

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Adoption and Fostering

Co-Chairmen: Craig Whittaker MP, Tom Harris MP

Secretary: Jessica Lee MP; Treasurer: Lisa Nandy

4th March 2013. 17.00 pm in the House of Commons Committee Room 18.

In Attendance: N.B. Includes only those that signed the attendance sheet

Craig Whittaker	MP for Calder Valley
Carol Homden <i>Speaker</i>	Coram
Chris Smith	CVAA
Christine Prickett	CVAA
Helen Oakwater	Independent Trainer
Katie Law	Richmond CC
Michelle Cuffe	Excel Fostering
Felicity Lacey	Excel Fostering
Sylvia Little	Lewisham
Sue Lucas	Assist
Anna Sharkey	Adoption Focus/Father Hudsons
Valerie Wigfall	Children's Family Trust
Grace Wyatt	Nexus Fostering
John Collins	Nexus Fostering
Elaine Dibben	BAAF
Andy Stott	BAAF
Jan Fishwick	PACT
Jeanne Kaniuk	Coram
Joy Rees	Kingston upon Thames
Lynn Charlton	After Adoption
Natasha Hilderley	After Adoption
Naomi Angell	Osborne's Solicitors
Hugh Thornberry	Adoption UK
Erica Pennington	Adoption UK
Anna Sharkey	Adoption Focus
Gail Jackson	Adopt Together
Martin Sadler	Nugent Care
Sue James	Adopter
Alison Miller	St Francis Children's Society
Gillian Kirsch	Norwood
Lady Pippa Dannatt	SSAFA

Apologies:-

Jean Hasnip	Cornerstone NE
Pauline Dancyger	Panel Chair
Harvey Gallagher	NAFP
Norman Goodwin	Adoption Matters NW
Sue Jones	Family Care Notts
Sally Heaven Richards	Action for Children
Marion Hundleby	Independent
Lesley-Ann Doughty	SSAFA

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CVAA UK (Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies)

Corienne Strange	SSAFA
Ian Crompton	Adopt Together
Debbie Jones	Lambeth
Marion Layberry	Safehouses
Josie Orrel-Pearse	Independent
Lucia Hodgson	Parliamentary Assistant

1.	The Chair, Craig Whittaker MP, welcomed all and read out the apologies.
2	CW introduced the topic of the meeting <i>Recruiting Adopters: rising to the challenge</i> and the presenter Carol Homden, CEO, Coram and member of the DfE Implementation Group and the Recruitment Forum.
3	CH then introduced and examined the topic in more detail (without the aid of a PowerPoint presentation) - At 31 st March 2012 over 4,600 children were estimated to be waiting to move in with a new family; more than 600 additional adopters each year are needed to keep up with the growing number of children waiting to be adopted, and we need an additional 2,000 to 3,000 over and above that to reduce the backlog. (Please also see attached presentation)
4	CH identified a number of reasons that explain why there is currently such a serious adopter shortage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firstly, it is the case that local authorities tend, understandably, to be focused on the local need for adopters, as opposed to the national need for adopters, as this is their statutory duty. • This focus means that local authorities have little or no incentive to invest in recruiting additional adopters to recruit adopters for children outside of their local area. • In some cases, a number of local authorities are turning away prospective adopters because they are not needed in their local area. In the context of the national adopter shortage, this is something we cannot afford to do as prospective adopters are often put off by such a response. • In addition many adoption agencies operate at a very small scale which means they cannot benefit from economies of scale. • Because of the perceived, and not actual, cost differences local authorities tend to look for adopters sequentially going to VAAs as a last resort. This inhibits the range of choice of adopters for each child and slows down the process. This also creates a systemic bias against VAAs • A combination of these factors hinders the system from responding effectively to the need for growth in the number of adopters recruited.
5	CH then posed the question "what does a solution look like" she suggested – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater collaboration between local authority agencies and voluntary adoption agencies

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LAs commissioning more adopter recruitment and assessment work from other agencies • Equalising the inter-agency adopter assessment and placement fee • Understanding motivations and co-ordinating recruitment approaches • Creation of the new national adoption gateway – First4Adoption
6	CH then went on to describe the National Gateway, an enquiry service for adopters called First4Adoption.
7	<p>CH finished her presentation by stating that the basis to any problem solving was a shared resolution and this was required more than ever to meet the critical shortfall of adopters and foster carers for the growing number of LAC.</p> <p>She then posed some questions: How do the LAs and VAAS benefit from economies of scale? Should smaller LAs work with other partners? Crucially are there enough adopters? To the last question she stated that research had shown that there were and that success would hinge upon recruiting them.</p>
8	CW thanked CH for her thought provoking presentation and asked if there were any comments or questions.
9	<p>Martin Sadler. Nugent Care.</p> <p>MS asked how big is the potential pool of adopters and is a national campaign needed to reach a whole new audience? Also why would you adopt when you can foster?</p> <p>CH replied that in terms of reaching a new pool of adopters any campaigns had to be, for example, more regionally focussed and have clarity that removes perceived barriers such as there being an upper age limit to adoption.</p> <p>CH added that the demographic should be working towards success but the messages had to be given quickly and potential adopters had to be engaged now because otherwise many children would remain looked after as childhood is short.</p> <p>MS then asked about “thresholds” and what guidelines were being applied to potential adopters.</p> <p>CH replied that there was a huge variation in the system of between 3-29% between different LAs. This also covered costs where in some LAs an adoption placement cost was £35k and others £100k.</p>
10	<p>Sylvia Little. Lewisham.</p> <p>SL said that out-sourcing might seem quite attractive to LAs but her authority would need 100-150 adopters per year. Could any VAA provide that many? LAs needed to be encouraged too?</p> <p>CH responded by stating that it was those LAs that needed to do better who ironically did not realise this or the scale of the problem.</p> <p>They both agreed that the other “time-bomb” that was ticking was the shortage of qualified SWs.</p> <p>CH added that the Minister thought it really was the last chance to get to grips</p>

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	<p>with this and local communities had to be engaged and their help enlisted. She quoted the fate of black boys who in particular were four times as likely not to be adopted. This was exacerbated by the perception that those children in care were there for a reason. However, by working constructively with for example the community in Lambeth this problem was being eased considerably and their chances of a permanent placement increased considerably.</p>
11	<p>From the Floor:</p> <p>Have we been investigating all the pathways to adoption? Can those who have ruled themselves out rule themselves in and how can they be helped to do this? Will the Gateway offer such an opportunity and will it also discuss honestly some of the difficulties of adopting from abroad?</p> <p>CH stated that she would take these issues back to First4Adoption to explore further. She added that fertility clinics that could offer advice were often giving advice contrary to adoption and not relaying all the possible difficulties attached to IVF and multiple births.</p> <p>The questioner added that she had foster-carers come to her solicitor's practise last week and it emerged that they were too frightened to adopt. CH said that the fear of rejection was not uncommon and neither was the fear and concerns around the possible impact of an adopted child on birth children and siblings.</p>
12	<p>Anna Sharkey. Adoption Focus (Father Hudson's)</p> <p>AS stated that the fast developing situation had meant that adopters were now more quickly adopting younger children but this meant that the chances for those children in care over four years old were diminishing. She added that also staff shortages were not assisting her agency's ambition to place more children.</p> <p>CH stated that she believed there were enough SWs in the system and research showed that there was a gap between the number that had qualified and those that actually worked in the sector. She suggested that courageous leadership could come up with mid-term solutions such as a "Social Care First" campaign similar to that for teachers which would allow more trainees in the system. However, that did not resolve the immediate difficulty and investment using social impact bonds may assist. As a collective she believed that the sector must invest by recruiting more graduates.</p> <p>AS responded by stating that since January, in response to job vacancies for new graduates which her agency had advertised, 220 SWs viewed the vacancy concerned with adoption and this resulted in only 3 applications where as 230 viewed the vacancy concerned with foster-care work and there were 24 applications.</p> <p>CH stated that adoption was a niche area and generally represented only 1% of an LA budget. CH also emphasised the importance of using data when tackling any issues and mentioned that Bristol were particularly good at this. Lynn Charlton. After Adoption.</p> <p>LC said that some VAAs were looking at their workforce development and taking on a student SW placement representing a saving of £3k per year. She added that it was not appropriate to view VAAs and LAs on different "sides" but organisations on the same side and working for the good of children.</p>

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13	<p>From the Floor.</p> <p>A question was posed about the Adoption Passport and the possibility of it being more prescriptive and consequently reassuring adopters about the support they would be entitled to receive.</p> <p>CH admitted that this was a challenge that had not been met by the current legislation which required a duty to assess need but not provide it. The difficulty was compounded by the fact that children were dynamic and their needs changed over time and, added to which, their needs often spanned the traditional department boundaries of health and education. She added that it was often impossible to predict a child's future needs but she did not understand why an infant that is born crack addictive cannot have their needs deemed as "clinically predictive" from the outset.</p> <p>From the floor:</p> <p>It was asked whether the three year rule would assist and perhaps that should be extended to five years?</p> <p>CH responded that it was important to empower adopters and if their children have difficulties then they want quick access to the experts that can assist. Carole Oakwater. Independent Trainer.</p> <p>CO suggested that the solution was to "reverse engineer" the issue so that there was a presumption that an adopted child would need access to services. CH stated that parents needed to be able to choose who assessed their children and regional barriers should not exist. She believed that a collective effort from all the ministries involved was required because the nation had not gone from relinquished babies to LAC overnight. This had happened over a period of decades and yet the systems in place had not changed sufficiently. In answer to another question from the floor, asking whether the money should follow the child, CH responded by stating logically this should be the case but the barriers were huge because children in such great numbers represented such a massive cost.</p> <p>MS suggested that a small amount be taken from each child's IAF for adoption support.</p> <p>HO said that better clarity was required and it should be stated that if you fostered a child it would cost "Y" and if you adopted it was "X".</p> <p>LC added that the value proposition did not encourage adopters.</p> <p>CH added that ordinary people adopt and foster children and that they become extraordinary and should be valued and prized.</p>
14	<p>CW thanked Carol Homden for her extremely enlightening and stimulating presentation and all those that had attended.</p> <p>The meeting finished at 18:40.</p>

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