

ADOPTA

Adopting hard to place children – developments in the UK

The UK context – developments in England

- Six years ago the Conservative Party, when entering government in coalition, set out to make better use of adoption. This intent has continued over the lifetime of the previous parliament and was reenergised when the Conservative Party were elected with a majority Government in 2015.
- Adoption is a devolved matter in the UK so we have four different legal frameworks and policy agendas. This presentation focuses on England where the scale is largest and the policy agenda the strongest and most advanced.

The Vision for Adoption in England

- The Government has recently set out its new vision for adoption to be achieved by 2020; this includes:
 - Decisions about placements are always made in children's best interests.
 - Service delivery has at its heart innovation and practice excellence.
 - Social workers are highly skilled professionals who make high quality, evidence based decisions and do not tolerate damaging delay for children in their care.
 - Matches are made without unnecessary delay.
 - Every adoptive family has access to an ongoing package of appropriate support with a right to a high quality, specialist assessment of need whenever it is required.
 - The voice of adopters and their children is at the heart of national and local policy decision making and delivery of services.

Placements – progress and challenges

- In 2010 we had a trend of reduced use of adoption, an increase in the numbers of children entering care and an "adopter gap" – we had far too few adopters for the number of children waiting to be adopted.
- The numbers waiting exceeded 6,000 at any one time.
- The system was fragmented and many local authority adoption agencies were turning away those interested in adopting as they did not match local placement needs – there was no national focus.
- Some children were waiting for up to three years, others were never adopted and had their plans for adoption reversed.

Placements – progress and challenges

- The government response to the adopter gap was to incentivise the recruitment of more adopters by agencies. This was through a mix of target setting and national performance management and investment in more recruitment resources.
- This has been a partial success, we now have an oversupply of adopters for the number of children coming into the system (flow) and stock (the number of children who have been waiting).
- The adopter gap has now gone if measured numerically but still exists for hard to place children – the profiles of the children waiting do not match the stated preferences of adopters.
- The "oversupply" of adopters is partly caused by a 50% drop in the number of children with plans for adoption over the last 24 months. This is a reaction to an appeal court judgement that did not change the law but has been interpreted as raising the bar for adoption orders.

Who are the hard to place?

- The profile of children hard to place is consistent over time; they are:
 - Those with disabilities or complex needs
 - Children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds
 - Older children - 4 years and upwards and especially boys
 - Sibling groups

How is this challenge being met?

- The Children and Families Act 2014 removed barriers to good placements caused by undue emphasis on finding a perfect 'ethnic' match between children and adopters.
- A key innovation of the adoption reform programme has been the focus placed on involving adopters in matching, exploring for themselves the children waiting for adoption, and making their own decisions about matching.
- There has been a significant growth in the use of adopter-led matching through National Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days where prospective parents and children can meet face to face in a fun and friendly environment. These techniques have been particularly successful in helping children with additional needs find homes. In 2014-15, 300 children were matched with adopters through 25 local authority Adoption Activity Days.

Future developments

- The move to regional adoption agencies – in two years we will see 182 local authority adoption agencies consolidate to between 25-30 agencies. The aim is to raise quality, drive out inefficiency and create larger pools of adopters in each agency to meet the needs of children waiting to be placed.
- Where a regional pool can't provide a match the intent will be to go to the national pool immediately. There is currently a sequential approach of trying local matches first, then looking regionally and then going national and then going to an independent charity sector agency (the latter are often more successful in finding families for hard to place children).
- There is a fee that is paid for "interagency" placements paid by the child's local authority. This is a disincentive to place outside of the local. The Government has committed to cover this fee through central funds in the short-term.

Future developments

- A continued effort to improve adoption support. It is considered likely that adopters will be more likely to take harder to place children if there is a better guarantee of timely and sufficient support.
- A children's needs led approach to adopter recruitment. Many of the adopters now waiting for a child will only consider younger children with limited additional needs – needs/preference mismatch.
- "Stretching" work with approved adopters waiting for a placement. Agencies are developing programmes to help adopters reconsider their preferences through information and further preparation. Our assessment system leads to many prospective adopters narrowing their preferences unrealistically given the needs of most children awaiting adoption.