

TACT Briefing

Adoption: a vision for change

Summary

On 27 March 2016 Education Secretary Nicky Morgan MP released a new “blueprint for adoption”. The purpose of this strategy is to transform the life chances of children who spend up to 18 months in care waiting to be adopted. This is part of a four year strategy and the first in a number of announcements that will ‘revolutionise support for the most vulnerable children in our society’.

Overview

Adoption: a vision for change outlines the following reforms:

- All children are to be matched without delay free from the “shackles of council red tape”.
- A new drive to boost the educational success of adopted children to include a designated teacher and a ‘virtual school head’ who will provide tailored support to help children overcome trauma.
- £14 million investment for innovation of local schemes that result in more children finding homes. Coram Cambridgeshire who put babies under two with foster parents willing to adopt are cited as an example.
- The appointment of Andrew Christie as the new Chair of the Adoption Leadership Board.

The strategy contrasts the success of adoption reform of recent years with the decline in adoptions over the last two years. 5,300 children were adopted in 2015 – 72% more than in 2011. Yet over the last two years, the number of decisions for adoptions have almost halved.

In response there is

- A commitment to change the law to ‘make crystal clear councils and courts must always pursue adoption when it’s in the child’s best interest – rather than with a series of short term carers who can’t provide the support they need over the long term’.
- Prioritisation of restorative care and the ‘long term stability that adoptive placements can offer to children who have suffered from devastating heinous abuse.’

By 2020 the government will:

- Pledge £14 million to address delay for vulnerable children in care by providing larger pools of approved adopters, by making sure every council is part of a regional adoption agency by 2020
- Provide therapeutic services to all adopted young people up to age 21 as well as for the family and friends who care for them – a commitment totalling over £49 million
- Skilling up social workers to make ‘right decisions’
- Shine light on poor performance by holding adoption agencies and councils to account with the use of scorecards which will also be rolled out to Regional Adoption Agencies

Briefing in Full

Foreword

The joint introduction by Nicky Morgan MP and Edward Timpson MP establishes the family as the most important building block in a child's life. Foster carers are acknowledged in the second paragraph when they tell us that "Very often, the best placement will be with kinship carers or foster carers."

What follows is an emphasis on adoption - proven to provide children with unique stability and care within a new family that 'lasts long beyond childhood'. The report points to 3.2 % of children returning to care every year after an adoption order is granted, compared to 25% of children on a residence order.

Chapter 1 Progress to date

Highlights the success of the adoption reform programme to date by referencing

- The appointment of Sir Martin Narey as ministerial adviser on adoption
- Enforcing a data driven approach to performance improvement
- Launching First4Adoption, a single adoption information service
- Increasing the recruitment of adopters
- Driving up innovation in the way that children are matched and removing barriers to good placements
- Improving adoption support
- Acknowledgement of how the reforms have improved lives.

Chapter 2 New and enduring challenges

A key challenge is the number of adoptions that has halved. The conclusion is that many children for whom adoption would be the best option are now missing out, and that some alternative placements are being made despite professionals having significant concerns about the quality and stability of the care on offer, and the future risk for the children involved.

This is to be addressed though *further reform and a focus on practice, transforming the services on offer to children and families, to deliver excellence everywhere, by sharpening accountability and performance management structures.*

Chapter 3 Creating the foundations for sustainable success

Reference is made to *Children's social care reform: a vision for change* (2016) in which the government outlined its overarching vision for transforming the quality of children's social care services by 2020.

This chapter describes three fundamental building blocks of the adoption system

- **Legal reform** – the law will be changed so that prospective adopters are explicitly included within the categories of people a court and adoption agency must have regard for
- £14m will be allocated to the implementation of a **regionalised adoption system** over the next two years

- **Workforce development**, to enable the children's workforce to make the best option for the child, negotiate the legal process, identify a permanent carer and support the adoptive families.

Special Guardian Assessments

Children in special guardianship placements will now be eligible for help from the Adoption Support Fund. The fund - which was launched last year to help adoptive families access therapeutic support and short breaks - will increase in size every year in this parliament, be open to adopted children until they are 21, and be open to those in special guardian placements.

Regionalised Adoption Agencies

£16m will be provided in 2016/17 and 2017/18 to local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) to further develop and implement regional adoption agencies (RAAs). Early adopters have already received support of £4.5m for 2015/16. Every local authority will be in one by 2020.

Developing the workforce

A sub section on workforce development signals a renewed commitment to raising the quality of social work across the board, and clarifying social workers' responsibilities in supporting vulnerable children. A commitment to support quality social workers to develop skills and confidence to

- Decide on the best permanence option for a child, based on a thorough knowledge of the evidence base on each option, and understand the impact of delay on a child's life.
- Negotiate the legal process and be able to present evidence in court convincingly
- Identify suitable permanent carer or arrangement
- Support families in transition

Chapter 4 Excellent practice everywhere

This chapter sets out the building blocks for a whole process redesign which are identified as Regional Adoption Agencies, development of a national matching infrastructure, speeding up placements by the use of 'early placement schemes' and improved adoption support.

Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

- increase in the ASF in 2016-17 to £21m and £28m in 2017-18, with further increases in every year in this Parliament
- Extension of support to adopted young people up to age 21 (from April 2016)
- Children adopted from other countries via inter-country adoptions to use the ASF (from April 2016) and
- Access to the ASF for special guardians who care for children who were previously looked after (from April 2016).

Mental Health

A specialist mental health provision for adopted children. The DfE, Department of Health and NHS England will work together on the transformation of mental health services for children and young people as set out in the Future of Mind report 2015

- By Summer 2016 an expert advisory group will be set up to advise ministers on the new care pathways for adopted and looked after children.
- Options for developing models of care for adopted children and other vulnerable groups to be considered in the context of local delivery and RAAs

Education

- Adopted children aged 2 years can get free early education and childcare.
- The role of virtual schools heads and designated teachers will be used to support adopted children
- Pupil Premium Plus will be applied to the needs of adopted children to improve their educational outcomes
- support voluntary sector organisations to develop and highlight effective practice including raising awareness and understanding in schools;
- develop guides on education for adopted children for schools and parents; and
- explore including a topic in initial teacher training on 'understanding the impact of trauma and loss on children's ability to learn'

Chapter 5 Sharpening accountability to ensure delivery

A cross reference is made to Children's Social Care Reform – a vision for change 2016

The report cites as examples of good accountability structures the development of RAAs, along with new organisational geographical delivery models such as Children's Social Care Trusts and the new 'combined authority' model. RAAs are seen as having the potential to create 'more appropriate conditions for excellent practice and innovation to flourish'.

High quality data will be a feature of accountability and the use of scorecards will be rolled out to the RAAs.

Ofsted will continue to have a key role in adoption services. The DfE is currently working with Ofsted to design a new system of inspection for the RAAs.

The Adoption Leadership Board will have an ongoing role

- collect and analyse data to inform, support and challenge policy makers and national leaders;
- engage regional leaders in policy questions and provide visible system leadership;
- support regional leaders in the implementation of the adoption reform agenda; and
- share good practice in implementing the reforms – particularly on regionalisation and service consolidation – and perhaps publish opinions and guidance where helpful.

The role of the adopter voice as a driver of reform

- Adoption UK will establish an Adoption Support User Group, made up of Adoption UK adopter champions and adopters from the Adoption Support Expert Advisory. The group will meet quarterly with officials and annually with the Minister for Children and Families
- Adoption UK will provide support to the partnerships of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies as they transition to regional adoption agencies, ensuring that the adopter voice is embedded within development and implementation plans; and
- Coram will extend the work of 'The Adoptables' to promote the views and experiences of young people who are adopted. After Adoption's TALK adoption project will help adopted young people to get together and share experiences.

Conclusion: Delivering the vision

The report envisages the following developments

- Legislating to ensure quality and stability of care, as a priority
- Funding and support via a RAA development fund, with up to £14m available across 2016-18 to support the implementation of RAAs
- Setting up an Expert Working Group to help develop the content and delivery method for a CPD programme for roll out from April 2017
- Undertaking a formal consultation of the proposed knowledge and skills statement for social workers whose job is achieving permanence in summer 2016.
- Commissioning an independent summary of the relevant research evidence, for use by local authority managers, social workers and judges, which focuses on comparative outcomes of different placement options
- Continuing to pay the inter-agency fee until July 2016 when they will review the position.
- **Innovation and practice excellence and** introducing two new funding streams for RAAs, voluntary adoption agencies and voluntary organisations, with up to £16 million across 2016-18
- Increasing the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) in 2016-17 to £21 million and to £28 million in 2017-18
- Extending ASF support from April 2016 to adopted young people up to age 21; to children adopted from care in other countries via intercountry adoptions; and to special guardians who care for children who were previously looked after.
- Strengthening the evidence base of 'what works' in terms of therapeutic adoption support.
- Setting up an expert Mental Health group to advise Department for Education and Department of Health ministers on new care pathways for adopted and looked after children.
- Developing models of care to meet the mental health needs of adopted children, and other vulnerable groups.
- **Education** and the implementation of new legislation to expand the role of virtual schools heads and consider how designated teachers can continue to support children who have left care under an adoption order
- Encouraging and spreading best practice in the use of Pupil Premium Plus
- Supporting voluntary sector organisations to develop and highlight effective practice in schools
- Considering including 'understanding the impact of trauma and loss on children's ability to learn' in initial teacher training.

Comment

The government has presented this paper as a radical redesign of the “highly fragmented” adoption system. There are new elements to the government approach, but scrutiny shows the new paper as being more like a continuation of the adoption reform programme kicked off by Martin Narey in 2014. The separation of adoption from the remaining parts of the care system makes for more ‘fragmentation’ and dis-integration of services for children in care.

The government have said that they will look at legislative change to facilitate ‘faster’ adoption but there is an absence of commitment to any timeline. Also missing is an up to date analysis of where we are now. Adoption is not the only option for every child in care, as TACT knows only too well. There are 64,000 children living with almost 55,000 foster families across the UK. As the Fostering Network report this figure represents 80% of the 81,000 children in care and the 20,000 special guardianship families.

A radical programme would put resource into the support, training and acknowledgement of those foster carers who selflessly support the majority of children in our care. This would add balance by signalling the importance of improving life chances for all children in care.

The proposed reforms like the virtual head input and teachers are welcome, but they will not be available to those children supported under special guardianship. The DfEs report on ‘Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England’ (31 March 2016) shows that educational improvements are not happening quickly enough to make real improvements on life chances for children in care.

The crossover between this paper and those of the Department of Health and NHS England on the mental health of children in care and adopted children is a welcome measure, in particular for children leaving care, who face difficulties in their transition from child to adult. Because many services, despite their best efforts, find it impossible to offer a smooth transition in service, with all too often disastrous outcomes for the adolescent care leaver.

The increase in adoption support fund for those children supported under special guardianships is welcome. Yet the number of Special Guardianship Orders are in excess of 20,000, our calculations show that the proposed funding would need to be doubled in order to make an impact.

The paper emphasises the importance of the ‘adopter voice’, though not on the proposals in this paper, which are already decided – with the exception of the consultation on workforce. Rather the adopter voice, along with the views of other stakeholders, is to be sought throughout the four year implementation of the key proposals. It is a shame that the entire white paper wasn’t presented for the scrutiny of adopters and key stakeholders.

The Regional Adoption Agencies are meant to strengthen the role of local authorities and partnership working with the voluntary sector. Again, this is separation of adoption from the many other components of support for children in care. It would make more sense to create permanence teams across the board.

TACT will support the positive measures in this paper, while at the same time we will campaign for a balanced approach to adoptive parents and foster carers, proper investment for special guardians, a focus on the safe transition of children leaving care into adulthood. We call for the government to positive measures in education for adopted children accessible to all children in care including those in special guardianship families. TACT will campaign for a radical programme of education measures geared to improving attainment for every child in care.

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