“Right on time: exploring adoption delays” - survey findings

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Right on time – exploring delays in adoption

- Thematic inspection undertaken by Ofsted
- Nine authorities visited between November 2011 and January 2012
- Authorities varied in size and geographical context
- Variable performance in adoption and recent relevant inspection outcomes
- The report was published in April 2012

What were we expecting to find?

- Time taken to conclude care proceedings
- Ineffective decision-making, particularly prior to entry into care and in the early stages of care and during family-finding and matching
- Increased demand upon resources within the system
- Insufficient pool of adopters
- Increased use of alternative permanence arrangements, including special guardianship orders, residence orders, and family/friend foster placements
- Timescales not sufficiently tracked

Why were we expecting to find this?

- Reduction in the number of looked after children adopted, including children aged under a year
- The average length of time between admission into care and adoption
- Research findings
- Inspection findings
- Increase in use of alternative permanence solutions

Methodology

Inspectors looked at:

- the quality of care planning, including the clarity, timeliness and effectiveness of key decision-making and multi-agency working
- legal advice
- liaison between local authorities, Cafcass and the courts
- performance management, including management oversight
- training
- policies/procedures
- strategic planning, including recruitment of adopters

Methodology

- Tracked cases included examples of:
  - children recently (within the last 12 months) adopted or placed for adoption, including children who were not placed within 12 months of a 'should be placed for adoption' (SHOBPA) decision
  - children subject to a recent SHOBPA panel decision (this may include children still subject to care proceedings) but not yet matched.
- Inspectors looked at 94 cases

Methodology

Inspectors also spoke to:

- Adopters
- Senior managers in local authority children's services
- Cafcass
- Court representatives, including judges

What we found…

- High number of cases had been known to children's social care for a considerable length of time prior to care proceedings being initiated
- There was some evidence that voluntary care was regularly used inappropriately for very young children, causing significant delay in achieving permanence

What we found…

Most common reason for delay was the length of time taken for care proceedings to be concluded.

Reasons included:

- repeat assessments of birth parents
- additional assessments of relatives
- additional expert assessments
- a general lack of social worker confidence and assertiveness within the court arena
- insufficient capacity of local courts to meet demand, resulting in timetabling difficulties.

What we found…

- Limited evidence of effective communication links between local authorities, Cafcass and the courts to address shared strategic and practice issues, including delay for children

What we found…

- Most children placed within 12 months of formal decisions that they should be adopted
- Matching processes generally robust
- Little evidence of delay caused by search for ‘perfect’ match

What we found…

- Most adopters felt that they had received a welcoming response from agencies
- Most adopters thought that the length of assessment was about right

What we found…

- Little evidence of decisions being made, or not being made as a result of financial constraints
- Several authorities felt that increasing workloads were adversely affecting outcomes
- Support from adoption workers to children's social workers was significant

What we found…

- Local authorities with robust systems to track progress were more likely to minimise delay
- Level of challenge from managers and IROs was inconsistent
- Recruitment strategies did not always reflect changing demand, nor were they always accompanied by SMART action plans

Conclusions

- The adoption process is highly complex, with each stage of the child's journey subject to risks of delay.
- A holistic approach by all key stakeholders to avoiding delay is necessary
- There must be a particular emphasis on ensuring timely planning and decision-making about removing children from the care of their birth family
- The survey's findings are consistent with several key findings and recommendations of the Family Justice Review

Conclusions (continued)

- Some evidence of delay in post-care proceedings, but these delays tended to be less lengthy than those prior to the conclusion of care proceedings
- However, delays were minimised if the following were in place:
  - swift commencement of family finding
  - An effective recruitment strategy to ensure that the pool of available adopters matched as closely as possible the needs of children requiring adoption
  - sufficient capacity within services to prioritise adoption work
  - systematic monitoring of adoption plans

Recommendations

Local authorities should:

- ensure that children who need to come into care are identified at the earliest possible stage and appropriate statutory intervention is taken
- ensure that a strategy is in place to recruit, approve and support adopters who meet the current and future needs of looked after children, with sufficiently specific, timely and measurable action plans
- ensure that staff who work in permanence are suitably skilled, supported and directed so that they can help children to achieve permanence most effectively without avoidable delay
- maintain robust performance management arrangements to ensure timely progression of adoption plans.

Recommendations

Local authorities and partners, including Cafcass and the courts, should:

- develop and maintain productive, challenging relationships that address delay at both strategic and casework levels.

The government should:

- seek to take swift and full action to support the implementation of relevant recommendations of the Family Justice Review, particularly those actions relating to the timely implementation and conclusion of care proceedings, so that delay at all stages of the child's journey is addressed.

Clear message from adopters and professionals

Adoption should be quicker, but the speeding up of the process should not happen at the expense of the necessary thoroughness of assessment of children's needs, and of potential adopters

Full report and summary:

http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/right-time-exploring-delays-adoption