

Report summary

Right on time

Exploring delays in adoption

Achieving timely outcomes for children who require adoption remains a significant challenge. On average, it takes two years and seven months before children are adopted after entering care. Most adopted children are aged between one and four when they join their new family, with the average age at adoption standing at three years and 10 months.¹

This report explores how delays for children within the adoption process were avoided, and why delays occurred, in nine local authorities. Inspectors examined cases where adoption was, or had been, the plan for children. They spoke to social workers, local authority managers, adopters and representatives from the voluntary sector, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the courts.

Inspectors found that a substantial number of children had been known to children's social care services for a considerable length time before entering care; delay in entering care proceedings jeopardised good outcomes for children. The children were older when they entered care, and their life experiences had resulted in some significant behavioural challenges for potential adopters.

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.

¹ All statistics: Statistical First Release: Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2011, Department for Education, 2011;
www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001026/sfr21-2011.pdf.

In some areas, the reliance on independent experts appeared to reflect a general lack of trust on the part of the courts in the quality of local authority social work assessments as well as a lack of social work status in the court arena, especially relative to Cafcass guardians. In turn, social workers in some authorities suffered from a lack of confidence and experience in court work. Local authorities, Cafcass and the courts were working productively in several areas to tackle shared strategic and practice issues, including delay for children. In most areas, however, relationships were more fragile and the impact of any liaison was minimal.

Parallel planning, where a contingent permanence plan is pursued and activated should a plan for rehabilitation prove not to be feasible, appeared to be standard practice in nearly all local authorities visited. The quality of its application, however, was variable. Best practice tended to be based on a strong relationship between the adoption team and children's social workers, supported by robust monitoring mechanisms. The court timetable generally ensured that timescales for parallel plans were met for those cases in care proceedings and inspectors saw examples of robust planning at the second statutory review, or earlier. In some cases, however, review recommendations about permanence were insufficiently clear about how the plan was to be progressed.

Family-finding specialists, responsible for identifying adopters who would meet children's specific needs, were generally involved at an early stage in most local authorities, with a clear definition of their roles and responsibilities and appropriate management oversight to ensure the timely progress of cases. In a small number of cases, however, their involvement was less focused, leading to an increased risk of delay. The National Adoption Register was accessed by all local authorities as part of its efforts to identify suitable adopters for children, although there was a mixed view of its effectiveness.²

Adoption panels consistently made effective efforts to meet as often as was necessary and inspectors found no evidence of panels contributing to avoidable delay. In cases seen by inspectors, nearly all children who had been placed for adoption had been placed within 12 months of a formal decision that they should be adopted.

There was no evidence that financial considerations had an adverse effect upon the timeliness of adoption placements. Although councils usually prioritised the use of in-house placements, searches for adoptive families were generally widened promptly if no suitable local placements were available. The payment of inter-agency fees, when appropriate, was well established in all local authorities.

² The Adoption Register for England and Wales is operated by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) on behalf of the Department for Education and the Welsh Government; www.adoptionregister.org.uk.

Nearly all local authorities cited their past or current staff recruitment and retention difficulties as a significant factor in delay for children. High caseloads were also evident, although this did not always result in delay. Specialist training was not provided consistently for all staff and managers involved in adoption work.

Performance monitoring mechanisms that enabled managers at all levels to have an understanding of local adoption performance varied in their rigour and attention to detail. The influence of independent reviewing officers (IROs) on timely adoption outcomes for children was inconsistent.

The majority of the 26 adopters spoken to reported that they had experienced a welcoming response from agencies when they had first enquired about adoption and were happy overall with the service that they had received from their approving local authority. Most adopters did not feel that they had experienced significant delay, although nearly all considered that there had been some kind of delay, however minor.

Most adopters felt that the assessment was necessarily thorough and that their social worker had been supportive and sensitive. Some delays had been experienced as a result of staff shortages. Some adopters were frustrated at the length of time it took to be matched with a child after they had been approved. A small number of adopters felt that the process was at times inflexible and over-cautious.

Good communication with social workers was seen as crucial by nearly all the adopters and it was important to adopters that social workers were reliable and did what they said they would do.

The views of children were generally taken into full account in the cases tracked during this survey. When children were too young to express their views, their wishes and feelings were assessed carefully by professionals and carers.

Key findings

- 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.

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