

Adopter recruitment, assessment and approval: LGA, SOLACE and ADCS commitments to a sector-defined approach to increasing the number of approved adopters

Introduction

1. The swift and successful adoption of children looked after by local authorities has been the subject of significant national political and media attention over the last two years or so. The Secretary of State for Education has expressed dissatisfaction with the numbers of children who are adopted, and the time it takes for an adoptive family to be found once the decision has been made that a child should be adopted. The publication 'Further Action on Adoption' (DfE, Feb 2013) (which draws on Ofsted data and that contained in the SSSA903 statutory annual return to attempt to quantify the rise in the number of children with an adoption decision and the resulting shortfall of adopters) argues that the local responsibility for the recruitment and approval of adopters has led to a fragmented system that does not respond quickly to such shortfalls.
2. LGA, SOLACE and ADCS agree that the supply of approved adopters has not kept pace with demand, particularly for adopters for older children, sibling groups and those with disabilities or other complex needs. The number of children approved by courts for adoption has increased significantly in each of the last two years. It is estimated that some 4,200 children were waiting 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, in order to address the estimated national shortfall of 2,000 - 3,000 adopters (as at 31 March 2012).
3. Clearly there is a complex set of interdependencies to understand to determine how far this is a 'supply side' issue (too few adopters of any kind) or how far it is a question of 'demand' relating to the specific needs of children waiting and the lack of suitable adopters to meet those needs. The solutions to the two problems are different. National data on adopters (which was used in the DfE paper Further Action on Adoption) is at an early stage of design and collection and will not produce consistent national results until 2014. That said, LGA, SOLACE and ADCS agree the urgent need to increase the numbers of approved adopters in order to meet existing and forecasted demand. To that end, our respective associations have each made a set of commitments to address the shortfall of adopters and the small scale at which some local authority adoption agencies operate in the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. **Our collective ambition is that by 31 March 2014 the national adopter shortfall estimated by DfE (at 31 March 2012) to be between 2,000 – 3,000 will be reduced by more than 50%.**
4. In addition to the commitments made by our respective associations in this paper, we are also working collectively under the auspices of the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) to support the sector to increase the number of approved adopters.

LGA and SOLACE commitments

5. The LGA is a cross-party politically-led organisation and SOLACE is the representative body for senior strategic managers working in the public sector in the UK. We will primarily focus our work on adopter recruitment on informing, supporting and challenging the political and managerial leadership of councils to support this tri-partite sponsored programme and the complementary work of the Children's Improvement Board.
6. Political buy-in and leadership from those who have democratic accountability for decisions about local services, as well as managerial leadership, are essential for achieving the changes needed in the system. The role of Lead Member for Children's Services was created by the Children Act 2004 to ensure clear political responsibility for children's services. Together with the Director for Children's Services, (who has professional responsibility for children's services) and the Chief Executive and Leader (or Mayor), the Lead Member for Children's Services has a key leadership role both within the local authority and working with other local agencies to improve outcomes for children and young people.
7. In the current context of increasing financial pressures, local politicians have to respond to and manage the challenges that arise. Whilst funds for early intervention have been cut, councils agree that there is an urgent need to increase the number of adopters and local government will prioritise action to tackle this challenge effectively. Our statutory role as corporate parents reinforces our wish to ensure the best outcomes for looked after children, and we will use our powers of influence and scrutiny locally to drive forward progress.

Consolidating leadership

8. A communications plan is being implemented to ensure that the key stakeholders in the local government sector understand the issues to be addressed in tackling the shortage of adopters:
 - Discussions at the LGA Children and Young People Board, which has responsibility for LGA policy and activity on the wellbeing of children and young people, and at the LGA Improvement and Innovation Board, will ensure that all relevant elected member representatives are fully informed of plans and there is continuing scrutiny of progress. SOLACE will keep its membership similarly informed through its Children's Network communications.
 - The LGA is establishing a group of member champions for adopter recruitment, to provide support/dissemination of information to others and to provide information back to the LGA on developments. Work is underway to identify appropriate members, including those working in shared services, consortia etc. and to agree Terms of Reference and ways of working.
 - The Chair of the LGA Children and Young People Board is writing to all lead members for children's services and chairs of scrutiny and SOLACE is engaging similarly with Chief Executives setting out the challenge and the support on offer.

- A fact sheet is being produced for lead members for children's services and other elected members and Chief Executives, to set out the data on adopter shortage, including the number of children in care, the costs of care etc.
- As well as direct communication from the LGA nationally, plans are being developed to facilitate and encourage regional discussions on the issues. All chairs of chairs of regional lead member networks will be contacted as well as the SOLACE Regional Chief Executives network in order to set out issues for consideration, with an offer to provide a discussion paper and officer attendance at meetings and a request for feedback from regional discussions. Links will also be made at regional level with the nearest member of the member champion group for adopter recruitment.

9. The Communications Plan also includes:

- Brief and offer support to lead members in councils where officers are having discussions about joining up services;
- Include a question on adopter recruitment arrangements in the revised 'Must Knows' for lead members;
- Include material in member development programmes, such as LGA Leadership Academies;
- Articles in LGA First magazine and SOLACE Children's Network Bulletin about the adopter recruitment challenge, including facts, figures and solutions such as shared services and consortia;
- Support for Children's Improvement Board work on learning from existing consortia, including ensuring learning is disseminated to elected members and Chief Executives in appropriate format;
- Promote adoption session at the 2013 National Children and Adults Conference.

Addressing Performance Challenges

10. The LGA, with ADCS and SOLACE, has a strong commitment to sector led improvement and will aim, through CIB, to work together to analyse data and identify councils who require support to improve.
11. The LGA will offer support and challenge to lead members in councils identified, including through:
- providing briefings and information, as necessary
 - matching up with member champion group
12. We will also engage the Chair and Lead members of the LGA Improvement and Innovation Board to address any persistent poor performance or unwillingness to engage in improvement.

Addressing Systemic Disincentives

Inter-authority fee

13. Following our actions to recommend that inter-authority fee paid to other councils for adopters should be aligned with the fee paid for adopters from Voluntary Adoption Agencies, the LGA and SOLACE will jointly write again to all council leaders, lead members and Chief Executives making the case for fee equalisation in greater detail and encouraging take up. This will be followed up with direct contact with councils that have large numbers of inter-authority placements, who will be particularly affected by the fee equalisation in order to:
- assess willingness to change fee structure
 - offer support/challenge as necessary
14. This will be followed by a formal 'sign up' process for fee equalisation in the period from now to September 2013.

Cost recovery

15. We are planning to undertake some work to develop a cost recovery methodology for setting fees. Instead of fixing the fee at what might be seen as an arbitrary level, enabling full costs to be recovered would fully remove the current disincentive to recruiting adopters for other areas. This would also have the advantage of introducing competition, which might potentially lead to some restructuring and consolidation within the system. We want to work with a number of councils to test this approach and explore what support or tools may be necessary to move to a level playing field. Completely open and transparent cost-allocation and fee setting would of course be a crucial tenet of this approach. In order to explore this further, it is intended that in the summer of 2013 we should:
- Issue a joint invitation with SOLACE to councils asking those interested in developing cost recovery methodology for setting fees to come forward
 - Let a contract to support councils to develop cost recovery methodology for fees and produce some 'worked through' examples, with accompanying guidance notes
- And then later in the year we intend to:
- Test draft methodology with councils
 - Test draft methodology with Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA)s

Payment by results

16. To tackle other systemic issues, we intend to explore with DfE and other stakeholders the potential for incentive payments/payment by results for adopter recruitment, including the feasibility, legal issues, and mechanisms that would need to be put in place.

Working with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs)

17. Good co-operation with the voluntary adoption agencies is vital if we are to work together to tackle the shortage of adopters and there is a strong commitment to invite the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies to the LGA Children and Young People Board to discuss how to improve working between councils and VAAs and to agree regular future engagement with them.

ADCS commitments to a sector-defined approach to increasing the number of approved adopters

18. The supply of approved adopters has not kept pace with demand, particularly for adopters for older children, sibling groups and those with disabilities or other particular needs. The benefits of Payment by Results (PbR) and Social Investment Bonds (SIBs) should be explored to provide potential stimulation and incentives into the market specifically for those children who wait longest to be placed with adoptive families.
19. ADCS supports market diversification for the recruitment, assessment and approval of prospective adopters. The current market for the provision of approved adopters is dominated by LAs. Currently, VAAs supply no more than 20% of approved adopters and there is little evidence to suggest they have the capacity or appetite to reach deeply into the LA market. In diversifying the adopter provider market, we must avoid de-stabilising existing arrangements by removing, or threatening to remove, the responsibility for approving adopters from the largest supplier in the market, as to do so would unequivocally not be in the best interests of children for whom adoption is the right route to permanence. Some areas may wish to consider floating off services to social enterprises or staff mutuals. It is vital however that the right entrepreneurial leadership is in place for this to happen, to drive progress whilst also ensuring appropriate safeguards remain in place. Establishing social enterprises and staff mutuals takes time; their entry into a diversified market would be welcome but it will not address the problem of the shortage of approved adopters quickly.
20. ADCS will support the active development of formal merged services or hard federations between LAs, and with VAAs and with any new entrants to the market that may emerge over time.
21. ADCS is currently undertaking a **data exercise** to better understand and triangulate DfE estimates the extent of the approved adopter shortfall. This data exercise will also demonstrate that LAs do have plans in place to recruit and approve an increased number of adopters. This data exercise will:
 - a) Give a closer to 'real time' picture of: the rate at which children are being identified for adoption and the rate at which adopters are being recruited by doing a quick data check with all LAs on the backlog of children already waiting; how many more children will come through between now and 31

March 2014; number of adopters approved by 31 March 2013 and projected numbers who will be approved by 31 March 2014 as set out in LAs' recruitment plans.

- b) Identifying the quantum and nature of existing formal strategic alliances (hard federations etc) between LAs, LAs and VAAs; and where LAs are not involved in any such arrangements, asking them if they wish to be so. It will always be appropriate for some children to be placed with adopters recruited and approved by a different LA than that which is responsible for the child awaiting placement and for the placement to be made out of area (for the safety and wellbeing of the child). This is a strong argument for the construction of regional (or sub-regional) hard federations, working collaboratively to recruit, assess and approve adopters. So, we would expect to see a continuation of inter-authority and inter-agency purchasing of approved adopters at the equalized fee level of £27,000. **LAs should implement the equalized fee arrangements with immediate effect.**
- c) From the analysis of the data returns ADCS will develop a narrative which includes identifying some regional or sub regional commentary on where it seems more challenging, including some trend analysis of the types of LAs that are likely to continue to struggle.
- d) As part of the narrative, we will identify the implications and recommendations that will lead us to a manageable proposition of what is going to be required over what period to get us to a healthier position - perhaps defining with sector partners levels of achievable or acceptable progress over say a period of three years; this might include a proposition on a minimum viability size for a local authority adoption agency to be successful and a specific challenge to underperforming local authorities to join or form hard federations.
- e) Analysis of the data returns and the accompanying narrative identifying implications and recommendations will be shared with Ministers in **early April 2013.**

Addressing the scale of too many small LA agencies and the structural issues of co-operation between LAs, VAAs

- f) ADCS acknowledges that LA practice in recruiting and approving adopters is variable across the country. 150 LA adoption agencies operating often at small scale is unsustainable and economies of scale can and should be achieved. From the data returns, we will identify: existing LA partnership working; those LAs that have said they wish to form formal strategic alliances; and, work with those LAs that would benefit from forming such alliances and help them to come together with each other and with VAAs into formal strategic arrangements, more akin to hard federations, not just the regional loose consortia in which virtually every LA is currently involved. We will facilitate this via a range of means including regional DCS groups and/or regional CIB arrangements, inviting VAAs to discuss directly with DCSs better working together in general, then as appropriate

from the regional or sub-regional commentary discuss with VAAs their role in LA-led hard federations.

More targeted work on those children who have been waiting longest

- g) Focus funding on children, not LAs, through a piece of very targeted work led by a small team of credible sector specialists who actively go out into communities and recruit the right people to adopt against the profile of the (say) 200 children who have been waiting longest. Perhaps funded via bidding for some of the EIG top-slice with payment to sector specialists made on a semi-PbR basis.
- h) DCS oversight and audit of cases for those children who have been waiting longest to: review care/permanence plans; and provide oversight on separating siblings if separation would facilitate more timely adoption for individual children and is in the best interests of the children concerned.

Taking a whole system view

- i) DCSs and through them ADCS, have a unique perspective on whole systems leadership. In the context of adoption, this whole system view must incorporate adoption support, recognising that good adoption support forms part of the toolkit of incentives to encouraging more adults to become adopters. Careful thought will need to be given to the impact upon adoption support of significantly increased numbers of hard federation arrangements.
- j) Taking a whole system view of adoption requires *de facto* a review of the existing regulatory regime.

Need for speed

- k) Below we elucidate how we believe the existing extensive suite of reforms to adoption (to which ADCS has made significant contributions including the co-production of the new 2-stage adopter assessment process) will in themselves contribute to reducing the time the whole process takes possibly by up to 50%, which means that most LAs should be able to significantly increase their adopter recruitment and approval activity.
- l) A number of the existing reforms, most of which are yet to come on stream, will contribute to addressing the shortage of approved adopters, including, but not limited to:
 - The new Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) will be easy to use and much more streamlined therefore requiring less time on the part of prospective adopters. Lessons learnt from PAR pilots indicate amongst other improvements a better retention rate of prospective adopters sticking with the process than previously. **There should be no further delay in implementing the new PAR.**

- Establishment of the adoption gateway (soft launch in January, formal launch 25 March 2013) will provide a customer-friendly portal, helping to improve initial enquirer retention rates. Working closely with ADCS and sector partners, the Gateway could in the immediate short term orient enquirers towards LAs or federations with known capacity to recruit and assess prospective adopters.
- Output of the DfE commissioned market research into attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption [expected early 2013] – as part of the work of the National Recruitment Forum (which is chaired by ADCS). The outputs of this research should help LAs to more precisely target recruitment campaigns upon previously untapped markets of adults interested in becoming adopters by the application of sophisticated marketing techniques and market intelligence.
- The work of the National Recruitment Forum more broadly which is overseeing national developments and promoting effective practice in recruiting prospective adopters locally and nationally.
- Introduction of the new streamlined, 2-stage assessment process from April 2013, together with the recent changes to the role and functions of Adoption Panels, will reduce the time it takes to approve from 8 months to 6 months.
- The proposed changes to ethnicity matching of adopters and children may help to change the attitudes of members of the public as well as social work practitioners as to the perceived barriers of becoming an adopter.
- Outputs of the DfE commissioned research into adoption breakdown rates to help us better understand why adoption disruption occurs and what, if any are the lessons in respect of adopter recruitment, assessment and approval.
- 26 weeks limit in care proceedings for all but exceptional cases will improve the timeliness of court awarded Placement Orders. This combined with the improved timeliness of adopter assessment processes will mean that matching should happen more quickly.

Children's Improvement Board (CIB)

As Ministers are aware, CIB has a number of planned actions to support the sector to increase the number of approved adopters:

22nd February 2013 – CIB launch Guidance and open access to Outcomes UK/BAAF Adoption diagnostic

Adoption diagnostic

CIB worked with DfE throughout the 2012-13 financial year on developing a methodology to analyse adoption performance across the spectrum of activity from recruiting adopters to court proceedings and final permanency. The diagnostic was delivered to jointly agreed target authorities only. CIB has subsequently commissioned a tailored version of the diagnostic to be available to individual authorities or sponsored through regional CIB programmes delivered by Outcomes UK/BAAF for 2013-14. This was launched in February alongside guidance and an access platform via the LGA Knowledge Hub.

26th March 2013 - Joint Virtual Staff College and Children's Improvement Board Workshop

Learning from Consortia and Joint Service Provision for Adoption and Care

This is an opportunity to draw upon the learning from those engaged in existing adoption and related consortia arrangements in order to meet the challenge to the sector raised by the Secretary of State around significantly improving performance in terms of the recruitment of adopters. The seminar will be conducted under Chatham House rules to allow the maximum frankness and self-challenge with an outcome of capturing both the learning from what exists and recommendations for improving effectiveness. The outcome will be a non-attributable report which can be utilised by the sector over the coming months and it will also open up a platform for individual adoption consortia to network information on practice between them. The target group is lead DCS's and those who directly manage consortia arrangements along with policy leads from ADCS, LGA and SOLACE.

April 2013 – CIB finalises Care Practice Diagnostic methodology and commence pilots.

Care Practice Diagnostic

Building on the Adoption diagnostic CIB national team has worked with East Midlands CIB on the development of a Care Practice Diagnostic aimed at supporting improvement in permanency and placement stability. The diagnostic will be piloted in the East and South East regions in May and July and the final product released for general use in July 2013. The product is complementary to other work on adoption.

May 2013 – Provisional – Joint VSC and Children's Improvement Board Dissemination event

Working collaboratively to increase the number of adopters

This event will build on two strands of work and be organised to focus down on the detail of a sector response to the challenge of recruiting more adopters, including:

- What is the market? Analytical work building on research on supply and demand from ADCS and DfE and transferable learning from other work e.g. Fostering market supply and demand analysis building on a joint CIB/Audit Commission seminar in April
- What are the lessons from existing collaboration? Drawing on the report from the 26th March seminar
- What are the next steps?

About ADCS, LGA and SOLACE

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd (ADCS) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services appointed under the provisions of the Children Act 2004 and for other children's services professionals in leadership roles. The statutory role of director of children's services (DCS) was created by the Children Act 2004 to establish a single point of professional leadership and accountability for services for children and young people.

The Local Government Association (LGA) is a cross-party politically-led organization that works on behalf of councils to support, promote and improve local government. We aim to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems. The LGA covers every part of England and Wales, supporting local government as the most efficient and accountable part of the public sector.

The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) is the representative body for senior strategic managers working in the public sector in the UK. SOLACE is committed to promoting public sector excellence. SOLACE provides its members with opportunities for personal and professional development, and the Society seeks to influence debate around the future of public services to ensure that policy and legislation are informed by the experience and expertise of its members. Whilst the vast majority of SOLACE members work in local government, SOLACE also has members in senior positions in health authorities, police and fire authorities and central government.

March 2013