



Report to the Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee

Title:	Adoption
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Report signed off by Cabinet Member:	Angela Macpherson, Children and Young People
Electoral divisions affected:	All

Purpose of Agenda Item

Information:

This item is intended to provide members of the select committee the opportunity to consider some of the key issues facing the provision of sufficient adoption placements for children in the care of Buckingham County Council. It should be read in conjunction with the report on fostering, which is also on the agenda of this committee.

Background

Background information on adoption and what it involves is set out in appendix A of this report. The 1989 requires local authorities to "take reasonable steps to secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of looked after children in their local authority area, otherwise known as the sufficiency duty".

Adoption has been a high priority for governments of all political persuasions for some time now. The current government has been particular concern to ensure more children are adopted and that they are adopted quickly. The government is currently consulting on a range of changes to statutory guidance and regulation concerning adoption. The consultation document has a joint Ministerial Foreword, by the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, and Children and Families Minister Edward Timpson – both of whom have personal experience of adoption (the former was adopted as a baby, the latter has siblings who were adopted by his parents). They express their delight at the recent increase in the number of adoptions, but their disappointment that there has been no overall improvement in how quickly children are adopted, which they intend to continue to tackle. Most of the issues included in this consultation are covered by measures in the Children and Families Bill, which received Royal Assent on 13 March 2014, and relate to the following key issues in adoption:

- Fostering for Adoption
- Consideration of ethnicity when matching children with prospective adopters
- Placing siblings with an adoptive family
- Information to be provided about adoption support
- The Adoption and Children Act Register
- Contact in respect of children in care and adopted children.

To support these amendments, the government is providing local authorities with a grant called the Adoption Reform Grant. It is intended to increase the numbers of children adopted and the speed with which they are placed for adoption. Buckinghamshire's grant allocation for 2014/15 is £450,864.

Summary

- The government introduced a national performance framework called the adoption scorecard in 2012. This measures over a three year average:
 - how long it takes between a child coming into care and being placed with its adopted family;
 - how long it takes a local authority to decide on a match for a child after court authority to place a child and;
 - the percentage of children who have waited more than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.
- The average time it took between a child entering care in Buckinghamshire and being placed with its adopted family over the last three years (2010-13) was 649 days (lower is better). The statistical neighbour average was 573 days and the England average 647 days. Oxfordshire took 450 days but

Hertfordshire took 672 days (National target by 2016=426 days). Performance in Buckinghamshire in 2013/14 to date was a much improved 474 days.

- The average time it took between Buckinghamshire receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family in the period 2010 to 2013 was 200 days (lower is better). This compares with a statistical neighbour average of 162 days and an all-England average of 210 days. Oxfordshire took 114 days and Hertfordshire 194 days. (National target by 2016 = 121 days).
- The percentage of children who wait more than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family was 49% in Buckinghamshire. Between 2010 and 2013 (lower is better). This compares with the statistical neighbour average of 41% and an all England average of 45%. In Oxfordshire, 21% of children wait more than 20 months, and 41% of children wait more than 20 months in Hertfordshire.
- In December 2013. Buckinghamshire had 5.2% of the looked after population placed for adoption compared with 5.8% of children in comparator authorities.
- However, 19.1% of children who have left care so far this financial year have done so through adoption (17/89). This compares with 15% in 2012/13, a statistical neighbour average of 11%, an all-England average of 13%, and a performance of 12% in Oxfordshire and 10% in Hertfordshire.

Adoption numbers

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES PRESENTED TO ADOPTION PANEL OR AGENCY DECISION MEETING						
Children	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/14* *to Jan 2014
Placement for adoption	21	34	29	49	49	
Matched for adoption	15	15	17	24	28	
Children Adopted	19 This represents 8.6% of the Children Looked After	17 This represents 8.4% of the Children Looked After	11 This represents 3.4% of the Children Looked After	22 This represents 5.9% of the Children Looked After	23 This represents 5.7% of the Children Looked After	17*
Families	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/14* *to Jan 2014
Approved	22	11	16	18	21	22*

for Adoption						
Matched for adoption	7	5	7	8	11	
Families adopted	15	14	14	13	18	

Expressions of interest in adoption (Enquiries)

Year	Number of enquiries
2013/14* (to end of February)	566
2012/13	180
2011/12	164

- Following a concerted adoption advertising campaign since June 2013, there has been a massive increase in interest in adoption. More adoptive parents will have been approved in 2013/14 than in any year for the preceding five years.
- Currently, there are 40 potential applicants in part one of the adoption assessment process, and 4 prospective adopter applications are ready for consideration by the March adoption panel.
- This success of the adoption recruitment campaign is creating capacity issues further down the system, such as making sure we have enough social workers to undertake assessments, the adoption panel is able to consider the considerable increased number of applicants, and we have in place the right amount and type of support to ensure those adoptive placements made are successful.
- Buckinghamshire County Council adoption service was inspected by Ofsted as a local authority adoption agency in September 2011 and was rated as "good".

Resource implications

- Adoption is a positive option for children (adoption tends to provide much securer long-term care than other forms of permanent care, particularly the younger a child is when adopted) and financially for the local authority as the new adopters take on full responsibility for the child, including financial responsibility.
- However, if finances may prevent an adoption from taking place or continuing, the local authority has the discretion to pay adoption allowances. In Buckinghamshire, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of

children being adopted and also attracting adoption allowances. The consequence of this is that spend on adoption allowances will exceed the budget in 2013/14.

- Moreover, the budget is predicated on the local authority buying and selling placements from and to other adoption agencies using the national adoption register. As the number of children requiring adoption placements in Buckinghamshire has grown, and to date the number of in-house local authority adopters has not kept pace with demand, spend on interagency placements has increasingly exceeded income generated from selling placements. This has created a budget pressure.
- Future budgets are planned on the basis of the local authority selling more adoption placements than it buys from other adoption agencies and expenditure from the adoption reform grant has been used to support this development.
- Current planned use of the adoption reform grant is focused on:
 - Reducing court timescales so children are available more quickly for adoption by creating a specialist family drug and alcohol court.
 - Increasing capacity to assess, approve, and support a significant increase in adoptive carers, and to become a net exporter and income generator from selling placements.
 - Developing a “fostering to adopt” scheme, and taking part in “adoption activity days”.
 - Modernising our adoption process.

Action being taken:

- Other action being taken to improve performance in relation to adoption and to ensure decisions about adoption are made more quickly include:
 - Strengthening permanency planning and tracking arrangements.
 - Extending family group conferencing
 - Training and developing staff in permanency planning, report writing for court etc.
 - Working with the courts generally to reduce delay.
 - Reviewing our business processes and improving our customer orientation review for adoption enquiries and;
 - Strengthening our performance management of the adoption and permanency process and creating a stronger, quality assurance framework.

Key issues:

- Making sure we have the right number and right type of adoptive placements for those children for whom adoption is the plan.
- Developing the fostering to adopt scheme.

- Reducing delay, particularly for those children who are traditionally "hard to place" (older children, those with disabilities, and sibling groups).
- Reducing expenditure on adoption allowances whilst avoiding putting people off adopting children
- Speeding up decision-making about permanency and ensuring that adoption plans are progressed more quickly.
- Working with the courts to reduce how long it takes to conclude care proceedings, in line with the Family Justice Review.
- Ensuring there is enough social work capacity in the system to deal with adoption assessments and post adoption support so that potential adopters are not discouraged from proceeding with Buckinghamshire and go to other local authorities or adoption agencies.

Steve Tanner

Head of Care Services

March 17, 2014

Appendix A

What is adoption?

Adoption is a way of providing a new family for children who cannot be brought up by their own parents.

It's a legal procedure in which parental responsibility is transferred to the adopters.

Once an adoption order has been granted it can't be reversed except in extremely rare circumstances.

An adopted child loses all legal ties with their first mother and father (the "birth parents") and becomes a full member of the new family, usually taking the family's name.

What is the difference between adoption and fostering?

Foster carers share the responsibility for the child with a local authority and the child's parents.

Fostering is usually a temporary arrangement, though sometimes foster care may be the plan until the child grows up. This long term or "permanent" fostering cannot provide the same legal security as adoption for either the child or the foster family but it may be the right plan for some children.

Who are the children who need adopting?

There are upwards of 6,000 children across the UK needing adoption every year. These children are from a great variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Many of these children are of school age and over half of them are in groups of brothers and sisters who need to be placed together.

There are disabled children and children whose future development is unclear

Some children have been abused and/or neglected and all will have experienced moves and uncertainty and their resulting behaviour may be challenging.

Who can adopt?

- You have to be over 21, happy to make space in your life and home for a child, patient, flexible and energetic, and determined to make a real difference to a child's life, for a lifetime.
- There is no upper age limit. Agencies are looking for adopters who have the physical and mental energy to care for demanding children, and whose

lifestyle suggests they will still have that energy when the child is a teenager, or young adult. Older children are among those children who wait the longest so we are keen to hear from people who can give a permanent and loving home to an older child.

- A record of offences will need to be carefully looked into but, apart from some offences against children, will not necessarily rule someone out.
- Everyone has to have a medical examination and health issues will need to be explored.
- People from all ethnic origins and religions can adopt. It is essential that any family with whom a child is placed is in a strong position to meet the child's emotional, identity, health and development needs. Over many years, research and practice experience indicates that children usually do best when brought up in a family that reflects or promotes their ethnic, cultural or religious identity. What this means in practice is that efforts are made to find a family that reflects or can promote the child's individual identity. This search always needs to be balanced against the importance of minimizing any delay in placing the child. In practice, social workers need carefully to consider how available adopters can meet as many of a child's assessed needs as possible while ensuring the child is placed with the minimum of delay. In England, the revised Adoption Statutory Guidance 2011 establishes a clear framework for addressing these complex issues.
- Disabled people are not excluded and sometimes experience of disability will be positively welcomed.
- A single person or one partner in an unmarried couple - heterosexual, lesbian or gay - can adopt. Since 2005 unmarried couples in England and Wales can apply to adopt jointly.

How do people apply to adopt?

Prospective adopters need to go through an "adoption agency". This is usually the local authority, although some agencies are voluntary organisations.

People are not limited to their own immediate locality but most agencies work roughly within a 50 mile radius of their office. Although it is only possible to follow through an application with one agency, several can be contacted at this early stage.

How do people get approved to adopt?

As of July 2013 there is now a two stage adoption process in England which takes about 6 months to complete.

Initially agencies will encourage applicants to find out all the information they need about adoption and to fully explore what it will mean for them and their family. We provide applicants with written information and offer information sessions. When applicants are ready to proceed, we provide them with a registration of interest form and this will enable us to decide whether we can begin to work with applicants.

1. Stage One – Registration & Checks

This stage of the assessment allows prospective applicants to explore in more detail what will be involved in adoption through attending training provided by the local authority, doing relevant reading and beginning some exploratory work which applicants are asked to complete with support from our staff. At the same time we complete all the statutory checks so we can be confident about progressing applicants through to a full assessment.

This stage will usually take two months but applicants can ask for extra time if needed and the local authority may need extra time to follow up some of the statutory checks. For example, if we need to contact specialists relating to a medical issue or obtain an overseas police check.

At the end of Stage One, we let the applicant know that all references have been received and we are happy for applicants to begin the next Stage where a detailed assessment will be completed.

If the local authority feels they cannot progress people to the assessment stage we have to give applicants written reasons.

If we do not have capacity to offer a full assessment and applicants do not want to wait then we must signpost applicants to other agencies or to First4Adoption, the National Adoption Gateway so applicants can be helped to identify another agency.

2. Stage Two – Assessment & Approval

Once applicants notify us that they wish to proceed to the full assessment, we meet with the applicant to agree a stage two plan detailing how the assessment process will be completed. This will include details of assessment meetings, dates for training sessions and a proposed date for the adoption panel.

A social worker will then make several visits to applicants in their home or sometimes in our offices. We speak to them about their past experiences and how these have influenced them in thinking about what kind of parents with a want to be. We may also ask to speak to any children say have living at home or away from home and some of their significant friends and family.

At the end of this assessment the social worker will prepare a written report which applicants can see and comment on and then this will be presented to the adoption panel who will consider the report and recommend whether or not applicants should be approved as adopters. Applicants will be given the opportunity to meet with the panel to assist them with their recommendation.

The agency's decision maker will usually make their decision that applicants are approved to adopt within four months of the start of Stage 2. Applicants can ask for extra time during the assessment if they need it and we let applicants know if we feel more time is needed.

How are approved adopters matched with a child?

After prospective adopters are approved, the local authority will try and match them with a child. They can also enquire about children being profiled in Be My Parent and other family-finding publications, like *Adoption Today*.

In England and Wales, agencies also refer prospective adopters to the Adoption Register for England and Wales which links waiting children with waiting approved adopters.

The proposed match will be presented to the adoption panel who will recommend whether to proceed with the placement.

What happens when the child moves in?

The child will move to live with their new parent/s after a planned period of introductions, which lasts a few weeks or a month or two, depending on the child's needs.

Social workers will remain involved to support the new family and the child at least until an adoption order is made.

How is adoption made legal?

There are certain minimum periods for which the child must live with the adopters before an application can be made to the court for an adoption order.

A birth mother cannot give consent to adoption until her child is at least six weeks old. Where birth parents do not agree, there is a process for the agreement to be independently witnessed. The detailed process varies according to the legislation of the particular country in the UK.

If birth parents do not agree to adoption, there are circumstances in which the court can override their wishes. In many cases the question of consent will be considered by the court before the child is placed for adoption. A children's guardian will be appointed by the court to investigate and give advice to the court on the child's best interests. In some circumstances, it will be necessary for the question of consent to be considered when the adopters actually apply for the final adoption order.

Do birth parents and other relatives have any contact with their child after adoption?

It is common for there to be an exchange of written information, perhaps once or twice a year, via the adoption agency.

There will be unique arrangements for each individual child which may mean direct contact for some children with various members of their birth family, including grandparents and brothers and sisters who may be placed elsewhere. Sometimes there will also be contact with birth parents - if this is best for the child.