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Andrew Webb  
The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd

Cllr David Simmonds  
Local Government Association

Mark Rogers  
Society of Local Authority Chief Executives

18 June 2013

*Den Andrew, David and Mark,*

### **Adopter recruitment, assessment and approval**

Thank you for your letter and paper of 22 March setting out the joint local government response to our proposals for improving adopter recruitment, assessment and approval. Thank you also for the Association of Directors of Children's Services analysis of adoption data on the current and future supply of adopters that was published on 24 April. I have given these documents my careful consideration.

I am pleased to see there are some indications of progress being made to address the challenges we identified and that you agree with our analysis that there are too many adoption agencies operating at too small a scale to be sustainable. I am also pleased to note that you support the possibility of local authorities spinning-out their adopter recruitment and approval functions as new mutual voluntary adoption agencies.

I am particularly pleased that the Local Government Association has already taken action to encourage the equalisation of the inter-agency fee and will observe the progress of the new fee with interest. I agree with you that this is an important first step in removing some of the disincentives within the system which currently constrain adopter recruitment.

There are, however, some systemic problems which I am not persuaded that

your proposals address as effectively. Although your commitment to reduce the estimated national shortfall of adopters by more than half by the end of this financial year is encouraging I have concerns about whether that growth will be sustained to address the remaining shortfall. In particular, I am not yet clear how you will ensure the proposals are effectively implemented across all local authorities. The central test of whether reform can be secured under sector leadership will be whether growth that can be sustained to address the present crisis and prevent the same situation arising in the future. There is insufficient detail in your proposals about how you will bring about sustainable change to the system for me to be confident that growth achieved in the short-term will be sustained in the long-term.

Some of the weaknesses of the current system for adopter recruitment and approval are not adequately addressed in the commitments that the sector has made. Most importantly the commitments do not give me confidence that local authorities will stop prioritising adopters approved by themselves. This is important because our aim is for social workers to make the best match for a child in the shortest time from the widest possible pool of adopters.

At a national level we are reforming the adoption register which will make it easier for social workers to identify a match regardless of the organisation which recruited and approved the prospective adopter. I am also considering what further support the Government can put in place for existing and new voluntary adoption agencies. It is commonly felt among voluntary adoption agencies that local authorities only turn to their adopters as a last resort. Not only does this introduce unnecessary delay for children but it also artificially narrows the range of adopters among whom a child's social worker looks for a match.

I do not believe that your proposals satisfactorily address these points. Indeed, I am concerned that the increase in consortium arrangements that are proposed in your paper might, if they further embed delay while a limited pool of adopters is considered, create more, not fewer, bureaucratic barriers to finding the best match for a child quickly.

I will therefore look particularly closely at whether the planning and implementation of the sector's reforms open up a space in which voluntary adoption agencies can flourish and compete and local authorities can choose the best matches for their children. I anticipate that a successful approach would continue to include both contractual arrangements with particular voluntary adoption agencies and a much greater use of individual adopters who best meet children's needs regardless of the agency which approved them. The equalised inter-agency fee is likely to be of assistance but not sufficient on its own to achieve this.

The survey and analysis undertaken by the Association of Directors of Children's Services is a useful additional data source and suggests that local authorities are making positive progress. The Department's officials have scrutinised the survey and the methodology, together with an analysis of our own quarterly survey of local authorities. Our predictions suggest a slightly more moderate progress than your projections indicate. I look forward with interest to the publication of the

official adoption data for 2012-13 in September.

In summary, I am not currently persuaded that your commitments, welcome as they are, address all of the problems that have been identified and are sufficiently credible, sustainable and substantial to make the new power in the Children and Families Bill unnecessary.

I am encouraged, however, by the ambition and progress that is clear to see and so would like to invite you to consider further how you could address the concerns I raise above. As I have explained, it is unclear from your proposals how the level of change we want to see would be achieved. I should therefore welcome your thoughts about how we might collectively gather agreed data on current and projected supply of and demand for adopters so we can monitor the implementation and impact of your commitments over the coming months. The Government will reach a decision about what further action, if any, it needs to take in January 2014, one year on from the publication of *Further Action on Adoption*.

I would be pleased to meet you to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ed Timpson'.

**Edward Timpson MP**  
**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families**