

**ADCS position statement on adoption
(November 2011)**

This position statement is a response to the government's current review of adoption policy. 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 professional in leadership roles. The Association provides a national voice as a champion for children, with local and central government, and with the public.

1. ADCS members are deeply committed to adoption. We unequivocally support adoption as one form of permanence for the placement of looked after children and young people. Adoption is an important facet in a successful care system but it is important to maintain a broad understanding of the range of permanence options available and to remember that adoption is an unusual option by international standards. It is unhelpful to look at the bald numbers of children adopted in this context. Last year's official statistics on numbers of children placed for adoption do indeed show a decrease. However, other forms of permanent placements have increased. Over the last five years (31 March 2006 – 31 March 2011) there has been a 27% increase in overall permanence orders and an 8.3% increase in the last year. The statistics also show an increase in the total LAC population. This increase arises from children on Interim Care Orders (ICOs) and in care under S20 of the Children Act 1989 with their parents' agreement. These are children for whom permanency/adoption plans cannot be implemented as they are still subject to care proceedings or accommodated at their parents' request. It is wrong to say that there are more looked after children and therefore more children available to be placed for adoption (or other form of permanence). In 2007, 9,160 children were subject of ICOs. In 2011, there were 13,660. In order for children to move from an ICO into a permanent placement, a Care Order (CO) then a Placement Order (PO) must be in force. Between 2007 and 2011 there has been a 5% decrease in the numbers of children subject to COs/POs (from 32,450 to 30,960); again, this means fewer children are available to be placed for adoption.
2. The review of adoption policy has implications for the whole system, including central government. Systemic change is necessary to produce a culture of learning and development, rather than blame; an environment supportive of professional judgment rather than one designed to be adversarial. The work of the Social Work Reform Board and the Family Justice Review are fundamental to the endeavours of a successful care system.
3. This country, along with the USA is one of only a few that places children in permanent adoptive placements. Adoption can transform a child's life chances and prospects; but, there are also those of the view that adoption is a draconian measure and to deny birth parents access to their removed children is immoral. ADCS and local authorities are firmly in the former camp – when done carefully and properly adoption is transformational for children and families alike. ADCS argues that local authorities are best placed to make these decision, not a national agency and we are reassured that Ministers are of this view also. ADCS welcomes the current review of adoption policy; it has highlighted the need for the philosophical as well as a

pragmatic debate – what is care for, what is adoption for and who is best placed to make those decisions?

4. For some children, being taken into care early can be the best way of improving their life chances and outcomes; for some children in some circumstances, care really does work. What research evidence seems to show however is that stability is a more important factor in predicting emotional, behavioural and educational wellbeing than the type of placement. So the outcomes for children placed in long term stable foster care for example may be broadly equivalent to the outcomes of their peers who have been adopted. This is important as adoption is not appropriate for all children. Not all children wish to be adopted¹ and we know that for many children adoption is not the right solution.
5. Intervening early to remove a child from its birth parents is right for some children. As many have acknowledged this is perhaps the most difficult and complex decision that a children's social worker has to recommend and they do so based on the principle of a child's needs and welfare being paramount. In his report for *The Times* (July, 2011), Martin Narey unequivocally said that more children should be taken into care much earlier. This may well be true in some instances and there is research evidence that shows the outcomes for some children returned to their birth parents are worse than for those who have remained in care. We must also recognise as a society the resource implications of taking more children into care – we know that on average it costs £40,000 per annum per child in care. These considerations must never be financially driven, but nor can we ignore the financial context, especially in these difficult times. We should also not confuse improving adoption rates within the current framework of legislation, guidance and practice and the wider debate about whether more children should be taken into care and adopted as the best means to improve their life chances.
6. It is right that the assessment process for potential adoptive parents should be as rigorous as possible because children and young people placed for adoption are some of the most vulnerable in our society. They deserve the best parents who are entering the adoption process for the right reasons and with the right level of skill. It is not the same as 'ordinary' parenting and we should never apologise for exercising great care in this process. The assessment of potential adoptive parents and the establishment of a permanent placement are complex and time-consuming activities. We agree that the processes can and should be foreshortened and made more efficient, but that cannot be at the expense of the quality and rigour of the assessment process because the breakdown of an adoption placement can be catastrophic and every effort must be made at the earliest possible stage to mitigate against disruption. It is critically important therefore that potential adoptive parents are fully aware of the challenges that adopting a child in care may present. The process for assessing potential adoptive parents is highly bureaucratic; it is over-laden with excessive levels of prescription with regard to the information that is

¹ *Characteristics, outcomes and meanings of three types of permanent placement – adoption by strangers, adoption by carers and long-term foster care*, Nina Behal, Sarah Ellison, Claire Baker and Ian Sinclair, SPRU, University of York, DCSF 2009)

collected about potential adopters. The 'industry norm' for presenting evidence and relevant information is the BAAF form (in addition to the details enshrined in regulation about what information must be collected). It is extremely repetitive and can run to 140 pages. In fairness, the BAAF Standard is designed to make sure crucial information is not missed out; however much of that detail is descriptive and not analytical. It is important to collect information about potential adopters, including their own history, which is relevant to their capacity and suitability to provide a stable placement for an adopted child. But, a blanket approach to the nature of the information that is collected risks infantilising professional decision-making; there must be more scope for exercising professional judgement as to what information is truly relevant. To this end, ADCS recommends that the BAAF Standard and the relevant regulations are reviewed and we have agreed to work with Martin Narey on this so that the assessment process is as permissive, analytical, relevant, streamlined, quick and bureaucracy - free as possible. We need to make it more welcoming, positive and less arduous, but without compromising the necessary rigour to make the best match, or the primacy of the child's need for a stable, appropriate placement.

7. ADCS believes that there is plenty of evidence of good local authority performance; we know too that there is variation in local authority performance. ADCS members will do all in our collective powers to help improvement and to aid transparency on performance. We would welcome discussion with government on ways it can provide additional help.
8. The numbers and rates of children in care vary significantly across local authorities; it is important to bring some transparency to these facts and the associated debate too. In 2010/11 the numbers of looked after children increased by 1.7% over 2009/10 and by 7.5% between 2008/09 and 2010/11. There is every reason to believe that increases will continue.
9. We are pleased that the government is committed to shining a light on good local authority performance wherever it exists and ADCS would be pleased to assist in this process although we caution against any crude analysis which might lead to the creation of local authority 'league tables' or process-orientated targets, which may result in the unintended consequence of putting off prospective adopters from coming forward for consideration. To this end, ADCS has agreed to work with Martin Narey and DfE on establishing an improved set of performance data.
10. The Family Justice Review has made its final report and recommendations. Those recommendations will undoubtedly assist in reducing court delays in family and public law cases and will drive systemic improvements. ADCS strongly encourages the government to accept the recommendations in full and to implement them as quickly as possible. The work of the Social Work Reform Board will do much to improve the initial training of social workers so they are, for example, better prepared for court work. The establishment of The College for Social Work is an important aspect too in raising the esteem within which the social work profession is held.
11. In summary, ADCS would like to see:

- A speeding up of the assessment and approval processes for potential adopters
- A greater emphasis on long term post-adoption support that acknowledges the roles and responsibilities of other agencies including health services and schools
- An inspection regime that measures outcomes not process compliance
- Intelligent performance data that is able to identify trends
- More flexibility on what Adoption Panels do (particularly with regard to their role in care planning and matching children and young people with adoptive carers)
- Implementation of all of the recommendations in the final report of the Family Justice Review as quickly as possible
- A broadening of the debate about adoption that recognises adoption as one form of permanence and that making and supporting permanent placements are one aspect of a range of services for looked after children.