

Redesigning Adoption

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The following report has been produced by the Expert Working Group on Adoption, which was established and commissioned by the Coalition Government to urgently review the operation of adoption in England. This follows the recent public debate identifying a range of concerns about the current effectiveness of adoption services. Our group is made up of managers, specialists and practitioners from across adoption including BAAF, local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies, academia and representatives of adoptive families. We share a strong commitment to the future of adoption as a key component of child care in England, relatively unusual by international standards in the way Parental Responsibility can be completely and irrevocably transferred in the interests of the child.
- 1.2 The current concerns about how adoption is perceived to be failing have been well publicised elsewhere. In essence the critique might be bluntly summarised as follows:
- too few children are available for adoption and it takes too long to secure an adoptive placement so applicants become frustrated while children become older and potentially more damaged as they wait;
 - the application and assessment processes for prospective adopters have become elongated, unduly intrusive and bureaucratic, so they are in themselves a significant disincentive to adopt;
 - for some prospective applicants the system is experienced as unfair and inaccessible because of inconsistencies between adoption agencies in their application of local and national policies ranging from health and safety to race and ethnicity;
 - despite good intentions and recent changes in post-adoption support, adoptive parents often may feel abandoned as they care for increasingly hurt and needy children.
- This is a simplified summary of a complex set of issues and evidence.
- 1.3 Members of the Expert Working Group are equally aware of the counter views in defence of this critique. These, put simply, include that:
- the true measure of success in adoption is the very low rate of failure or disruption and this must always be the key test;
 - the numbers adopted need to be seen in the context of the growth of alternative forms of permanent substitute care including Special Guardianship Orders;
 - the criticisms of the adoption service often tend to be on behalf of the adults as prospective adopters, rather than the children, whereas the service first and foremost must prioritise the needs of children - that also means that agencies should never compromise on the thoroughness and quality of assessment;

- there is a fundamental difficulty in the mismatch between the increasingly complex and challenging needs of children including sibling groups, and the capacity and expectations of many prospective adopters;
- if the problem is one of consistency then system reform is not required, rather there should be a more consistent approach to the application of the existing system.

This also paraphrases some highly complex and contentious arguments.

- 1.4 Strikingly, the consensus among the Expert Working Group is that there is some truth in both the critique and the defence. Our collective view can best be summarised as one which is proud and supportive of the role and performance of adoption at its best, but we recognise that the criticisms are genuine, evidence based and must be tackled. So the focus of the group has been on how to address the concerns in a meaningful way without losing the undeniable strengths of the existing system – how to achieve change without detriment.
- 1.5 The following paper summarises the work of the group in proposing a revision of the adoption system which is radical in addressing the concerns but does so by building on rather than dismissing existing capacity and legislation. The core components of our proposals include:
- Developing a more coherent, robust but honest approach to marketing adoption nationally, based around the real needs of the children
 - Introducing the Adoption Gateway as a new national “front door” for prospective adopters to supplement but not replace local agency access points
 - Enabling the Adoption Gateway both to provide easy and clear access to adoption information and processes, but also to provide low-level monitoring of the accessibility of local agencies
 - Re-designing the adoption application process into two distinct but fluent stages
 - The first stage would be focussed on initial training, self-assessment and basic checks – led by the applicant, guided by the agency;
 - The second stage would be the detailed assessment – led by the agency, guided by the applicant
 - Streamlining assessment forms and guidance to allow for more focussed and confident assessment reports without compromising on quality
 - Establishing a tougher target that in most cases the application process would take no more than six months (two plus four) to complete
 - Allowing that for some applicants, such as second time adopters or foster carers, these processes can be further “fast-tracked”
 - Ensuring that all children with a plan for adoption and all approved adopters are referred to and go live on the national adoption register after three months to maximise their chances of a match
 - Introducing charging for step-parent adopters
 - Substantially improving post-adoption support through the introduction of stronger minimum standards and the concept of an “Adoption Passport”
- 1.6 There has been a remarkable level of consensus within the group about these proposals which we collectively believe can make a substantial difference to the service and ultimately to the lives of children and adopters. But we must assert some notes of caution, not least because getting this wrong would have grave consequences. Our proposals have been produced at speed. We believe they are

coherent and well argued but these are highly complex and sensitive services and systems – there is much detailed work still to be done to finalise the proposals. Secondly, the implementation of these proposals will take time, consideration and concerted effort, and may require a review of if not an increase in the resource base. If accepted, it is vital that a skilled and committed but stretched workforce is fully engaged in a carefully constructed implementation programme. Finally, adoption services do not function and cannot improve in isolation. Our group believes strongly that improvements in adoption will also be heavily dependent on the implementation of the Munro Review and the Family Justice Review. We commend these proposals to Government.

2. Our approach

2.1 The Expert Group has taken a view of the whole system of adoption recruitment, assessment, training and support. In part, this is because we believe that the current ‘assessment process’ which starts at the point of formal application is too inflexible in allowing agencies and adopters to engage and plan the required work in a way that is effective and efficient. Within the current process, agencies are trying (quite literally in no particular order) to:

- assess prospective adopters’ suitability;
- give them comprehensive information about adoption;
- prepare and train them for placement;
- make assessments about possible links with children;
- verify and check past history and current circumstances;
- undertake statutory checks;
- carry out health and safety checks

2.2 Throughout this complex process, agencies are trying to balance expectations about the timetable of the process against the needs of any child that might be placed. It is often reported that there is also a subtle process of ‘conversion’ taking place whereby prospective adopters are encouraged to adapt their aspirations and hopes for the ‘type’ of child that they may be linked with. We believe that by taking a more flexible approach through a two stage process, the whole system can become more transparent, effective and efficient with improved timeliness and positive outcomes for all parties. For example, we believe that the critical importance of post-adoption support should be clearly identified and built in as a part of everyone’s expectations (agencies, adopters and children) and properly resourced and delivered as necessary. Similarly we think that training should be provided throughout the journey as adopters develop their understanding and identify their needs from early days to assessment and approval and continue once the child is actually placed.

3. Marketing and recruitment and the National Adoption Gateway

3.1 It is at present unclear exactly how many people make an initial enquiry about the possibility of adopting – there is no overall data collection but evidence from National Adoption Week and inter-agency comparison shows that people will/may approach multiple adoption agencies and non-specialist agencies.

- 3.2 It is important to have a clear picture of the profile of prospective adopters in developing appropriate marketing approaches but it is certainly the case that not all initial enquirers will be prepared to give identifying information and therefore obtaining an accurate picture will always be difficult. However, there are a number of clearly understood profiles and drivers to underpin development.
- 3.3 There are some, but few, prospective parents motivated primarily by the direct experience they have had with complex children (such as disability or as a foster carer) or with a very strong motivation and child-centred approach to helping children in the most acute need. In 2010/11 in England, 9% of adoptive placements (210 out of 2,450) were with current foster carers (Children Looked After in England (including adoption and care leavers), year ending March 2011 (DfE, SFR 21/2011, September 2011)) – over the past five years, the levels have varied between 9 and 11%.
- 3.4 Most prospective parents approach the possibility as a way of developing their family either instead of natural birth or because of infertility. The starting point for the latter is more likely to be a wish to develop a family through initially having a single child or a child who is without developmental challenges.
- 3.5 For some families with birth children, adoption is a means of “completing” their family – 13% of Adoption UK’s membership of prospective adopters and adoptive parents comprise adoptive families that also have birth children (the actual figure is likely to be slightly higher as not all members of Adoption UK provide information on their family backgrounds, although most do).
- 3.6 In 2009/2010, the breakdown of adoptive parents adopting children from care was as follows (Children Looked After in England (including adoption and care leavers), year ending March 2010 (DfE, SFR 27/210, September 2011)):
- 91% of children were adopted by two people
 - Most adopters were married (82%)
 - 6% were unmarried couples (different gender)
 - 2% were unmarried couples (same gender)
 - 2% were civil partners
 - 9% of children were adopted by a single adopter, the majority (93%) being female.
- 3.7 In addition, people considering adoption take complex pathways often spanning many years (Ward, 2011). They often have a number of complex psycho-social factors to consider and may take their time to address these even if their circumstances/relationships remain constant.
- 3.8 This information indicates that there is scope for targeted recruitment campaigns for specific categories of society as a way of increasing the numbers of people interested in adopting, and then look to increase further the conversion rate from interest to application.
- 3.9 Evidence (from surveys by Adoption UK) shows that at least two thirds of adopters are satisfied with the assessment process which, for many, takes an equivalent amount of time to becoming pregnant and the pregnancy itself. The current system

is also successful in assessing adopters who go on to provide permanent placements with low disruption rates.

- 3.10 However, it is consistently the case that some enquiring adopters experience direct discouragement either from entrenched and rigid views by an individual/agency about the profiles of adopters they are looking for or through delay caused by under-resourcing of the service by experienced practitioners. Other problems cited are:
- Initial delays in handling expressions of interest;
 - Inadequate signposting and referrals on to other agencies;
 - Initial enquiries are poorly handled – variable experience; failed or delayed responses; potential not positively considered;
 - The loss of local marketing teams within Local Authorities (LAs);
 - Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) pride themselves on effective and targeted recruitment, although recognise they could do more;
 - LAs and VAAs value National Adoption Week (NAW), but say it is not enough;
 - Adopters don't realise they can choose between LAs and VAAs;
- 3.11 Any new approach to promoting and marketing adoption, and recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters, has to address these points, if confidence in the adoption system is to be optimised.
- 3.12 There is therefore a failure of customer service which must be addressed but there are also undoubtedly other barriers that occur in different parts of the process which are a part of proactively engaging prospective adopters. These include the following:
- the lack of consistently up to date, positive yet realistic, well-presented information about the children waiting;
 - insufficient provision of direct skills development through training and preparation;
 - inadequate access to ongoing support to enable adopters to provide the therapeutic parenting their children need;
 - insufficient entitlement to adoption leave during introductions and the early days of placement;
 - inadequate financial and practical support which acknowledges the extraordinary costs of becoming parents to a group of children and continuing to meet their specific needs.
- 3.13 Specific action is required to address this and we call upon Government to commit to a clear timetable for a formal review of other aspects of the tax and benefits system which could and should be changed to incentivise and attract prospective adopters (see further below).

3.14 Meeting the needs of children entering the system

- 3.15 There is currently a mismatch between the supply of prospective adopters and the demand of children requiring adoption. For example, there are numerous sibling groups that agencies are unable to place, children with disabilities and other long-term conditions also struggle to find adoptive families.
- 3.16 To evidence this, there are currently 372 sibling groups of 2 on the Adoption Register but only 78 adoptive families active on the Register and approved for 2

children. At the same time, there are 75 sibling groups of 3 or more children active on the Register but only 3 adoptive families approved for 3 children. Evidence in the study of children not found an adoptive family found that for non-infant adoptions 20% of those with adoption recommendations were never placed. Selwyn's (2010) study found that children not placed were: white children 17%, 30% of mixed ethnicity, 58% of black and 64% of Asian.

- 3.17 By the same token, prospective adopters in different parts of the country find that they are rejected or make slow progress in the assessment process because they do not meet the particular, immediate needs of the agency to which they have applied. This means that there is an overall lack of co-ordination of supply and demand.
- 3.18 Arguably, local determination of those precise needs and local interpretation of aspects of existing guidance have conspired to place inappropriately difficult constraints on entry to the process for some families. This is also linked to individual local agency determination about how they can best utilise their limited assessment resources. So if someone rings enquiring about baby adoption or inter-country then efforts need to be made to educate prospective adopters about the children available and when people (often BME) ring asking to foster with a view to adoption, this needs to be progressed.
- 3.19 Given the current mismatch, there is a demonstrable need to maintain and enhance the number of enquirers coming forwards interested in Adoption. National Adoption Week is one successful means by which this is achieved. However, consuming increased skilled and scarce assessment resources at the initial level of enquiry cannot make sense. The principal task is the generation of more but relevant and informed enquiries rather than generating volume of enquiries alone.
- 3.20 Successfully recruiting adopters from NAW and any other local campaigns requires well resourced, proactively positive and realistic responses but with an expectation that 'conversion' from enquirer to adopter is always likely to be small although the potential is probably far greater than at present. The task is principally one of conversion of the maximum number of enquiries into assessments and placement. The Study by Selwyn et al (2004) Recruiting adoptive families, showed that in 3 LAs the conversion rate was 5%, 20% and 4% from enquiry to approval for white adopters and for BME adopters 4%, 1.5%, 9%.

3.21 Recommended approaches to improve customer service

3.22 The Working Group has a number of recommended solutions to these issues through marketing and an improvement in information, through the following approaches

- A new Customer Service Charter across all agencies;
- Enabled and supported via a new National Adoption Gateway;
- Greater understanding of the national picture and best recruitment practice;
- Provision of a new Adoption Passport of support for children who need it;
- Legislation to enshrine a Child Pledge to maximise chances of placement;

These five areas of work are addressed in more detail below, however, there are related policy changes which would enhance the above solutions and contribute to their success.

- 3.23 We believe that there is a need for a national awareness raising campaign, building on the current publicity around adoption and directly addressing misperceptions in the public mind and utilising the announcement of a package of new measures.
- 3.24 However, the marketing approach for adoption agencies and any future national campaigns should be explicit and honest about the needs of the children that are likely to be available for adoption. Partly this is intended to make a slight correction to the general perception of what it may mean to become an adoptive parent and that this is likely to require the development of parenting skills that are specific to the needs and characteristics of children placed.
- 3.25 This should not discount or disincentivise those people who already come forward to be adoptive parents, but it would ensure that they are aware of the true range of the needs of adopted children at the earliest stage. As new developments in neuroscience make us more aware of the impact of early deprivation there is no excuse for us not to prepare adoptive parents for the challenges that lie ahead.
- 3.26 We recommend that specific commitment to this support takes the form of a package of incentives, benefits and support for adoptive children. See further below in the support section for more detail on an Adoption Passport of support for children, which would include the provision of an Adoption Skills Voucher entitling adopters to redeem this for a package of training (equivalent to a 12 week parenting programme but potentially a range of options such as music therapy) at any point after placement (as happens in Holland).
- 3.27 There is much good practice in the placing of children with complex needs. Whilst many adoption agencies have sought to develop targeted recruitment, this has thus far been a more local, piecemeal approach; what is required is a sharing of best practice and thence application nationally (see (Rule, 2006) and Selwyn and Action for Children (forthcoming)).
- 3.28 We recommend that a Forum for best practice in recruitment should be formed to develop the actual range of tools and resources for optimising marketing approaches both nationally and locally, and this can be implemented immediately across all sectors by CVAA and ADCS.
- 3.29 It is proposed that this forum is charged with developing systematic targeted partnership marketing through specialist existing networks and channels including the National Autistic Society and Down's Syndrome Association with the aim of encouraging more families with children, and who view themselves as highly skilled carers, as well as advancing particular learning and development with faith groups and a larger scale of activity with, and through, the infertility sector.
- 3.31 This is not to say that the profile of children in need of adoption will not change at all. When the proposals from the Family Justice Review are implemented and contribute to a more proactive approach to earlier and faster care interventions there could well be a reduction in the age profile of children.

3.32 Evidence and experience shows that there is scope and potential for some greater use of concurrent planning and assessment (based on the Coram-Harrow partnership up to one sixth of under 2s). Three possible models for its wider implementation and replication, depending on setting and volumes, are being explored by Coram whilst other agencies in a variety of settings and partnerships are seeking to encourage and enable the earlier identification and placement of children by working across boundaries.

3.33 We therefore need to develop a marketing strategy geared to the current situation, but subject to review if the profile of children waiting changes over time. There will remain demand for adopters able to take sibling groups and we recommend that analysis be undertaken to identify how many who are assessed for more than one child (Saunders & Selwyn, 2011) do in fact take more than one child with action developed to ensure that such assessments do result in multiple placements enabled by the increased support package

3.34 New National Adoption Gateway

3.35 Key questions for the future marketing and promotion of adoption, and the recruitment of prospective adopters, centre on the following:

- Ensuring that we continue to recruit from the traditional pool of adopters, while shifting the perceptions of what is required;
- Making best use of, and keeping, existing marketing skills and material, alongside developing new approaches;

3.36 To answer these questions requires removal of geographical barriers. Whilst adopters will wish to, and are, most able to access preparation and find a peer and social support network close to home, postcode must not limit the choice of options for children. It is therefore recommended to form a new National Adoption Gateway (or 'front door' to the adoption system) to complement the work of agencies and enable them to target their work on preparation and support (rather than initial conversations). This will be central to any national effort to recruit potential adopters. The National Adoption Gateway will focus on the following groups of people:

- Anyone who may be interested in becoming an adoptive parent
- Supporting those who are already interested in adopting, but are having difficulties accessing the adoption system.

3.37 The National Adoption Gateway will provide the following services:

- General telephone information and advice service (providing basic information about the process and the requirements, and referring on to relevant agencies).
- Telephone information and advice service for those having difficulties in accessing the adoption system (providing practical advice on navigating the system, and information on potential agencies).
- A website, providing information on the adoption process, including the needs of children in care who will be placed for adoption, and the requirements around becoming an adoptive parent as well as adoption agency information and contact details.

- E-materials on common adoption preparation issues and adoptive parenting issues (e.g. how the home study works, competencies, needs of children, different parenting approaches, contact, etc.)
 - Information/statistical gathering on contacts and enquiries received and dealt with.
 - Analysis of available data regarding prospective adopters' experiences of the adoption system, including which agencies approached, response received, etc, and feeding this back to decision-makers in relevant agencies.
 - Identifying trends or issues in the recruitment of prospective adopters.
 - Providing information and analysis to adoption agencies, in particular decision-makers, about national recruitment issues. It should be emphasised that this feedback loop is essential to the continuous improvement of recruitment and marketing locally.
- 3.38 The National Adoption Gateway would be an option as a first, but not sole point of contact, operating nationally and not directly aligned to any existing agency that assesses prospective adopters. It must offer as a matter of absolute priority a welcoming, informed response. The National Adoption Gateway would not replace a local/agency 'front door' to the adoption system, and it would certainly not be an expectation that all prospective adopters had to use the National Adoption Gateway as a prerequisite to pursuing their interest in adoption. Each agency or consortium would retain their own 'front door' because many people will and should always seek to make enquiries locally, and it is important to continue to provide enquirers with choice.
- 3.39 There may be benefit in groupings of LAs and VAAs working together as consortia's to improve their cost-effectiveness and seamless service but it is only through a national 'front door' that prospective adopters can be sure to receive impartial and consistent initial advice and be pointed towards the most relevant adoption agencies for them, based on geography and other attributes or factors. For example, some prospective adopters describe being processed extremely slowly or being told that what they can offer is 'not a priority' in their local area. A National Adoption Gateway would mean that agencies can be better applied to the greater good through national co-ordination.
- 3.40 A national 'front door' would have the task of acting as an honest broker in working with local consortia's / agencies to identify and collate what priorities they are working to and then point prospective adopters towards the best match for what they can offer. It is expected that this would usually be based on geography, with enquirers being advised of all adoption agencies within an agreed radius which is practical for assessment and support but with the facility to refer enquirers further afield if this appropriately enhanced their chance of being followed-up, including to agencies that specialise in certain categories of adoption.
- 3.41 Based on some of the recent debate, we should not under-estimate the value of the national 'front door' offering clear, coherent, consistent and non-aligned advice about the adoption process and the needs of children. This is not a mass market and therefore a "call back" guarantee is sufficient and appropriate. Most will probably choose a local authority for assessment but the aim is to stop prospective adopters having to find their way through the system on their own, rather that they are assisted and guided through the system.

- 3.42 The running of the National Adoption Gateway should clearly be independent of any particular agency and there are a number of national bodies that could take on this task. It should, however, certainly be co-located with a related service for resilience and cost-efficiency. It should also be sector-led and overseen by a steering/advisory group that is representative of all key stakeholders to ensure that the customer service approach is enthusiastically embraced.
- 3.43 A second, important by-product of the National Adoption Gateway would be the ability to build up greater analysis and intelligence about emerging demands that could inform future marketing and assist in continuing to shape the national adoption picture. The national line would also enable a better picture of customer satisfaction to be gathered and act as the champion of national Customer Service Standards.
- 3.44 There are a number of ways in which the National Adoption Gateway could be financed and the Expert Working Group had divergent views. Some favoured central Government grant funding. Others preferred a subscription levied upon on all local authority and voluntary adoption agencies to produce stakeholder accountability
- 3.45 All adoption agencies would need to be required to advise any direct enquirers of the existence and contact details of the National Adoption Gateway which would benefit from a high profile launch as a useful way of raising awareness.
- 3.46 The principal role of the Gateway is to provide information to all who are interested in pursuing adoption and who make an initial enquiry. Some will only want an initial chat or basic information but experience shows that some calls will become complex quite quickly and therefore the service should be social work managed with appropriate expertise on the adoption system. It will operate by telephone and through the website providing a coherent resource. All enquirers will be provided with direct information on all the agencies available within an agreed radius (rather than authority or consortia boundaries) to support them in making a choice. The Gateway will refer those with different issues to other existing agencies (e.g. adopted adults). The Gateway will not in itself conduct any assessments but any national self-assessment tools will be available through the portal. The Gateway does not replace agency marketing and enquiries locally but those agencies will be required to inform all enquirers of its services.
- 3.47 The second role of the Gateway is therefore to support and enable the implementation of Customer Service Standards by all agencies and the standards should be part of the Ofsted inspections for agencies with whom responsibility remains. The Customer Service Standards will need to encompass timeliness and quality of information of the response whilst respecting the resourcing realities of agencies and at the same time encouraging cross-referral.
- 3.48 Enquirers will be able to return to the Gateway if they are experiencing difficulties and the Gateway can problem solve these with the agency decision maker (but not cut-across agency procedures) and aid improvement. The Gateway can conduct random sample and mystery shopper exercises to complement agencies and Ofsted in this process.
- 3.49 A range of key performance indicators could include:

- Volume of calls/response times.
- Evaluated responses to service levels/needs met.
- Conversion rates of callers who then go on to apply to adopt/are approved to adopt.

3.50 Finally, it is worth reiterating the whole system nature of the marketing, recruitment, assessment and placement process. Without a clear understanding of the package of support for children, the number of enquirers converting to adopters will always fall short of the maximum.

4. The objectives of adopter preparation, assessment, approval and support

4.1 The primary objective of preparation and assessment is to identify and predict the capacity of adults to become effective adoptive parents to the specific child or children placed. Identifying and predicting parenting capacity is challenging. Most people only know what parenting is like and their response to it when they actually experience it. Parenting is a continually evolving process as the child and the parent/s develop over time. The capacity to learn from experience, respond to the unexpected and be creative and remain positive and deeply engaged and committed to the realities of being a parent are essential qualities. Predicting whether and how this might happen even with birth children is a serious challenge despite there being substantial evidence about the general characteristics and circumstances that might enable and determine this. Extensive reading of parenting manuals and attendance at antenatal or other parenting classes for 'born to' children may only be of limited use when compared with the actual experience of caring for a newly born baby. It is essential throughout adoption preparation and assessment that the limits of what can be assessed and predicted are acknowledged. Preparation and assessment enable a pathway but they only partially determine it.

4.2 In adoption the preparation, assessment and approval process is often generic when the child's needs, characteristics and circumstances are very specific. There is an inherent gap between the usual family formation and that of adoptive parenting which might include such as (a) sudden arrival of a child (not newborn) who has had detrimental experiences; (b) long-term impacts of trauma; (c) impact and differing needs of more than one child of different ages; (d) prevalence of disability or medical issues (and substance misuse impacts). What happens subsequent to the placement of a child depends on a combination of existing parenting capacity, the realisation of identified potential parenting capacity and the release of unknown (but likely) potential parenting capacity. It is particularly important that there is some acknowledgement of the limits of predictive accuracy and the likelihood of error in adopter assessment. These issues have been subject to considerable scrutiny by Munro (2011) in identifying both system and professional expectations of predictive accuracy in relation to safeguarding. Munro has identified that a belief in the possibility of eliminating error has resulted in defensive professional and system practice that is risk avoidant in intention which actually creates risk as a consequence. The recommendations from that review highlight the importance of rigorous systems and practice that acknowledge the reality of predictive error and uncertainty, of systems and practice, that enables the open identification, acknowledgement and discussion of uncertainty and risk, its proactive incorporation into everyday practice and the support systems that make this possible. Relationship based practice is a core part of these recommendations as is a confident and well-trained workforce.

4.3 There is considerable experience and expertise across the adoption sector in the art of assessment and where it is available, its science. It is a complex professional task that requires considerable knowledge, skill and experience about parenting capacity, the evidence that identifies and supports its development and the accompanying support systems that facilitate this. Adoption assessments need to incorporate lessons from attachment research which demonstrate that:

- Adopters need to have resolved any personal 'loss issues' if they are to be emotionally free to invest in a child;
- Adopters need to be 'reflective'/ psychologically minded' – i.e. they need to have the capacity to see things from different perspectives and to understand why people might behave in ways which are problematic – generally this is reflected in the way people describe their own childhood experiences and subsequent relationships. These matters are not susceptible to self assessment, but are at the heart of assessing adopters.
- Adopters need to have a child centred motivation (as opposed to a wish for a child to 'complete' their family or marriage).
- A good assessment also serves the purpose of building a relationship between adopter and social worker where the social worker understands the adopter's strengths and their vulnerabilities, and the adopter has developed trust in the social worker's professionalism.
- This is essential for supporting the adopter through the difficulties of placement, and particularly through the early stages where adopters may feel overwhelmed, and it is important that the professional network retains confidence in the adopter's capability.

4.4 There is also considerable experience and expertise in designing and facilitating the systems that support this professional task. In further developing the competence and capacity of the system, it is essential that this is not based on unrealistic expectations of what can be predicted or controlled prior to the actual linking, matching and placement of a child. In particular, there must be recognition of the importance, when necessary and appropriate, of the continuing engagement with and support of adopters and children as parenting and family life develops. The Expert Group has borne these considerations in mind in debating how the adopter training, preparation and assessment process might need to change.

4.5 Whilst this report is focused upon redesigning the overall adoption process, it is important to recognise and reflect upon the findings and recommendations of the previous Review of Adopter Preparation and Assessment and Panels (Department of Health, 2002). To that end we have attached as Appendix 1 an analysis of how we have arrived at the current position and why the system is too prescriptive and inflexible.

5. First stage (2 months) 'Agency Guided but Adopter led'

For prospective adopters: information sessions, preliminary training and e-learning

For agencies/consortia: preliminary checks and follow up

- 5.1 In a proposed new stage 1, the focus is on early exploration and identification of the anticipated work that any individual applicant and agency would need to complete in order to be ready to submit a formal application. The complexity of adoption invariably means that there is a necessary process of familiarisation and learning that takes place over time. The current process of pre-application information and counselling is intended to ensure that the motivation to adopt is based on an informed perspective of what adoption is, the children available for adoption and the process that this entails. It is intended to ensure that the applicant's motivation to adopt is well enough formulated to make it a realistic option and that there is sufficient evidence of the primary conditions that enable this – stability, resources, the absence of excluding factors such as age, specified offences, habitual residence. The revised system would keep these characteristics but impose tighter timelines to ensure that time is not lost in assessing suitable applicants.
- 5.2 In order to achieve these faster and more consistently observed timescales, local agencies/consortia need to ensure that there is a rolling programme of information sessions for prospective adopters (as is existing best practice in many LAs). We recommend that information sessions will need to be provided at least monthly either in the agency itself or via the local consortium. We also suggest that the guide time between first enquiry via either the local or national 'front door' and availability and attendance at the first information session could be part of a new performance management framework.
- 5.3 The information sessions should include the opportunity to meet existing adoptive families and should emphasise the particular characteristics and needs of children that may be adopted. We recommend that receipt by an agency of a registration of interest form from a prospective adopter following attendance at an information session would start the clock ticking in terms of the 2 month time frame for Stage 1. Receipt of the form would in turn trigger the setting up of an initial contact with a social worker to explain the purpose of stage 1, the availability of the e-learning and self-assessment resources and the authority to undertake a variety of checks to be made before an application to be assessed for suitability to adopt can be submitted.
- 5.4 We think that a significant amount of training and information giving can be achieved at this early stage through the use of a variety of learning methods but, in particular, the greater use of accessible (and potentially assessable) e-learning modules on child development, health and safety in the home, the impact of parental neglect and abuse and the significance of becoming an adoptive family.
- 5.5 We recommend that the Government commissions the development of these materials without delay so that they can be made widely available to adoption agencies and prospective adopters.
- 5.6 We also recommend the development of standardised screening questionnaires to enable applicant/s to evaluate their life histories, experiences, resources and views and expectations about adoption.
- 5.7 We recommend that at the same time as prospective adopters are accessing further information and the proposed e-learning and self-assessment resources, local agencies or consortia should be required to commence the required checks on families - CRB, health and previous partner checks. This will obviously require the consent of the applicants but there should be a clear expectation that such checks

will be taken up at this early stage and that they are necessary to progress to full application. It has the double benefit of accelerating the process by 'front-loading' it and also eliminating the need for wasteful investment in more detailed but redundant assessments for applicants with clear contra-indicators.

- 5.8 To aid safe and consistent practice we recommend that the Government issues revised guidance and clarification on the circumstances in which the range of possible checks (including previous partner and overseas checks) should be carried out. In particular this relates to overseas checks and previous partner checks.
- 5.9 Part of the e-learning modules should be self-assessment. Self assessment should focus on prospective adopter's learning in relation to the needs of children, their own experiences or potential for parenting but also, and more pragmatically, it should include a self assessment of health and safety in the adoptive parents' home including any issues about pets, swimming pools, etc.
- 5.10 From the agency point of view it is important that their identified priorities in adopter recruitment are taken into account and where an applicant profile does not match these priorities, their responsibility is to signpost to other agencies recruiting against such profiles.
- 5.11 The aim of these parallel processes is to get prospective adopters to a point where they are ready to make an evidence based, realistic and informed full application to adopt. Successful completion of the stage 1 work will have enabled enough preliminary preparation and training to have taken place for the prospective adopters to more fully understand the challenges involved, the support required and any immediate measures that they may need to take with regards to their home circumstances or lifestyle in order to progress the application effectively.
- 5.12 A guiding perspective for this stage of the process might be that it should be social worker *guided* but applicant *led* work.
- 5.13 It is also the case that for some prospective adopters the information, self-assessment and checks will act as a filter and mean that they do not pursue their applications where this is unrealistic or that they are barred from doing so. In particular it will be helpful to have the checks carried out prior to the applications. If the checks show up good reasons why prospective adopters should not go forward in their applications then this will save professional time and effort which could more usefully be targeted on those that are more likely to be successful. It is important that agency resources and professional time is effectively focused on those prospective adopters where there is a reasonable likelihood of them developing the full range of adoptive parenting capabilities.
- 5.14 The completion of stage 1 would not require any detailed exploration or verification of personal issues other than through the required checks although prospective adopters must be made aware of the importance of being open and honest with the agency.
- 5.15 The agency could refuse to accept an application based on Stage 1 on the basis that the applicant was not ready to submit a formal application, or had significant contra-indicators. There is a need to develop a suitable mechanism for dealing with adopters who feel they have been unfairly treated in situations such as when the

agency has exercised its right not to accept a full application. There will need to be clear criteria for the this new mechanism in order that futile applications are not then allowed to proceed and 'silt up' the system (see below).

- 5.16 We recommend that the final element in the first stage of the process should be the submission of an application. Completion and evaluation by the relevant agency of the first stage would lead in turn to an agreement and formal acceptance to undertake the home study and the preparation of the Prospective Adopters Report (PAR)

6. **Stage 2 (4 months) 'Agency led and adopter guided'**

Prospective Adopters: continuing training and beginning the linking process
Agencies/Consortia: assessment of suitability and linking

- 6.1 We recommend that Stage 2 should begin with a visit from the prospective adopters' allocated social worker and that this visit should act as the gateway into the full assessment. The visit should lead to an agreed 'Assessment Contract' which will set out the expected content of, and timeline for, the assessment, for which 4 months will be the maximum timescale in the majority of cases. The availability of information already collected e.g. through self-assessment in Stage 1 would enable an agreement to be made about personalising the home study for the individual. Key objectives would be identified and agreed that would enable further relevant information to be collected, verified and analysed in preparing for the completion of the PAR and submission to Panel. This part of the process would be applicant *guided* but social worker *led*. The initial Stage 2 visit would also provide an explanation of the panel process and details of the line management for the assessment along with any contingency plans for sickness etc. We anticipate that in many cases it will be possible to agree a timeline for prospective adopters which is less than the 4 months stipulated above. Equally, in some cases it may be agreed by both parties that it would be desirable or necessary for the process to take longer.
- 6.2 The Expert Working Group has reviewed the existing PAR and has drawn up a first draft of a revised PAR. Whilst we acknowledge that this requires further refining it offers a potentially useful reduction in bureaucracy and we propose that this new PAR is piloted in a number of agencies in order to refine it further,
- 6.3 Our view is that the front-loading of information, checking and self-assessment in Stage 1 means that the full assessment should be able to proceed effectively and efficiently and should generally be achievable within a target of four months. This necessarily deeper assessment is concerned with determining the suitability of a prospective adopter and assessing their suitability to adopt a child with more specific needs and characteristics (e.g. suitable for 2 or more children, age range, sibling groups, disabilities etc).
- 6.4 We recommend that access to the Independent Review Mechanism should be limited to Stage 2, subject to the points made above. This would meet the objective of facilitating the more open engagement of prospective adopters and agencies in stage 1.

- 6.5 In order that social workers are able to work most effectively on assessment and linking it is essential that the system is not 'silted up' with other tasks. To that end it is recommended that new fast track procedures are put in place for converting long term foster carers to adopters – such foster carers would not need to go through stage 1 of the process, instead they would submit an application and go straight through to stage 2. We recommend that second-time adopters should also proceed straight to stage 2.
- 6.6 The step-parent adoption procedures should also be reviewed in order to streamline the process and we also recommend that the Government considers whether agencies could charge to assess step-parents as adopters. For all of these categories we propose that the assessment agreed in the 'Assessment Contract' should be focused and limited only to those areas that require further assessment.
- 6.7 Dual registration for foster carers and adopters offers a speedier path to permanence for those children where adoption is the likely long term outcome, but where foster care is initially the appropriate placement. This may be in concurrent planning placements, where care proceedings are ongoing and assessment/s of parents or relatives are to be undertaken, but the likely outcome is adoption, or it may be in other circumstances where a placement needs to be tested out before the legal basis can be finally determined. Such assessments need to cover all the issues relevant to adoption, but also to test out and assess the applicant's understanding of the different status of foster placements, and their ability to meet those demands – e.g. contact, working with birth parents/ relatives, lack of PR (placement for adoption confers elements of PR) etc. These issues require additional opportunities to meet with carers who have undertaken foster care of this nature. Preparation needs to cover the range of uncertainties involved: outcome of legal process, management of contact regime during proceedings, health issues (this arises in concurrent planning placements for babies where mothers may have used illegal substances, and the baby may be at risk of viral infections such as Hep B or HIV which cannot be tested before placement) as well as the developmental risks of such young babies who may be at risk of genetic conditions. This assessment needs to enable the potential carers to face the exceptionally stressful situations during care proceedings, and they need the opportunity to consider the issues without pressure of time; it is suggested that given the dual assessment, 6 months is appropriate.
- 6.8 We recommend that alongside the assessment there should be a continuous process of training and education. Such training should again be offered through a variety of learning methods and must be available at times which are suitable to prospective adopters i.e. weekends and evenings.

6.9 The role of panels

- 6.9.1 We recognise that the Family Justice Review has recommended that Panels should no longer have a role in the scrutiny of local authority care plan for adoption. The plan is subject to scrutiny during care proceedings by the courts and requires no further endorsement. In addition, the recommendations of the Family Justice Review reinforce this position which would be consistent with an anticipated more rapid journey through the courts system. However, it is essential that permanency planning in local authorities is rigorous in its quality and adherence to timescales to support the anticipated reduction in delay that is core to the objectives of this review.

- 6.9.2 However, we do think that panels may have a role in quality assuring decision making relating to the approval of prospective adopters and the viability of the link between adopters and children. It is worth noting that if panels were to lose their role then there would be no external scrutiny of these decisions or process other than via the regulator. While we want to streamline the process we should not underestimate the gravity of what it is at stake in approving adopters as suitable to adopt and subsequently that a child should become a part of their family for life.
- 6.9.3 There is a divergence of views within the Expert Working Group on the subject of panels, the quality assurance role that they provide and the degree of prescription that should apply with regards to role and membership. However, there is no disagreement over the importance of independent oversight, quality assurance and challenge in the process of approving adopters and linking.
- 6.9.4 Panels should not be the cause of delay and should be scheduled to make their final recommendation with regards to suitability within the four-month timeline. It is essential that restrictions are placed on panels requesting further information if the assessment team has decided that that information is unavailable, of limited value or irrelevant. Where there are serious errors or poor quality reports these must be referred for immediate action by the agency management team. Detailed consideration should be given locally to the operation and membership of panels to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility and discretion to ensure that high quality recommendations continue to be made with the minimum of delay. Panels may also have a role in the scrutiny of the effectiveness and timeliness of family finding for every child that has adoption as the plan.
- 6.9.5 There are further areas which could be considered to reduce the costs of panels and address the issues of delay – for example – considering setting a maximum number of panel members, which current guidance does not do, and further reducing the quoracy requirement; removing the requirement that panels cannot make ‘in principle’ decisions so that cases can be looked at prior to final expert reports being received.
- 6.9.6 We recommend that further consideration be given to the role, function and membership of panels.

7. From approval to linking

- 7.1 It is essential that following approval, adopters agree a plan with their social worker to identify a child. This should identify the search locally including consortia, referral and use of the Adoption Register, Exchange days, Be My Parent, Children Who Wait and innovative projects such as Placement Activity Days. Timescales should be included in this agreement plus details of available resources and on-going support. The quality and delivery of the plan should be monitored and subject to report in the agency’s annual report.
- 7.2 We propose a *Child Pledge* to ensure timeliness in linking. The related policy changes consist of two recommendations to Government: one focusing on the Adoption Register; and the other on up-to-date information on children’s case files and ‘next best’ matching.

- 7.3 Children deserve the earliest possible chance of finding an adoptive placement irrespective of geography. Therefore, the principal recommendation is that Government legislates to require referral of all children to the Adoption Register within three months of a Placed for Adoption Decision as a national resource, whereby all adoption agencies work simultaneously to find the best solution for them, where there has not been a speedy and appropriate match locally.
- 7.4 The Adoption Register service exists and the impact would be potentially rapid especially in improving the understanding and information of the national position but it is acknowledged that this would have resource implications for the Register requiring further exploration.
- 7.5 The second recommendation is access to information about children which enables agencies, and especially VAAs, to prepare parents to provide homes for children no matter where they happen to be, and ensure that support services reflect the needs of adopted children. Prospective adopters are also encouraged and empowered by such available information.
- 7.6 It is also essential that there is enforcement of the requirement for regular updating of information (especially medical) about children who are waiting since its lack of availability discourages prospective parents and builds in delay, a case strongly made in the new Care Planning Regulations and strengthened role of the IRO. It is recommended that legislation requires this to be done every six months.
- 7.7 The combination of these two recommendations creates a new *Child Pledge* to a maximum speed of action on a national basis. This needs to be linked to the presumption and requirement to consider the 'next best' match after three months so that overly prescriptive local determinations do not lead to a lifetime in care for a child who could have been placed.
- 7.8 The case for the requirement for immediate referral of adopters to the register is also made by the need for national understanding and data. Most adopters are matched locally and this reflects the best pattern for assessment and post-placement support. However, liberalisation of the existing market will increase children's choice and prevent the intervention of solely financial factors. It is therefore recommended that Government should legislate to refer all adopters to the Register immediately upon approval, but approving agencies should have 3 months to match those adopters before the referral to the Register goes live enabling a national search for suitable links.

8. Stage 3 (6 months) Linking, post placement training and support

- 8.1 As has been stated throughout, an expectation should be created with adopters and adoption agencies that post-placement support and ongoing training will be necessary for all placements. The obvious comparison here is with foster carers where such training and support is a clear expectation. As we get better at setting realistic expectations we would expect a culture of post adoption support being an expected part of the 'contract' between agencies and adopters. Post adoption support should of course be tailored to assessed individual need.

- 8.2 In our view initial post adoption support should be in place for a minimum of 6 months after the child is placed with a clear contract made with adopters on how they can seek further support and help in the future.
- 8.3 In order to facilitate this it is therefore proposed that Government create a guaranteed Adoption Passport of support defining clear minimums and designed to empower and enable actual access to existing services, which is not currently always delivered despite the statutory requirements of section 4 of the Adoption & Children Act 2002.
- 8.4 It is recommended that the passport includes the following elements on the basis of fairness and of cost-effectiveness:
- Parity between adoption leave and pay and maternity leave and pay, and including, say, 10 days' leave from work for introductions and preparation for placement. Currently, these employment rights discriminate against adoptive parents in three key respects:
 - the "length of service" requirement to be entitled to adoptive leave;
 - the rate of pay during the first six weeks of leave;
 - self-employed adopters have no access to adoption pay whilst on adoption leave;
 - Entitlement to a Voucher for clinical Complex Needs/Diagnostic Assessment at a defined number of national centres which will enable parents to identify routes to specialist support;
 - Priority access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) with monitoring of referral and treatment timescales;
 - Greater recognition of adoption as an SEN start-point to complement the recent most welcome changes to the school admissions framework, due to come into effect for the 2013/14 academic year;
 - An Adoption Skills Voucher, entitling adopters to a package of training (equivalent to a 12 week parenting programme but including a wider range of options such as music therapy) at any point after placement;
- 8.5 Government is also asked to commit to a clear timetable for a formal review of the tax and benefits system which could and should be changed to incentivise and attract prospective adopters. This could include:
- The introduction of a national minimum adoption allowance for all adoptive parents;
 - The provision for adoptive families within the tax credits system;
 - The guarantee of child benefit payments to all adoptive families, irrespective of family income levels (given that child benefit is to be withdrawn from some families in 2012/13);
 - Expand eligibility to relevant benefits such as disability living allowance so that they include reference and acknowledgement of emotional, behavioural and developmental difficulties directly related to the consequences of being exposed to early trauma and neglect, as will have been experienced by many children placed for adoption from the care system;
- 8.6 To support this, it is recommended that the Government builds upon the work done to develop the care cost calculator to enable local authorities to apply consistent

practice across boundaries and make progressive adaptation of their resources. Evidence seems to show that for every month of reduced waiting, a LA saves £3k and this can be reinvested in family finding including inter-agency fees and in adoption support.

- 8.7 It is recognised that some aspects of delay are beyond the control of the Local Authority but the calculator will only make this more evident. This should be complemented and accelerated by the pilot work on Social Investment Bonds being developed by CVAA for complex older children, and by the Coram model for Concurrent Planning and Early Permanency planning for infants.

9. Other related issues

9.1 Regulation and performance management

- 9.1.1 There is some agreement that the regulatory system has not worked well for some aspects of adoption services especially when it leads to perverse incentives, skewed priorities and delay.
- 9.1.2 Our view is that generally the regulatory regime should focus on child outcomes with unannounced inspections of Adoption Services. The inspection should be focus less on compliance and how things are done and more on the effectiveness of what is done in terms of adopters and children. It should focus on the journey of children and prospective adopters with a particular focus on the pressure and transition points between the various stages outlined above.

9.2 Collaborative working

- 9.2.1 There appears to be evidence that where local authorities and VAAs work together in consortia then there can be benefits for both agencies. This could be encouraged but not imposed. Moreover, the national 'front door' should encourage a pluralistic approach to adoption with a range of adoption agencies which prospective adopters should find much easier to access. This should lead to non-exclusive collaboration between agencies to ensure that they reach their target audience.
- 9.2.1 There are also multiple opportunities for collaboration across the process. It may be, for example, that consortia commission the initial information and self assessment stage to particular voluntary agencies – although there will need to be a close link to the consortia so that expectations and processes are properly managed.

9.3 Workforce development

- 9.3.1 The developments that are currently taking place with the Social Work Reform Board, linked to the recommendations of the Munro review are, in our view, entirely consistent with the workforce development that will be required as a consequence of these proposals. In particular, there is a greater emphasis on professional discretion based upon an enhanced capability of social workers to use analysis and professional judgement in assessment and planning. We recommend that the Social Work Reform Board gives urgent consideration to the training and development needs of the adoption workforce if the reforms in this paper are to be implemented effectively.

9.4 Legislation and Guidance

- 9.4.1 In our view it is unlikely that there would need to be significant changes to primary legislation. However, it is likely that there would need to be and there is indeed scope for extensive changes to the Adoption Agency Regulations, the Adoption Statutory Guidance, Practice Guidance and the National Minimum Standards as these provide a significant driver for agencies to prioritise issues such as health and safety compliance. The early engagement of OFSTED is recommended to ensure that what is recommended here is consistent with inspection frameworks and methodologies.
- 9.4.2 We recommend the development of a regulatory framework that is explicit in those issues that directly impact on the child in terms of reducing delay and those aspects of the approvals process which consider suitability to adopt which focus on the development, acquisition and assessment of adoptive parenting capacity. This should allow for sufficient local agency and professional discretion but it is essential that a framework operates that does not result in a breakdown of trust when agencies place outside of their area and have exercised their discretion in a way that is different to the agency they have referred to.

10. Conclusion

- 10.1 The above report outlines a redesigned adoption system that could, subject to effective implementation, lead to a more efficient, transparent system which matches the supply of potential adopters more effectively with the needs of children which drive the demand for adoption. The revised system should take no more than 6 months from start to finish in the majority of cases. It should embed a stronger expectation of post-adoption support. Above all the focus must be explicitly on the child and the adopters and be justifiable in ensuring that maximum focus is maintained on the safe and effective placement of a child in a loving, stable family for life.
- 10.2 The model and recommendations outlined in this paper have the potential to deliver a more consistent, user friendly and speedy process for prospective adopters while retaining essential safeguards and controls to secure the interests of the children whose welfare should always be at the heart of the adoption process.
- 10.3 There remain some points for further consideration and resolution, particularly with regards to panels. We should also not underestimate that once the principles are agreed the challenge of implementation will be significant in the context of the Munro review of child protection and the Family Justice Review. That said, we believe that this paper offers a workable solution.

A1 Broader context - How did we arrive where we are now?

- A1.1 In establishing a new framework for adopter preparation, assessment and support, it is important to acknowledge the findings and recommendations of the previous Review of Adopter Preparation and Assessment and Panels (Department of Health, 2002). That review established the current regulatory and practice framework including the inspection framework used by OFSTED.
- A1.2 The findings and objectives of that review were intended to ensure –
- Consistency and transparency between agencies by establishing a common menu of issues to be explored in preparation and assessment
 - To provide high quality information and preparation for adopters
 - To establishing a common framework for checks and references
 - To establish a staged process of information and counselling, application, assessment and approval of suitability to adopt within an agreed timetable
 - To provide independent scrutiny of the process through the Adoption Panel
 - To re-assure adopters of the thoroughness, objectivity and fairness of the process through establishing a right to scrutiny by the IRM
- A1.3 It is important to note that the rationale for every part of what was subsequently implemented was to ensure that children who were placed for adoption were placed with adopters who were safe and would provide them with a loving and stable and enduring family life.
- A1.4 The current system directly implements the objectives of the review through the regulatory framework, including the recently revised statutory and practice guidance and report template published by BAAF and supported by further guidance. Compliance is monitored by various internal agency processes and externally by OFSTED against the National Minimum Standards and the inspection framework. It should be noted that while the review was published in 2002 and implemented in 2006, it has been further reviewed in 2011 with new Statutory Guidance and the National Minimum Standards and the current pilot of a new inspection methodology.
- A1.5 The current review has returned to many of the issues of 2002 and this include serious questions about –
- Consistency of practice within and between agencies
 - A staged process that reduces the opportunity for flexibility and the use of discretion
 - Unbalanced use of resources in preparation and assessment when compared to post placement support
 - Failure to comply with the statutory timescales
 - “Unsatisfactory” experiences of prospective adopters (the customer experience) throughout the process
 - Over-long, repetitive, unfocussed reports

- The ‘threat’ of the IRM resulting in an over cautious approach to accepting applications
- The difficulty in managing the ‘supply’ side for approved adopters for children requiring placement
- Panel processes that inhibit effective and efficient decision-making
- The relative absence of the provision of timely and effective support before and after placement

A1.6 The proposals in this report are designed to tackle these issues again in the light of experience with a view to effectively resolving them.

A2 The system is too prescriptive and inflexible

A2.1 The design of the current system was intended to create consistency and transparency for prospective adopters, adoption agencies and professionals. This is essential in delivering the objective of a good ‘customer’ experience, to facilitate reliability, effectiveness and confidence across the sector especially where discretion is exercised. At the same time flexibility and adaptability is important in responding to individual circumstance. It is also important in the efficient use of resources. Balancing prescription in order to create a level playing field with flexibility to enable discretion is always a challenge especially where flexibility exercised by one party is seen by others to be unsafe or poor practice.

A2.2 The most important part of the current system was the introduction of a staged process that facilitated the early exploration and development of becoming an adopter through providing sufficient information and advice before the submission of the application. The application triggered the arrangements and availability of preparation courses, checks, the home study and the preparation and submission of the report to the panel and decision maker’s approval or otherwise. There were the strong reasons for splitting the process in this way. It was intended to ensure that –

- applicant/s were ‘ready’ for the preparation and assessment process,
- the extensive resources required from the agency and adopters to engage in the work were only made available to those that were in a strong position to undertake that process
- access to the IRM would be available to those where an application had been accepted as a guarantee of a fair and transparent process.

A2.3 The timescales were designed to reflect and allow sufficient time for the various steps that the agency and adopter were required to complete. In particular there was recognition of the complex psycho-social process of emotional, cognitive and social learning that most adopter/s would need to complete especially where there was relative lack of familiarity with adoption, the children placed for adoption and longer term issues such as contact, education and emotional and behavioural difficulties.

A2.4 The current question key to reform revolves around whether a design that was intended to create a timely, transparent, fair and effective system is not sufficiently responsive.

- A2.5 It is undoubtedly the case that there is a wide range of individual circumstances in those that are interested in and apply to adopt. There are some prospective adopter/s where their individual circumstances clearly and strongly indicate their preparedness and readiness to adopt. Among these are likely to be second time adopters and foster carers wishing to adopt a child already placed. There are others who have personal or professionally relevant experience of children. However, these categories do not of themselves indicate suitability to adopt. There may be a host of reasons why prospective adopters in these categories need to engage in further preparation and assessment. There may also be others without these experiences who have considerable stability in their lives accompanied by psycho-social insight and a capacity to learn that also indicates their readiness and suitability to adopt. There may be others who have experienced considerable instability and loss in their lives but the resolution of these issues in recent years has also created an openness that facilitates adaptation and a capacity to learn. The insistence of the application of the full process as it is designed may well be frustrating, unnecessary and inefficient in the use of scarce resources for these applicants. The scope to exercise responsible discretion may be an appropriate response to this. But this must be based on an evidence-based evaluation requiring considerable professional judgement.
- A2.6 Currently there is scope for limited flexibility and discretion. An agency could be satisfied that an individual's application could be accepted quickly for processing. The preparation and home study process may run in parallel to shorten the timescale from application to recommendation and decision. The agency can exercise its discretion not to interview former partners where there are no children from that relationship. If it does so then that decision needs to be explicitly identified in a professionally managed evidenced based process.
- A2.7 What this suggests is an exploration of the scope for re-designing the process that centres on the system being responsive to the individual circumstances of the applicant rather than the applicant having to adapt to the requirements of the system. In doing so, it is essential that the long accepted principle that adoption is a service for children is not lost – nobody has a right to adopt a child. The following proposals for a redesigned adoption journey seek to achieve the right balance in a system that needs to be both responsive and robust.

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