

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT OF COUNCIL ADOPTION SERVICES

DIRECTORS' BRIEFING

1. Purpose

The Children's Improvement Board (CIB) together with DfE commissioned Outcomes UK in partnership with BAAF to complete 12 diagnostic assessments of councils' adoption services (May-July 2012). The diagnostic was designed to assist councils in managing their own improvement in response to national policy, particularly reducing adoption delay.

This briefing outlines the key themes for the sector and areas for future improvement support arising from the diagnostic assessments.

2. Key Themes for the Sector

"Childs Journey" – There is some encouraging evidence to suggest the beginnings of a refocusing onto the "child's journey" through the social care system from first contact through to post adoption. This is reflective of the recommendations in the Munro Review and the value of a more holistic approach in meeting need in a more timely way in order to improve outcomes. Examples of better tracking systems of children and better risk assessment have been identified. The sector though still has a way to go to properly join up electronic data with paper based systems. Wherever there is potential for duplication and complexity there is also potential for delay.

Permanency Planning – There was significant variability in how embedded permanence planning was in an authority's policy and social work practice. Positively this was being addressed in a variety of ways – permanence panels, new pre-proceedings panels, and a new permanence planning officer post. In around four councils there was evidence of concurrent planning in order to reduce the potential for delay. A critical identified challenge is an over optimistic focus on family reunification and seeing adoption as a last resort; this builds in delay into care planning and negatively impacts on children's attachments and achieving better outcomes; this is particularly the case with long term neglect. In a significant proportion of councils, permanency planning is too reactive and as a consequence too crisis driven.

Assessment Skills - Our experience repeatedly highlighted social work assessment and analytical skills and the tools available for assessment as critical issues. In the most positive adoption services there was encouragement, training and support for assessment expertise. In one agency the well-planned introduction of a new assessment tool was clearly making a difference.

Case Management and Monitoring – The large majority of action plans have identified the need for more robust case management and supervisory skills to pick up on drift and to challenge poor practice. The best examples of this being tackled were when performance data and the narrative on child care plans was being scrutinised on a monthly basis.

Workforce and Culture Issues – Many authorities were struggling with high turnover in front line and management jobs, and had newly qualified social workers requiring considerable support. One authority had brought in 3 new 'practice educator' posts that was encouraging. In some authorities

we found a gulf between senior management and frontline staff that could clearly hinder the implementation of change strategies. But where there was clear leadership and responsiveness to the concerns of the frontline, a better focus on the child's journey was being achieved.

Children and Adoptive Parents – It has been challenging to talk directly to children going through the adoption system due to time constraints but listening to messages from children and adoptive parents there are real concerns about poor communication, high expectations of prospective adopters and drift in the system.

Scorecard – Councils need to develop a more sophisticated range of performance information about adoption that goes beyond the three-year aggregate figures in the scorecard. Where councils have this data they have been able to understand the key factors affecting timeliness and pinpoint early evidence of improvement within the three-year timeframe covered by the scorecard. Some councils are working hard to capture more real time data to show improvement and what they need to do to get “ahead of the curve” e.g. local measures for current performance in year; also importantly triangulating timeliness with outcomes for children.

Innovation and Challenge – A recurring theme is that adoption services are not challenging themselves enough to refresh practice and find more imaginative solutions to adoption delay. This has been characterised by experienced longstanding members of staff who need more active challenge and support to think more imaginatively. A sector led support offer should seriously consider this as a key area of activity in order to change the culture within certain councils.

Future Improvement Support - Councils were relatively strong on self-assessment of the causes and forces at work but far less strong on what could work to do better. Below are a selection of the main ideas and recommendations that emerged from the diagnostic assessments that councils believe would make the biggest difference in improving the timeliness of adoption. Some councils identified that their structures, systems and processes were contributing to delay and identified ‘business re-engineering’ as something they would welcome support with. This could take the form of process mapping to develop more efficient ways of working that would reduce complexity, duplication and tasks being achieved quicker

- Effective Adoption Consortia (“adopters for children” not councils) that enable councils to look beyond their own placement needs so any spare capacity re. potential adopters can be shared with neighbouring authorities. Through better joint commissioning arrangements greater efficiency and effectiveness could be achieved in placement contracting with the voluntary and independent sectors. Also consortia developing models of shared services and best practice that drives improved performance e.g. that address issues relating to the significant variability in the use of adoption, or in the recruitment of adopters for siblings and other harder to place children
- Strategies for supporting the pivotal IRO role in the care planning process
- Actively engaging, listening and responding to children, young people, birth families and adoptive parents to drive performance and outcome improvement
- Developing an outcomes focussed performance management and QA framework to monitor results and change

- Local and regional conference events for children’s social care, the judiciary, CAFCASS at which research findings could be shared to drive forward the importance of timely decision making for children
- Almost universally the councils see benefits in the use of Family Group Conferences (FGC’s) in making timely informed decisions about children and their families. FGC’s allow councils to complete an early assessment (pre-proceedings) on the capacity of the family and others to provide suitable care. Some already have in-house provision, some purchase the service externally. Given the important role councils see FGC’s as playing then it will be important to make sure these can be delivered and that there is capacity and flexibility regarding their use (potential for sharing services across councils)
- Councils want easily accessible research and best practice material and new strategies regarding placement dilemmas that can often cause inordinate delay e.g. transracial placements, placing siblings together or not, how long to keep looking for adoptive families for hard to place children, and new/innovative ways of achieving this. Perhaps building on the work of the C4EO
- The action/improvement plans developed by councils do include specific actions, including learning and development for staff, and sector led support has to chime with these
- Specific performance management, QA and workforce development needs emerged that could be tackled regionally or through groups of similar councils coming together or through networking (“buddying”) and action learning opportunities, these include:
 - Effective adoption support
 - Assessment and planning skills to support timely and effective early intervention
 - Determining the most appropriate permanence options for looked after children – effective case management
 - The case for adoption – outcomes, controversies, the voice of adopted children and adults, how to improve practice
 - Developing concurrent planning services
 - Developing good practice in dual assessments and “fostering to adopt”
 - Key features of successful family finding and increasing the numbers of adopters
 - Reducing and managing adoption breakdowns

4. Finding Out More

Please contact Andy Gill (Head of Social Care Consultancy Practice, Outcomes UK) if you would like to know more about the joint work with BAAF and diagnostic assessment. Both organisations offer a range of adoption support services and are committed to work with the sector to maximise the impact of shared learning in order to improve outcomes for children.

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