

'For children who need the love and stability that an adoptive family can offer, what matters most is that they get that chance, in the right family, with the minimum of delay. Local authorities have a huge responsibility to play in achieving that. But this report highlights that one of the most important things we need to do if more children are to have the chance that they need, when they need it, is to get the court process right. Decisions to place children for adoption are not easy. They are life-changing decisions that social workers and the judiciary have to make. However, the focus must always be on the child and what is best for that child. Part of that is looking at how we can minimise delays wherever possible when adoption is the right decision.'

Deputy Chief Inspector, John Goldup

*Note: This guide captures the key findings and the recommendations in the document produced by Ofsted.*

*It uses the language of the original document.*

## Executive Summary (paragraph 4)

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. Inspectors saw examples of cases where considerable efforts had been made to undertake all necessary assessments as early as possible in the proceedings. However, these assessments were often sequential which meant that delay was inevitable.

## Key findings (page 6)

- The most common reason for delay in the cases tracked for this report was the length of time taken for care proceedings to be concluded before an adoption plan could be confirmed. There were several reasons for court delay, including most significantly:
  - repeat assessments of birth parents
  - additional assessments of relatives, often commenced late in proceedings
  - additional expert assessments, sometimes by independent social workers
  - a general lack of social worker confidence and assertiveness within the court arena, which sometimes led to a lack of challenge to changes in plans and additional assessments
  - insufficient capacity of local courts to meet demand, resulting in timetabling difficulties.
- Fourteen of the 53 tracked cases scrutinised by inspectors had been known to children's social care for a considerable length of time prior to care proceedings being initiated.
- There was some evidence in a small number of local authorities that voluntary care was regularly used inappropriately for very young children, causing significant delay in achieving permanence.
- Evidence of effective communication links between local authorities, Cafcass and the courts to address shared strategic and practice issues, including delay for children, was variable. Although these services often met routinely and formally, the impact of the meetings on improving the timeliness of outcomes for children was not always evident.
- Recruitment strategies for adopters did not always fully reflect changing demand, nor were they always accompanied by specific action plans.
- Although several cases were subject to delay due to difficulties in identifying suitable adopters, most children were placed within 12 months of an agency decision that they should be adopted.
- Processes for matching children with adoptive placements were generally robust. There was little evidence of delay caused by an unrealistic search for a 'perfect' ethnic match.
- Most of the adopters spoken to reported that they had experienced a welcoming response from agencies when they first enquired about adoption.
- Most adopters felt, especially with the benefit of hindsight, that the time taken to complete their assessment was necessary, although some had experienced delay as a result of staff shortages.

- There was little evidence of decisions being taken, or not being taken, as result of financial constraints, including the payment of inter-agency fees or when planning post-adoption support.
- Senior managers and social workers in several local authorities felt that increasing workload demands had adversely affected their capacity to achieve timely permanence outcomes for children.
- The level and quality of support available from adoption workers to children's social workers, including family finding specialists, were key factors in minimising the impact of competing demands and commencing timely parallel planning.
- Local authorities' adoption services were structured in a variety of ways. The extent to which the inevitable risks of any service structure were managed was variable, however, with some evidence of a lack of adequate training and support for those workers responsible for permanence and adoption planning.
- Local authorities who had robust systems in place to track the progress of cases were more likely to minimise the risk of significant accumulated delay
- The level of challenge from managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) to prevent or reduce delay was inconsistent.

## Recommendations (page 7)

### 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.

### 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.

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