



Michelle Donelan MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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To: Directors of Children's Services

Adoption as a permanence option

I want to start by thanking you and your teams for the work you do on a daily basis to improve the lives of some of our most vulnerable children.

For those children who will never be able to return to live with their birth parents, it is vital we find them permanent new homes as quickly as possible.

There are, of course, a number of other options that can offer children permanence and stability including long-term foster care, kinship care and through special guardianship.

However we also know that adoption remains an important permanence option and can be transformative for many children providing them with stability and care which lasts long beyond childhood. **Adoption will therefore be a priority for the new Government and we also wish to see a renewed focus on adoption by all local authorities.**

We are determined to see adoption pursued whenever it is in a child's best interests and to develop a fully regionalised system where all children are matched with adoptive parents without undue delay. We also want to ensure adoptive families receive ongoing support from the moment their child is placed with them and throughout their childhood.

Adopter recruitment

The latest data published for 2018-19 by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) shows that there has been a decline in the overall number of adoptions for the last four years.

One reason is that there are more children waiting with a placement order than approved adopters. There is therefore a need to recruit more adopters.

We have heard from prospective adopters that some have been put off from going through the approval process by agencies because, despite the law being clear that they are eligible, they are told that they are not suitable, e.g. they are too old;

single; have never had children etc. **I attach a communication sheet “Who can Adopt – The Facts” which you can use in your adopter recruitment websites and materials.** This covers areas that are consistently cited as reasons why adopters are wrongly turned away.

The statistics show that black children are significantly less likely to be adopted than other children, mainly because there are insufficient Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) adopters being recruited.

Of course it is not only BAME adopters who can adopt BAME children and, when matching a child and prospective adopters, agencies should not prioritise trying to find the ‘perfect’ ethnic match. Recent press coverage about a court case has again brought this issue to the fore. The law is clear that adoption agencies must have regard to the child’s characteristics, but this should not exclude anyone from coming forward to adopt, nor matching them with a child who is not of the same ethnicity.

I am therefore asking you to review your processes and procedures to ensure they are compliant with the legislation framework, and that **all front line social workers understand what the law says** and operate properly within it.

To support you to recruit more adopters the Government provided £650k to the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA) to work with Voluntary Adoption Agencies to increase the number of adopters. Using this funding they ran a communications campaign in National Adoption Week in October and will be running a further campaign from February to April this year. An evaluation of the campaign showed a positive response from prospective adopters, but we now need to convert this into more children finding families. On 22 December we announced an additional £1m to enable this campaign to continue in 2020-21. In particular I have asked them to reach out to communities that are under-represented, particularly BAME communities.

Decisions made by local authorities to put a child forward for adoption (ADMs)

The latest figures also show decline in the numbers of children where the assessment shows that adoption is the right permanence option. There has also been a decline in the making of placement orders by courts.

The reasons for this will be mixed and the data shows there is a lot of variation in local permanence decision making. We understand that some local authority decisions may be influenced by local court responses to previous applications and this could mean some children missing out on the benefits of adoption. However, this alone would not account for the decline in best interest ADM decisions over several years.

Children’s needs should be at the forefront of decisions. I urge you not to shy away from putting children forward for adoption where you think it would be in their best interests.

Andrew Christie, chair of the ASGLB, has asked all Regional Adoption Boards (RABs) to consider why ADM decisions decreased in each of the last four years

and for Boards to consider how to achieve greater consistency on permanence decision making across local authorities within their region. I have asked him to report back to me on these discussions by the end of February.

Assessment and approval

I have asked officials to consider whether the assessment and approval process could be improved so that we lose fewer prospective adopters as they progress through the system. Clearly a rigorous assessment is critical when we are looking at whether people have the capacity to provide lifelong care for a vulnerable child. However, it is also important to ensure that our rules and processes do not act as a barrier to those considering adoption. The ASGLB will be asking RAAs and RABs whether changes should be made to the regulations and statutory guidance regarding the assessment and approval process. Please feed your thoughts into this process or write to me direct.

Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs)

The development of RAAs gives us an opportunity to drive change and see excellent adoption services being delivered everywhere, with a strong focus on innovation and practice. We want to see a new system that is designed around the needs of children and which draws on the best of both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Going forward, **our commitment to having all LAs working through an RAA remains and the Department and the ASGLB will continue to support and challenge LAs to join an RAA during 2020.** My officials will be updating me further on progress in creating a fully regionalised adoption system in the spring.

Adoption Support

We also want to ensure adoptive families receive ongoing support from the moment the child is placed with them and throughout their childhood. As you know, the Adoption Support Fund has been a significant success. We have released almost £140m since it was launched in 2015 which you have used to support tens of thousands of families. In recognition of the level of demand, we announced on 22 December that funding would increase from £40m this financial year to £45m next financial year.

The ASGLB has developed, in collaboration with the sector, “blueprints” for adoption and special guardianship to help agencies think about the support services they provide in relation to adoption and special guardianship and identify good practice. The aim is to publish them both in the spring. **I would ask you to consider these “blueprints”, identify where you are doing well, but also look at areas where you think you can improve.**

I am copying this letter to Chief Executives and Regional Adoption Agency Leaders.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "M" and a long, horizontal flourish at the end of the name.

Michelle Donelan MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

Who can Adopt – The Facts

- There are few factors that will automatically rule you out as an adopter.
- Our aim is to find loving families for children. The key is to be totally honest in your application so that all circumstances can be considered in context.
- People can adopt regardless of their marital status. Many single people and unmarried couples have successfully adopted children.
- Your sexual orientation is not a factor in adopting – we welcome adopters from the LGBTQ+ community.
- We welcome applications regardless of ethnic background. If you can meet the needs of a child and understand and appreciate the important cultural, religious or linguistic values of their birth community, you will be considered for adoption.
- You do not have to be a British citizen. You can also adopt if you are not a British citizen but you or your partner must have been a legal resident in the UK for over a year.
- You are never too old to adopt. Adopters need to be over 21 but there is no upper age limit - so long as you have the health and vitality to see your children through to adulthood. Your health is important as an adoptive parent. As part of the adoption process, you will have a medical exam to ensure you are well enough to manage the day to day challenges of parenting.
- There is no legal reason why an adopter can't smoke. However, an adoption agency has a duty to consider the effects of smoking on children especially a child under five, or with disabilities. This may limit the children smokers can be matched with.
- You can adopt whether you already have your own children or not. As part of the adoption process, consideration will be given to the age gap of the adopted children and your own children.
- Being on benefits is not a barrier. Your financial circumstances and employment status will be considered as part of an adoption assessment.
- You do not need to own your home. You can adopt if you are in a rented accommodation and you do not need to have a 'big' home, but some children may need their own bedroom.
- Support is available for adopters who have disabilities. People with disabilities are able to provide a very loving home for a child so don't rule yourself out before you have had a conversation with an adoption agency. If you need some additional assistance to adopt, an agency may be able to provide this support.
- More importantly, it is not true that most adoptions breakdown. The vast majority of adoptions (97%) are successful and the experience of ordinary family life gives children the opportunity to rebuild their lives after a difficult start.