

Adoption reform: Messages from local authorities on changes in processes and timescales Findings from wave 1



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Executive Summary

Background

In *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling delay* the Coalition government outlined a range of measures that are designed to ‘accelerate the whole adoption process so that more children benefit from adoption and more rapidly’ (Department for Education, 2012a, p.3). The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre has been commissioned to undertake a qualitative study to facilitate exploration of adoption managers’ and frontline social workers’ perspectives¹ on the strengths and limitations of the adoption reforms and factors that need to be taken into account in the meaningful interpretation of quantitative performance data. This is part of an overall exercise that the Department for Education (DfE) is engaged in to examine the on-going impact of the developing adoption reform programme on: the numbers of adoptions taking place; the speed of progression through the system for both children being adopted and prospective adopters; and causes of delay and how best to overcome them.

Methodology

The DfE has introduced a voluntary quarterly survey to collect quantitative data from local authorities on:

- The number of children and adopters at each stage of the adoption process.
- Timescales for completion of core processes.
- Children’s ages, ethnic backgrounds and disabilities (see Department for Education, 2012b).

The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre is undertaking three waves of complementary qualitative data collection at six monthly intervals (wave 1: October 2012, wave 2: March 2013 and wave 3: October 2013) in order to:

- Assist with meaningful interpretation of the quantitative data.
- Examine factors affecting adoption timescales and causes of delay.
- Explore how local authorities are responding to the adoption reform agenda.

Twenty local authorities were approached to participate. The sample was limited to local authorities that met the adoption score card average time threshold indicators and then

¹ Frontline social work perspectives will be presented in subsequent reports (wave 2 and 3).

stratified to secure a range in terms of the timeliness of family finding, region and local authority type.

At this, the first wave of data collection (October to November 2012), telephone interviews were undertaken with adoption managers from 15 out of the 20 local authorities that were selected for inclusion². The aims were to:

- Explore strengths and limitations in current adoption policy and practice.
- Examine barriers and challenges to reducing delays in the adoption process.
- Discuss recruitment strategies.
- Explore how management information system data on adoption processes are used to inform decision-making.
- Examine levels of awareness concerning proposed reforms and issues emerging in the early stages of implementation.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed to facilitate thematic analysis. The report presents the findings from these baseline interviews.

Key findings

Delay and drift

- A wide range of factors, some within and others outside the control of children's social care services may contribute to delays in the decision-making processes that can be detrimental to children's future wellbeing. Perspectives on where responsibility for delay and drift lie may vary according to professional background and ideological standpoints. All but two (13 out of 15) of the adoption managers interviewed for this study cited court decisions as contributing to delay in the adoption process. The concerns they expressed related to the length of care proceedings, commissioning of additional assessments on birth parents and/or friends and relatives, as well as the use of experts.
- Adoption managers expressed their commitment to reducing unnecessary delay and ensuring the timely completion of adoption processes. However, they also highlighted that 'faster is not always better' and raised concerns about the tight timescales for the completion of the adopters' approval process on the basis that

² One manager declined to participate and the remainder failed to respond to correspondence from the research team. Local authorities that did not respond will be approached about participating in subsequent rounds of data collection.

speed may be at the expense of quality; this may have detrimental consequences for children and families and increase the rate of adoption breakdown.

- The main cause of delay in the children's social care arena was judged to be matching harder to place children with suitable prospective adoptive carers. The adoption care managers suggested that the solution is not as simple as increasing the number of adopters because the core problem is a fundamental mismatch between adopters' wishes and expectations about the types of children they would like to adopt and the children awaiting adoption.

Recruitment

- A range of strategies were employed to facilitate recruitment of potential adopters. The most common, identified by virtually all the adoption managers, was advertising on the radio, in the local press (or less frequently) on the television. In some, but not all areas, targeted recruitment strategies were employed with the aim of increasing the number of prospective adopters for children who are harder to place.
- Gauging the effectiveness of recruitment campaigns is not straightforward. Current recruitment activities may not yield immediate returns.

Adoption scorecards

- Adoption managers reported that adoption scorecards were useful and informed discussions, review and future planning processes. They were described as 'a helpful tool for gauging where we are at and what we need to focus on'. However, during the interviews a couple of managers did caution against overreliance on these data without reference to the wider context of local authority practice.

Reforms

- On the whole adoption managers were familiar with key proposals under consultation as part of the adoption and family justice reform agendas and reported that information was communicated to them via a number of channels including the DfE, British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and adoption consortia.
- There were different perspectives on whether a 26 week timetable for the conclusion of care proceedings would prove feasible and sustainable; to some extent this may reflect the wide variations in the average duration of proceedings in different courts.
- A number of adoption managers questioned whether removing the requirement for the adoption panel to scrutinise and approve children's plans was beneficial and

suggested that the new approach was less robust. It was also highlighted that under previous arrangements the panel would have reviewed and discussed children's permanency reports. The managers considered that knowledge and discussion at this stage supports the matching process.

Conclusion

Adoption managers were committed to the principle of timely decision-making but cautioned against focusing upon the speed of completion of core adoption processes at the expense of quality. In particular, concerns were raised about a six month approval process for prospective adopters. The following comment typified their views: *'People are pregnant for nine months...I mean adopters invariably they've had years of thinking about being parents, but in terms of the issues in adoption they need to have had time to properly reflect'*. Furthermore, social workers considered that it is crucial to have sufficient time to undertake high quality assessments.

Findings from the research also demonstrate the challenges of finding sufficient families who have the skills, attributes and inclination to parent older children and those with disabilities and complex needs. It was noted that this issue is being further exacerbated by the rise in the number of younger children in the system. The rising care and adoption population also places additional pressure on a range of services that are experiencing significant budget cuts. In this context some managers were anxious about the capacity of children's social care to provide adequate post adoption support to meet the needs of children and families.

Background

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 aimed to improve planning for permanence and increase the number of children adopted from care (Department of Health, 2000). Although there was a small increase in the number of children adopted from care between 2003-5 the rates adopted per 1,000 children have remained constant at 0.3 (Munro and Manful, 2012). However, national statistical returns demonstrate wide variations in the percentage of children adopted in different authorities; and in timescales for placement with prospective adoptive carers (Department for Education, 2012c). In *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling delay* the Coalition government outlined a range of measures that are designed to 'accelerate the whole adoption process so that more children benefit from adoption and more rapidly' (Department for Education, 2012a, p.3). Adoption scorecards have also been introduced; these show how swiftly children in need of adoption are placed for adoption in each local authority area. This allows local authorities and other adoption agencies to monitor their own performance and compare it with that of others.

The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre has been commissioned to undertake a qualitative study to facilitate exploration of adoption managers' and frontline social workers' perspectives³ on the strengths and limitations of the adoption reforms and factors that need to be taken into account to ensure that the quantitative performance data collected are interpreted in the most meaningful ways and fully understood. This is part of an overall exercise that the Department for Education (DfE) is engaged in to examine the impact of the adoption reform programme on: the numbers of adoptions taking place; the speed of progression through the system for both children being adopted and prospective adopters; and causes of delay and how best to overcome them.

Methodology

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- Assist with meaningful interpretation of the quantitative data.
- Examine factors affecting adoption timescales and causes of delay.
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Twenty local authorities were approached to participate. The sample was limited to local authorities that met the adoption score card average time threshold indicators and then stratified to secure a range in terms of the timeliness of family finding, region and local authority type.

At this, the first wave of data collection (October to November 2012), telephone interviews were undertaken with adoption managers from 15 out of the 20 local authorities that were selected for inclusion⁴. The aims were to:

- Explore strengths and limitations in current adoption policy and practice.
- Examine barriers and challenges to reducing delays in the adoption process.
- Discuss recruitment strategies.
- Explore how management information system data on adoption processes are used to inform decision-making.
- Examine levels of awareness concerning proposed reforms and issues emerging in the early stages of implementation.

Interviews were tape recorded, lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed to facilitate thematic analysis. The report presents the findings from these baseline interviews. Follow-up data will be collected in waves 2 and 3 to examine changes in local authority policy and practice in response to the reform agenda and implications in terms of children's social care professionals' workloads and on the quality and timeliness of adoption decision-making.

⁴ One manager declined to participate and the remainder failed to respond to correspondence from the research team. Local authorities that did not respond will be approached about participating in subsequent rounds of data collection.

An overview of strengths and limitations of current service provision

Adoption managers were all asked an open ended question on what they perceived to be the current strengths and limitations of the adoption service in their local authority. The most frequently identified strength related to staffing and management. Nine out of 15 highlighted that they had experienced staff and/or a supportive team culture. Five also made specific references to the positive contribution that senior management commitment and investment in adoption played in supporting the service. Other responses related specifically to delivery of adoption services, including: timescales for approving adopters (4 local authorities); success in recruiting sufficient adopters (4 local authorities); support for adopters (3 local authorities); and commitment to effective permanency planning (4 local authorities).

In terms of limitations, the most common responses related to resource issues; and capacity to recruit sufficient prospective adopters to meet the needs of the children awaiting adoption. Eight of the 15 managers said that resource constraints placed limitations on service delivery. In terms of resource issues one respondent reflected that in the context of high case loads and competing demands:

I think sometimes we do the work but we know we haven't probably done it to the level that it should be done, and you know we're just sort of hoping that things don't go wrong.

Wider implications for children and families were also identified. For example, one local authority identified that one of their current strengths was commitment and investment in supporting adopters from '*the start of placements which encourages adopters to feel they can rely on us.... we are putting in therapeutic consultation*'. However, they questioned whether this was financially sustainable in the longer term⁵. Another manager drew attention to:

The financial constraints on all health services [which mean that]... they are pulling in the reins from what was already a fairly patchy and in some cases very minimal service, so I think we are struggling to feel that we have an appropriate level of psychologist input into both the planning and then later in the support of some of our families.

⁵ Another manager noted that they were being told to accommodate post-adoption support needs in the budget but in reality there was no budget for this. Furthermore 'the money is not going to match the growing population'. See also Holmes, McDermid and Lushey, forthcoming 2013.

Just over half the respondents (8 of 15) drew attention to the challenges associated with securing adoptive placements for sibling groups, older children, black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and those with disabilities or complex needs (see also Farmer *et al.*, 2010; Selwyn *et al.*, 2010; Ward, Munro and Dearden, 2006). As one manager explained:

The things we struggle with are the things that you know all areas struggle with, they are recruitment of adopters for large sibling groups, children with very, very complex care histories and older children, I mean I'd put those things at the top of the list, the rest of the things are like transitional issues around implementing [the reforms]...in terms of the thing that we struggle most with it is getting the more specialist adopters.

This difficulty was also explained with reference to the mismatch between the types of children that prospective adopters would like (and have the capacity to parent) and the needs and circumstances of looked after children who require a family for life. In one authority a manager suggested that the rise in the number of young infants entering care or accommodation since the Baby Peter Connelly case had led to an increase in the number of children awaiting adoption:

It is a buyer's market, if you look at the adopter as a buyer, and they are therefore going to go for the less difficult children, smaller sibling groups, all of the things that we didn't have, all the things that we had were the things that people didn't really want. So we were really struggling to find those placements.

Another reflected that:

Adopters have a lot of choice and are choosing children 'who are less problematic'. This means our older and more vulnerable children miss out sadly and don't get the same opportunities as they would have done a couple of years ago.

These issues influence timescales for adoption and can contribute to delay. The quarterly adoption survey also shows that the number of children awaiting adoption is considerably higher than the number of adopters awaiting a match and that the adoption process takes considerably longer for older children and slightly longer for sibling groups and children with disabilities (Department for Education, 2012b).

Delay and drift

Court delays

A wide range of factors, some within and others outside the control of children's social care services may contribute to delays in the decision-making process that can be detrimental to children's future wellbeing. Perspectives on where responsibility for delay and drift lie may also vary according to professional background and ideological standpoints. All but two (13 of 15) of the adoption managers interviewed for this study cited court decisions as contributing to delay in the adoption process. They expressed concerns about the length of care proceedings, commissioning of additional assessments on birth parents and/or friends and relatives, as well as the use of experts (see also Ward, Munro and Dearden, 2006; Munro and Ward, 2008). One manager reflecting on a case explained that:

One judge said because of the history of this family, he wanted to get this [case] resolved very quickly, and we were given a very short space of time to get it to panel, to get the agreements, then the court date, went back to court, different judge, different judge decided that they wanted this assessment done and that assessment done, and in fact it should have been agreed last December and eventually we got the court decision in I think it was August of this year. Whereas this was a baby at that time, well still is a baby, but a very small baby at the time, it would have been about six weeks old at the time we got the care order, he's a mixed race baby, he's now less desirable now because at that time he would have been a brand new baby, now he's pretty much 12 months old, again reducing the pool, and that was about having you know one judge thinking one thing, and another judge thinking something else.

Ward, Brown and Westlake's (2012) study of a sample of very young infants identified as suffering, or likely to suffer significant harm, before their first birthdays revealed that the commissioning of specialist parenting assessments was a major cause of delay. All the recommendations from the assessments were followed. Two thirds of the assessments advised that children should remain with their birth parents, but in over half of these cases the children eventually had to be removed. This late separation from a neglectful or abusive environment makes it more challenging to identify suitable adoptive families to meet their needs; they are both older and more likely to have complex needs associated with prolonged exposure to adverse conditions. The study also identified extensive efforts to place children within the extended family if rehabilitation to birth parents was not viable. The study highlighted that some children were placed with relatives whose own children had very poor outcomes, while others were placed with distant relatives who were virtually unknown to the

child or their parents. Concerns in this respect were also apparent in interviews for this study. For example, one manager said:

It takes so long, because you might be in the court process, you might have done your viabilities on certain family members, and there's a real pressure in the court to try and place, make it work and place within the family, and even sometimes when we do negative assessments the court will override us anyway, and place those children.

Another reflected that:

Currently there seems to be quite a delay... in court, with additional assessments being requested for relatives who hadn't come forward at the beginning of the process, and are coming forward quite late in the process and then independent social work assessments of those relatives where the fostering service have done an assessment and deemed [that they are] not suitable.

The issues raised also echo findings from a recent Ofsted report exploring delays in adoption. This drew on evidence from cases and from the views of adopters, children and young people and professionals, including local authority managers and social workers, and representatives from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), the courts and the voluntary sector. The report concluded that:

The key factor causing delay in tracked cases was the length of time for care proceedings to be concluded before an adoption plan could be confirmed. A high number of cases had been subject to repeat or late assessments of parents or members of the wider family. The time taken to carry out these assessments often had a measurable and adverse impact upon the timely granting of a placement order....In some areas, the reliance on independent experts appeared to reflect a general lack of trust on the part of the courts in the quality of local authority social work assessments as well as a lack of social work status in the court arena, especially relative to Cafcass guardians. In turn, social workers in some authorities suffered from a lack of confidence and experience in court work (Ofsted, 2012, p. 4).

The judicial response to the Family Justice Review seeks to promote improvements in case management and promote the timely conclusion of care proceedings.

In order to help achieve quality case management decisions, there will be rule and practice direction changes relating to the use of experts and a timetable track which will presume that non exceptional cases can be completed in 26 weeks (Judiciary for England and Wales, 2012, p.10).

Over the next 12 months the second part of this study will explore the impact of these changes, from a children's social care perspective, with the adoption managers participating in the study.

Children's social care delays

During the interviews adoption managers expressed their commitment to reducing unnecessary delay and ensuring the timely completion of adoption processes. However, they also highlighted that '*faster is not always better*' and raised concerns about the tight timescales for the completion of the adopters' approval process on the basis that speed may be at the expense of quality; this may have detrimental consequences for children and families and increase the rate of adoption breakdown. As one professional reflected:

You know, to make something efficient is not the same as making it effective, and you know the thing I say all the time is this isn't like buying a washing machine; people need time to go through the emotional journey to become successful adopters.

Another manager said that:

The challenge is the couples where they're not quite ready and we don't want to push them, sort of rush them, because if they're not quite ready the implication is disruption if you place someone too early.

The messages from these managers reinforce the importance of focusing upon outcomes rather than completion of processes within rigid timescales. This is also consistent with findings from the Munro Review of Child Protection (Cm 8062). While managers expressed some anxiety about tight timescales for the completion of the adopters' approval process, they did acknowledge that the matching processes sometimes took longer than was desirable.

The main cause of delay in the children's social care arena was judged to be matching harder to place children with suitable prospective adoptive carers. It was identified that the

solution is not as simple as increasing the number of adopters because the core problem is a 'fundamental mismatch between what people come forward for and you know what we've got'. As one manager reflected:

The majority of people come to adoption because they can't have their own children...So therefore it's a big shift for them thinking about having their own kind of perfect baby genetically ...to having a baby that isn't genetically related and you know has had nine months exposed to substance misuse and not knowing the impact that's going to have.

In this context they also highlighted the importance of not rushing the process and ensuring that prospective adopters have time to reflect and make informed decisions.

A further issue identified was that the profile of children awaiting adoption is constantly changing:

Until a couple of years ago something like eighty per cent of our children were singletons. And we had a few sibling pairs a year... we've had five or six sibling groups of three this year, about a dozen sibling pairs...There are fewer families who can offer them a family, and they also need more support...it's much more challenging to find suitable families who are going to meet their needs.

Another professional highlighted that:

One of the difficulties...is actually you can't recruit to the children you have available at the time because if it takes six months to get adopters through the system....so the difficulty is predicting who you're going to need placements for in six to twelve months' time.

Managers also drew attention to the fact that cases were not left to drift and that local authorities were proactive in trying to find families for children who are 'harder to place'. Strategies to recruit more prospective adopters and find families for children awaiting adoption are explored further below.

Recruitment

Just under two thirds of the local authorities participating in the research reported that they had access to a marketing officer (normally part-time), or assistance from the communication team within the local authority, to support recruitment activities. A range of strategies were employed to facilitate recruitment of potential adopters. The most common, identified by virtually all the adoption managers, was advertising on the radio, in the local press or (less frequently) on the television. In some, but not all areas, targeted recruitment strategies were employed with the aim of increasing the number of prospective adopters for children who are harder to place. Local authority websites and social media were also used as a means of awareness raising and promoting interest in adoption (8 of 15). As one manager reflected, use of Facebook and Twitter has been proving:

Extremely effective in linking people through, because we have our own website, Adoption in [LA] and there's a link through from...to our website and that is generating a lot of interest.

Five managers made specific reference to convening information sessions at regular intervals throughout the year. In one local authority conversion rates had improved since they had replaced 'chalk and talk type invite only sessions' with open sessions which provide an opportunity for members of the public to hear from, and talk to adopters, about their experiences. The events also allow people to talk more informally with social workers about their individual circumstances. Others also highlighted the value of adopters' stories and phone-in sessions as a means of generating interest and dispelling some of the myths surrounding adoption. For example, one authority uses adoption champions, referred to as 'experts by experience', to share their stories about adoption as part of National Adoption Week. They have also started an initiative involving visiting schools to raise awareness about adoption. This has dual benefits insofar as it aims to educate children and 'normalise' adoptive family life as well as facilitating discussions between children and their families, which has the potential to stimulate further interest or enquiries about adoption.

The quarterly adoption survey found that there were 4.5 times as many enquiries about adoption as applications and a little over 1.3 times as many applications as approvals (Department for Education, 2012b). Adoption managers explained that gauging the effectiveness of recruitment campaigns is not straightforward. Current recruitment activities may not yield immediate returns but may reap rewards in the future. As one manager reflected:

I think adoption, unlike fostering, is something that people, they don't ring up [about] having heard some article on the telly, or read something in the newspaper, it's something they, you know, they give a lot of thought to before they make that call...

The barriers that managers identified to increasing the pool of adopters and improving conversion rates were varied but included: stereotypes and misinformation in the media about who can adopt and the quality of service provided by local authorities; the recession and job insecurity; the ongoing problem of the mismatch between adopters' wishes and expectations about the types of children they would like to adopt and those who are waiting for families and the resources available to invest in recruitment. One practical suggestion was a national media campaign, informed by evidence on 'what works' in recruiting families for 'harder to place children'.

Gauging current performance: adoption score cards

Adoption 'scorecards' provide local authorities with child related data on:

- The average time between a child entering care and moving in with his or her adoptive family (for children who have been adopted).
- The average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family.
- Children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

Related information is also presented on:

- The number of children adopted and percentage leaving care through adoption.
- Changes in permanence decisions.
- Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds and of children aged five or over.
- The number of children awaiting adoption.

From 2013 data will also be provided on prospective adopters. These data allow the public and local authorities to monitor their performance against government thresholds, examine trends over time and draw comparisons with other areas. Adoption managers reported that the adoption scorecards were useful and informed discussion, review and future planning processes. They were described as a '*helpful tool for gauging where we are and what we need to focus on*'. However, during the course of the interviews a couple of managers did

caution against overreliance on these performance data without reference to the wider context of local authority practice. For example, one local authority that was below the government threshold on 'average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding to match to an adoptive family' reflected that the reason for this was their commitment to finding suitable families to meet the needs of children who are harder to place. The manager explained:

We could have given up on those [harder to place children] and said okay let's go for long term fostering, but we didn't want to do that, we felt somewhere out there, there were families that were right for [them]... the consequence of not changing the plan to long term fostering, sticking to the adoption plan, trying very hard to find an adoptive family... affects our figures.

Another identified that their performance would be affected by difficulties in obtaining placement orders; they explained that voluntary adoption agencies would not consider prospective adopters for these children until orders were granted. Caution was also expressed about possible future indicators linked to timescales for the proposed two month preparation and four month assessment stage for prospective adopters. One manager reflected that:

Some [prospective adopters] want to send their applications back in a day, and others want to send it back in three, four, five months' time, and I don't think there's much to be gained by harrying people through that process...it's an individual thing, and we need to be able to go at people's pace really...I think it's actually setting the local authorities up to look bad. Because actually, nobody would [be] capable of giving people information, sending in their application pack, getting their medicals done, the CRBs done, if that checks, you know, home visit and everything else within two months, and, you know, I don't think there's anything to be gained by it really.

These issues and changes in local authority performance, alongside contributory factors, will be explored further at subsequent data collection points.

Reforms

On the whole adoption managers were familiar with key proposals under consultation as part of the adoption and family justice reform agendas and reported that information was communicated to them via a number of channels including the DfE, British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and

adoption consortia. During the course of the interviews adoption managers were asked specifically about their views and perspectives on:

- The 26 week timescale for the conclusion of care proceedings.
- Amendments to the Placement Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012.

The latter change, effective from September 2012, means that adoption panels no longer make recommendations on whether a child should be placed for adoption if an application for a placement order is required.

Adoption managers identified that it was relatively early in terms of implementing the latest reforms designed to address court delays (Judiciary of England and Wales, 2012; Ministry of Justice *et al.*, 2011). There were different perspectives on whether a 26 week timetable would prove feasible and sustainable; to some extent this may reflect the wide variations in the average duration of proceedings in different courts (see McKeigue and Beckett, 2010 for a discussion of the potential impact of tackling court delay on pre-court delay). In three areas managers identified that the reform agenda had led to improved communication between the local authority and courts; roundtable events involving the courts and children's social care were identified as a good forum to enhance understanding of the knowledge base and pressures and demands on each system. It was also identified that the new timescales reduce the scope for judges to order 'assessment after assessment'; three managers perceived that courts were already less inclined to order additional assessments or instruct experts, which was welcomed. However, others identified that changes do not resolve longstanding issues such as the low status of social workers in courts (see also, Holmes, Munro and Soper, 2010; Munro and Ward, 2008; Ward, Brown and Westlake, 2012). Concerns were also raised about the intense pressure that the tight timescales place on social workers and the adoption managers cautioned that the drive for speed may be at the expense of the completion of quality assessments to inform decisions that have life changing consequences for the children and families concerned. If it is a 26 week process then:

We have to write reports at the end of quite a short process...when we've not had long, or we've not long had, or are only just getting, parenting assessments or viability assessments on family members.

Professor Eileen Munro (2010) also recommends that:

There should be a stronger awareness of balancing the timeliness with the quality of assessments, so that the specific needs of any child can be well assessed.

Timeliness matters but so does quality, and local arrangements should monitor both (p.11).

Adoption panels

In relation to adoption panel changes a third of the managers reflected that the panel approval process had not been a cause of delay in their authority (see also Ofsted, 2012). Moreover, a number questioned whether removing the requirement for the adoption panel to scrutinise and approve children's plans was beneficial. As one manager explained:

I think the panel is really, really vital in providing a sort of independent kind of checking mechanism really that everything has been done, and is likely to be done...we need to have that to make sure that placements are safe and meet the needs of the child. So I don't think that is a delay.

It was also suggested that the new approach was less robust and that new systems and processes have had to be introduced to compensate for this. One manager reflected that:

The workload that's put on us now is what the panel used to do, we still have to go through those due processes, it's just that it's done by an individual now not a panel, and that individual's time is limited to do that... so we've devised a way of managing it, but it's not easy.

Another explained that:

We've turned what was essentially an external panel process into an internal quality assurance process...I don't think anybody is realistically expecting an Assistant Director to sit there and look at five sets of documents...they have people who will do some of the scrutiny for them.

Adoption managers also highlighted that under previous arrangements the panel would have reviewed and discussed children's permanency reports. They suggested that scrutiny of information at this stage served to support and inform the matching process. As one manager explained:

They all need to be matched anyway, so previously panel would know the children who were coming through because they'd have already read the reports and they've gone through the approval process, the recommendation for approval, and at the

matching they'd know who... so they'd know all the adopters already and they'd know the children already and they'd get a bit more of a feel you know, so taking that stage, that layer out hasn't necessarily I don't think prevented delay.

The management and implications of these changes will be explored in subsequent reports.

Conclusion

Unnecessary delay before, during or after care proceedings can leave children 'in limbo' awaiting changes necessary to secure their long term futures. The adoption and family justice reform agendas aim to tackle delay and create a faster but rigorous framework to provide children with a family for life (Department for Education, 2012a; Ministry of Justice et al., 2011). Adoption managers were committed to the principle of timely decision-making but cautioned against focusing upon the speed of completion of core adoption processes at the expense of quality. In particular, concerns were raised about a six month approval process for prospective adopters. *'People are pregnant for nine months...I mean adopters invariably they've had years of thinking about being parents, but in terms of the issues in adoption they need to have had time to properly reflect'*. Furthermore, social workers need sufficient time to undertake high quality assessments. As one manager explained:

The things that sink placements are around unsolved trauma, attachment issues around a parent, you know they are quite subtle things, and you have to have a good relationship with somebody to work out whether you know the depression they've had is actually going to be something that causes a problem or whether the depression they have is going to be a resilience factor because they have more of an insight about low mood.

Findings from the research also demonstrate the real and ongoing challenges of finding sufficient families who have the skills, attributes and inclination to parent older children and those with disabilities and complex needs. It was noted that this issue is being further exacerbated by the rise in the number of younger children in the system. The rising care and adoption population also places additional pressure on a range of services that are experiencing significant budget cuts. In this context some managers were anxious about the capacity of children's social care to provide adequate post-adoption support to meet the needs of children and families. Subsequent reports will explore local authority implementation of reforms and the impact of these on tackling delay and improving the life chances of looked after children.

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