Department
for Education

Further Action on Adoption:

Finding More Loving Homes

January 2013

Contents

Foreword by Edward Timpson MP

We all want the very best for our children. Children who enter care through no fault of their own also deserve the very best. As someone with two adopted brothers I have seen for myself the enormous benefits that adoption can bring. Adoption offers vulnerable children much needed stability and security and the support they need to achieve their potential. As a society we owe it to them to provide the stable, loving family home that so many of us take for granted. That is why I am committed to reforming the adoption system, ensuring that adoption is available for children, where this is in their best interests. The earlier children are adopted, the better their life chances and the more likely they are to succeed.

Last March the Government published *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* which set out the changes we are making to speed up the adoption system in England. In *Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes,* we set out our proposals for the next steps in tackling delay so that more children can benefit more quickly from being adopted into a loving home.

We are making good progress on the commitments we made in the *Action Plan* but there is still a long way to go. A critical challenge facing the adoption system is finding enough prospective adopters – people who are willing to open their homes and hearts to the challenges and rewards of adoptive parenthood. At the end of March 2012, there were over 4,600 children waiting to move in with a new family and we estimate that the current figure is now even higher. That is simply not acceptable.

Local government and the adoption sector are in agreement that there is a problem with the current system. In this document we put forward our vision of a system with fewer adoption agencies operating at larger scale with clear incentives to respond to the needs of all children waiting for adoption. We also set out our intention to legislate to shape this new system.

We will not hesitate to intervene where we believe this is in children's best interests. However, we recognise that this is a radical step and if local authorities are able to bring forward alternative proposals that will deliver a radical shift in the system's capacity then we will not need to use the power. I encourage our partners in the sector to come forward with their proposals for addressing the current failures in the system. Children in care are among the most vulnerable in society. I am determined that our reforms will ensure that no child in need of adoption has to wait longer than necessary to be placed with a loving family.

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

Executive summary

When adoption is the right decision for a child it is essential that they are placed quickly with a loving family that meets their needs. Working closely with local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and other national adoption organisations, and with the Ministerial Adviser on adoption, Sir Martin Narey, we have made good progress with the implementation of the *Action Plan for Adoption* that we published in March 2012. We have published two sets of local adoption timeliness scorecards, consulted on detailed proposals for a streamlined adopter assessment process, published draft legislation that addresses the unnecessary delay in placement for adoption caused by a child's ethnicity and encourages 'Fostering for Adoption', and we have begun to implement our proposals for the new National Gateway for Adoption. These and other reforms have begun to drive improvement but there are still significant issues facing the adoption system.

There is still one outstanding challenge for the adoption system – finding enough adoptive parents. The numbers of children being approved by the courts for adoption each year has risen from just over 3,000 in 2009-10 to over 4,200 in 2011-12. But in the same period the numbers of children moving in with adoptive families each year has risen much more slowly from 3,100 to 3,500. As a result, at the end of March 2012 there were over 4,600 children waiting to be able to move in with a new family.

We urgently reviewed how well the system is set up to find enough adopters to meet the demand from children and found that it is not working as it should. Local authorities recruit and assess adopters to meet the needs of children in their area in line with their statutory duties. One consequence of this is that, if a large number of local authorities have a minor shortage of adopters, this can translate into a major shortage at a national level. Another consequence is that the system is unable to make best use of the national supply of potential adopters – we know of a number of local authorities who are turning away prospective adopters because they are not needed in their local area. We believe that the role of local authorities in both the supply of, and demand for, adopters is at the root of the problems in the adopter recruitment system.

For this reason, we are intending to put forward legislative proposals that would give the Secretary of State the power to require local authorities to outsource the recruitment and approval of adopters. This change could drive improvement in the recruitment of adopters so that supply becomes more responsive to demand and recruiting

organisations have a clear focus on improving the process for adopters. We believe that only a significant change of this nature will reform the system as a whole. We do accept that there are risks attached to such ambitious change and are working with partners in the adoption sector to understand and manage them. We are also keen to listen to alternative proposals from the sector that could deliver the change that the system needs and will consider proposals from the adoption sector before making a decision about using this power.

We are also putting in place immediate activity to increase the recruitment of adopters. Earlier this year we provided local authorities with £8 million one-off additional funding to support the implementation of the adoption reforms. In the next financial year we will be providing financial support for greater investment in adoption in the form of a one-off £150 million Adoption Reform Grant. This funding will address the backlog in children awaiting adoption as well as supporting wider improvements in the functioning of adoption services. We have also agreed to provide £1 million additional one-off funding to the voluntary sector to add an additional 200 adopters each year on top of what is already projected.

We have identified increasing adopter recruitment and approval capacity as a priority. But we also need to make the system more supportive and responsive to potential adopters and adoptive families. Introducing the National Gateway for Adoption is an important step in making the system more welcoming to potential adopters. We need to go further though. This is why the Prime Minister announced in December a number of changes to give approved adopters a more active role in the process of finding a child, and a package of improvements to the support available to adoptive families. The final section of the document describes these proposals.

Chapter 1: Why we need more action on adoption

A continuing focus on adoption

1. Children get on best if they are brought up in stable and loving families. For the vast majority of children, that requires no involvement from the state. However, where families are struggling to care for their children themselves, local authorities should provide support to help them stay together. Where parents consent, or where a local authority can satisfy the family court that the child is suffering, or is at risk of suffering, significant harm, the state must step in to look after the child.

2. Providing high quality care for these children is a crucial responsibility of the state. Outcomes for looked after children have improved a great deal in recent years, thanks to the hard work and commitment of managers and front line staff alike. But – in terms of education, health, job prospects, and the likelihood of teenage pregnancy and contact with the criminal justice system – the outcomes are still much worse than for other children[1] [2].

3. We must take action to address this disparity – but we must not misinterpret it as being caused by failings in the care system. Poor outcomes for children in care are very rarely a result of the experiences they have in care but are embedded in the experiences that led to them entering care. A DfE data pack[3] published in 2012 indicated that children's educational outcomes improve the longer that they remain looked after. Similarly, a report by TACT and the University of East Anglia[4] found the care system can be transformative for troubled children and teenagers and reduces a child's risk of offending.

4. This Government's priorities for reforming services for children in care are to ensure that children who need to enter care do so promptly and that the care they then receive does a much better job of helping them overcome the harm and disruption they have experienced earlier in their lives. Ensuring a sufficient supply of good permanent carers – whether adopters or foster carers – who are able to meet the needs of children in care is one of the most acute challenges we face.

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[1] Statistics on Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England, as at 31 March 2012
[2] *Life After Care: the experiences of young people from different ethnic groups*, Barn, R., Andrew, L. and Mantovani N. (2005), Joseph Rowntree Foundation, London.
[3] Raising the aspirations and educational outcomes of looked-after-children data tool.
[4] *Looked after Children and Offending: Reducing Risk and Promoting Resilience*.

5. When a child comes into care, the decision about what form of care is best for them is not and should not be driven by an arbitrary hierarchy of placement options. The most appropriate form of care will depend on the assessed needs and circumstances of each individual child. We know that many children thrive in a whole range of stable placements. However, of all the children who come into care, those who do so at a young age and are placed swiftly with loving and capable adoptive families are most likely to go on to enjoy some of the very best chances in life.

6. This is why – alongside all the Government's important work to improve outcomes for children in care – reforms of the adoption system are a major priority. As set out in the *Action Plan for Adoption*[5] published in March last year, we want to see more children, for whom adoption is right, being adopted by loving permanent families with less delay.

7. The *Action Plan* summarised the overwhelming evidence of harm being done to vulnerable children by inexcusable levels of drift and delay in care and adoption services – delays that mean children wait an average of almost two years between entering care and moving in with an adoptive family. It then set out the steps we are taking to streamline the adoption system and enable it to find permanent loving families for more children more quickly and more effectively.

Progress to date

8. Working closely with local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and other national adoption organisations, and with the Ministerial Adviser on adoption, Sir Martin Narey, we have made good progress with the implementation of the *Action Plan*. We have:

    ▪ Published two sets of local adoption timeliness scorecards and conducted detailed investigatory work in the lowest-performing local authorities which has led to clear plans for improvement.

    ▪ Consulted on detailed proposals for a streamlined adopter assessment process.

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[5] *Action Plan for Adoption*.

- Published draft primary legislation that addresses two issues. One is the unnecessary delay caused by a misplaced desire to match children with parents of the same ethnicity; another is the benefit to children from 'Fostering for Adoption', whereby prospective adopters care for a child they are likely to go on to adopt, while the courts consider the case.

- Selected First4Adoption, an exciting new partnership between Coram, Coram Children's Legal Centre and Adoption UK, to operate the new National Gateway for Adoption – which will provide a welcoming and informative point of access to the system for would-be adopters. The helpline is now up and running and the full on-line service will be launched later this year.

9. Some encouraging early signs of improvement have emerged. There is a growing consensus amongst social workers of the urgent need for change – with 90% sharing the Government's concern about the timeliness of the adoption system, according to a recent survey by the College of Social Work[6]. Data recently released showed that the number of children starting to be looked after has been rising, with more young children starting to be looked after. This suggests that social workers are responding to the strong evidence that the system currently tends to be too slow to intervene. Similarly, more young children are being authorised by the courts to be placed for adoption, which suggests local authorities are acting more swiftly and effectively to decide whether adoption is right for a child and, where they decide a child ought to be placed for adoption, are applying for and obtaining placement orders from the courts more quickly.

10. Considerable progress has been made on implementing reforms to the family justice system. The Government is working to introduce its legislation, including in relation to the proposed 26 week limit for the completion of care and supervision order cases, as soon as Parliamentary time allows. The Family Justice Board is now well established with a remit to drive significant improvements in system performance. As a result, the average duration of care cases has steadily fallen from the 56 weeks highlighted in the Family Justice Review to 47.7 weeks.

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[6] The College of Social Work's Adoption and Fostering Survey (November 2012).

The challenge still ahead

11. While there is still a long way to go, these signs of improvement in the processes for taking children into care, identifying the best long term plan for them, and where necessary obtaining the court order, are very encouraging. But they bring into sharp focus the critical outstanding challenge for the adoption system – finding enough adoptive parents.

12. The numbers of children being approved by the courts for adoption each year has risen from just over 3,000 in 2009-10 to over 4,200 in 2011-12. But in the same period the numbers of children moving in with adoptive families each year has risen much more slowly from 3,100 to 3,500. As a result, at the end of the March 2012 there were over 4,600 children with a placement order waiting to be able to move in with a new family.

13. The obvious conclusion is that the number of adopters being approved has not been keeping up with the needs of children waiting for adoption. Ofsted recently published the results of the first ever national data collection about adopter numbers[7], and they support this conclusion. Based on a 90% response rate, these results show that just over 3,000 adopters were newly approved in 2011-12. We need more than 600 additional adopters each year to keep up with the growing number of children waiting to be adopted, and we need 2,000-3,000 on top of that to reduce the backlog. The number of children with an adoption decision waiting to be placed has increased by 33% from 31 March 2010 to 31 March 2012, of which the proportion of those waiting 21 months or longer to be placed has increased by 7 percentage points.

14. The *Action Plan* identified the lack of adopters as a major cause of delays to adoption. This new data makes clear that until this challenge is resolved thousands of children will be left waiting longer than they should for adoption. Some of those children will miss out on their chance of a permanent family altogether. Each additional month a child spends in a temporary placement makes it harder for them to form a lifelong relationship with a permanent carer. Such delay has negative consequences for their development, the chance that their adoption will be successful and the likelihood that they will be adopted at all. What is more, we

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[7] Ofsted adoption quality assurance and data forms 2011-12.

anticipate that the number of children who are authorised to be placed for adoption has continued to rise since Ofsted collected this data.

15. The *Action Plan* stressed in particular the shortage of adopters willing and able to adopt older children, sibling groups (where it is in their interest to stay together) and those with disabilities and other particular needs. That remains a massive challenge. Data from the national Adoption Register, which holds the details of most children who wait significant periods for adoption, suggests that about a half are in sibling groups, about half have maternal substance misuse in their backgrounds, and just under 40% have developmental delay or uncertainty. As we increase the numbers of adopters, we need to consider the profile of the children waiting and encourage and support adopters to give permanent homes to children with more complex needs.

16. This is a moral but also a financial imperative. We estimate that there are at least 3,000 more children in foster care waiting for adoption than there would be if we had sufficient adopters. That is costing local authorities approximately £1.2-1.5 million per week, and £60-80 million per year in foster care costs alone. Increasing adopter recruitment therefore can markedly improve the life chances of neglected and damaged children while at the same time relieving financial pressures on local authorities.

Are there enough potential adopters out there?

17. Reforms to increase adopter recruitment will work only if there are enough potential adopters in our society, people willing and able to take on the challenges and joys of adoptive parenthood. The Government believes strongly that this is the case. Viewed in the context of a system managing just over 3,000 adoptions a year, finding adopters for thousands of children is an enormous challenge, but in the context of an adult population of 30 million, it is totally achievable.

18. We also know that many more people express interest in adopting than go on to adopt. New data collected by Ofsted[8] indicates that there were over 25,000 enquiries about adoption last year compared to just over 4,000 applications and just over 3,000 approved adopters. Some of these may be multiple enquiries from a

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[8] See footnote 7 above.

single family, and there will be many good reasons why many people take their enquiries no further but, again, a small percentage change in the conversion of enquiries into applications would go a long way to addressing the on-going adopter shortage.

19. We can derive further grounds for optimism from the experience of a number of agencies who have sought to significantly increase adopter recruitment. Bristol City Council, for example, set itself the challenge of increasing its number of adopter approvals by 50%, and did so through effective marketing and recruitment activity and investment in its adopter assessment team. Its experience suggests the system does not tend to exhaust the available supply of prospective adopters. In short, until we are confident that the adoption system does and is known to do a consistently excellent job of recruiting and attracting adopters, we should not question whether there are enough potential adopters out there, we should ask why we are not converting more of them into approved prospective adopters.

Why are we not recruiting enough adopters?

20. Since the publication of data in September[9] which showed how critical the adopter shortage had become, we have been urgently reviewing how well the system is set up to find enough adopters to meet the demand from children. Our findings suggest the system is not working as it should. Individual local authorities have all the information they could need to project how many adopters they will need, and yet collectively they did not predict and respond to the scale of the problem that the national data has now exposed. To help local authorities better understand the scale of the problem, the Department plans to share a data tool with them.

21. Research conducted by the Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre in 2012, which was based on interviews with fifteen adoption managers, found that in terms of limitations the most common responses related to resource issues and capacity to recruit sufficient prospective adopters. Voluntary adoption agencies tell us that they have the will and the ability to recruit more adopters, but that the financial case for expanding any faster than they already are does not stack up. Voluntary agencies are paid only when a local authority places a child with an adopter they have

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[9] Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England (including adoption and care leavers) - year ending 31 March 2012

recruited, and local authorities tend to use voluntary agency placements only as a last resort. But the issues we face are not about local authority performance. They are about system-wide failure.

22. These findings are symptoms of underlying problems in the way adopter recruitment and assessment is organised. As we will set out in detail in Chapter 2, a key reason why we are not recruiting enough adopters is because the structure of the system weakens the incentives on individual agencies to respond to the adopter shortage, and dictates that many operate at too small a scale to be able to do so effectively. Another key reason, at least partly a consequence of the first, is that the system has tended not to treat and value adopters as it should. As we said in the *Action Plan*, many adopters receive an excellent service and many agencies are very effective – but the system does not do a consistently good job of attracting, retaining and supporting prospective adopters.

23. An online survey of 179 members of Adoption UK conducted in 2010[10] explored the experience of adopters over the preceding decade. It found that two thirds to three quarters of adopters received a reasonable or good service. For example, just under half of those expressing an interest in adoption were invited to an adoption information session within two months (the statutory requirement) and over half of respondents, having had their application accepted by the local authority, had their preparation begin within three months. A report by the Commission for Social Care Inspection in 2006 demonstrates the lengths some local authorities go to in order to ensure prospective adopters have a good experience of the system. It highlights five agencies, including Bradford, which at the time of the research offered adoption preparation training groups for Asian applicants in their first language. Adoption UK's online survey reveals, however, that significant numbers did not. Some of those turned away reported the following justifications:

"… not recruiting within our own city council, only looking for people outside of our county."

"The authority said we were out of their area even though it was xxx County Council and we live in [the same] county."

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[10] Adoption UK (2011) *Waiting to be parents: adopters' experiences of being recruited*.

"We are a lesbian couple and one authority was not interested in accepting us due to our sexuality."

24. These experiences are not typical of the adoption system, but they do show adopters are not consistently welcomed and valued. Where agencies did respond positively to enquiries, they did not necessarily respond quickly – in almost a third of cases, three months or more elapsed before the adopter was even able to attend an information session.

25. A larger and more recent survey of 260 adopters and would-be adopters conducted last year by Parents and Children Together (PACT)[11] found a similarly mixed picture. Many of the respondents who were going through or had completed the adoption process said positive things about their social workers. Ofsted found that almost half of adopter assessments take more than the eight months set out in statutory guidance. There are direct consequences for adopter recruitment. PACT found that over 30% of those who enquire about adoption are put off by what they know about the adoption process and the time it takes.

26. This document sets out the Government's analysis which indicates that the structure of the system is inhibiting the necessary growth in the recruitment and assessment of adopters. It proposes a new way of organising adopter recruitment and assessment, with fewer agencies, many of them operating at larger scale, with clear incentives to respond to the needs of all children waiting for adoption by providing a rigorous, supportive and effective service to adopters. It sets out our intention to legislate to shape this new system. We are committed to reforming the adopter recruitment and approval system for the good of children and will use the powers at our disposal to bring it about, if necessary. We do, however, recognise that transition to a radically new system is not without risk. And we are open to any alternative proposals for sustainable system improvement that our partners in the adoption sector can bring forward. Because of this, we have not fully determined that we shall use these powers and we are asking our partners in the adoption sector to come forward with their own proposals for how they could better equip the system to find sufficient adopters.

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[11] Barriers to Adoption Report PACT Research, Harding, R. (2012).

27. We recognise that reorganising adopter recruitment and assessment will take time. Chapter 3 of this document therefore sets out short term measures that national and local government will take, in partnership with the voluntary sector, to begin to address the adopter shortage immediately.

28. The *Action Plan* set out proposals to improve prospective parents' experience of the adoption system, including a new national Gateway and a streamlined adopter approval process. Chapter 4 of this document draws these reforms together with improvements recently announced to support adoptive parents. It then sets out new proposals to increase the role of adopters in identifying the children they may go on to adopt, and to create an adoption champion to help ensure adopters are well treated. Taken together, these reforms will ensure that adopters are better informed, and feel more able to demand a good service from agencies.

A system for children

29. One of the criticisms levelled at this Government's reforms of the adoption process is that they are motivated by concern for adopters, rather than for children. It is an easy criticism to make, but the facts simply do not bear this out. As we said in the *Action Plan*, the adoption system can serve the best interests of children in need of adoption only if it has a sufficient supply of adopters. That means it needs to do an effective job of attracting, recruiting, preparing, assessing and supporting adopters. This document is consequently focused on improving the system for adopters in order to improve the adoption system for children.

Chapter 2: Recruiting adopters

Present arrangements for adopter recruitment and assessment

30. At present, almost all of about 150 local authority adoption agencies and about 30 voluntary adoption agencies operate their own adopter recruitment and assessment services. On average, each agency approved 17 adopters last year[12]. This is not an effective scale at which to provide these services. It reduces the scope for specialisation, innovation and investment. An operation of this size is unlikely, for example, to be able to conduct audience insight research to inform a targeted marketing campaign or to have specialist staff that engage with specific communities. It also means the cost of recruiting and assessing each adopter is likely to be higher, because management overheads and fixed costs are shared over a smaller base.

31. Data collected nationally on local authority spending shows the wide variation in the cost per adoption across authorities. In a detailed study of the costs of adoption, Julie Selwyn reported that unit costs of adoption varied by a factor of four amongst the eight local authorities in her sample. The same study noted that local authorities had responded to this issue to some extent in recent years by joining consortia to share activities such as adopter information evenings and training events, and in some cases to share the costs of recruitment posts. There are, however, only a couple of examples of two or more local authorities going beyond this loose form of collaboration and actually merging their services[13].

32. Local authorities recruit and assess adopters to meet the needs of children in their area in line with their statutory duties. This, however, has two important consequences for the national picture. One is that if a large number of local authorities have a minor shortage of adopters, this may not strike them individually as a significant problem requiring significant investment in adopter recruitment – but the combination of these minor shortages at the local level will translate into a major shortage at a national level. The other is that it renders the system unable to make best use of the national supply of potential adopters. Although we have a huge

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[12] See footnote 7 above.

[13] *Adoption and the Inter-agency Fee*, Selwyn, J. (2009)

shortage of adopters nationally, we know of a number of local authorities who are turning away prospective adopters, let alone doing their best to attract more, because they are not needed in their local area.

33. The national Adoption Register is an attempt to address this issue – and it has helped agencies to exchange adopters who turn out to be surplus to local requirements. But it has not changed the fact that local authorities, naturally, have no incentive to do more to recruit adopters from their local area to meet the needs of children in other parts of the country.

34. Voluntary adoption agencies are independent of any particular local area, and are motivated by their charitable mission to help place the nation's children. But they, too, are constrained by the present system from responding fully to national demand. To increase their activity their trustees have to invest, because they are paid only when a local authority places a child with an adopter they have approved. But their confidence in investing is undermined by the reality that, historically, local authorities tend to place children through voluntary adoption agencies only as a last resort.

35. This is not because there is evidence that placements with adopters approved by voluntary adoption agencies are less effective. A 2010 study by Farmer et al[14] looked at the quality of adoption matches and found that voluntary adoption agencies are just as successful, even though they tend to provide placements for children with more complex needs. It is because the hidden costs on local authorities of recruitment make the fixed fee charged by voluntary adoption agencies appear expensive in comparison with an adopter approved in-house who seems to be free in cash terms. Julie Selwyn[15] has shown that this is a false perception, based on failure to understand the full costs of in-house placements, particularly in relation to overheads. We recognise that there are arguments for trusting relationships built up between professionals but that these relationships do not require people to have the same employer – as evidenced by the many successful placements through the current voluntary adoption agency providers and the many successful local authority voluntary adoption agencies.

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[14] *An investigation of family finding and matching in adoption – briefing paper*, Farmer et al (2010).
[15] See footnote 13 above.

36. In addition, the fixed fee local authorities charge one another in return for an adopter is less than half that charged by voluntary adoption agencies, strengthening the false impression that voluntary adoption agencies charge too much. This inter-authority fee does not cover the costs of recruiting and assessing a prospective adopter. This means local authorities lose out financially if they 'sell' adopters they have recruited – by allowing them to adopt children from other areas, and so makes them reluctant to risk recruiting more adopters than are needed locally. We commend the work that our partner organisations in the sector are doing currently to address this issue and are committed to supporting them to do it quickly. We do not, however, believe that tackling this problem alone, important as it may be, will solve the fundamental issues with the structure of the adopter recruitment system.

37. The rapid growth in the numbers of children waiting on placement orders in recent years suggests that the adoption system is not effective in translating increases in the numbers going through the system into increased incentives on agencies to recruit and assess. This analysis of the structure of the system helps to explain why. It demonstrates that the real improvement we need cannot happen while provision is dominated by 152 local authorities trying to recruit and approve only the adopters they immediately need and around 30 voluntary agencies artificially limited by the reluctance of local authorities to use their adopters. This is not the fault of individual agencies, many of whom provide an excellent service and are very effective at recruiting sufficient adopters to meet their local needs. The problems lie in the incentives that the system places on agencies.

38. There are signs that the system is beginning to take tentative steps to address some of these issues. A small but slowly growing number of local authorities are forming partnerships with voluntary adoption agencies and other external providers in order to improve their service. Harrow, Kent and Cambridgeshire, for example, have all contracted elements of their adoption service to the voluntary adoption agency Coram. Oxfordshire has brought in the Core Assets Group to run its adopter assessment process. Three boroughs in London – Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster, and Hammersmith and Fulham – and three unitary authorities in the North West – Warrington, Wigan and St Helens – have merged their adoption services in order to save money while improving quality.

39. One major barrier to effective collaboration between local authorities in relation to adopter recruitment is the inter-authority fee. It is currently set at £13,000, while Julie Selwyn's independent research suggests the actual cost to a local authority of recruiting and assessing an adopter is over £30,000. This places a strong financial incentive on local authorities to avoid recruiting more adopters than are needed for its children, and allowing other local authorities to place children with them. The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) are working together to raise the level of the fee to the level of the inter-agency fee – which better reflects actual costs. We would expect to see swift progress on the levelling of the inter-agency fee as part of any alternative proposals put forward by the sector.

40. Voluntary agencies have embarked on a concerted and coordinated expansion programme to increase the numbers of adopters they recruit by at least 20% in each of the next three years, and in doing so some are consolidating their operations to generate economies of scale. We do not believe, however, that these gradual and piecemeal developments will bring about the systemic change needed to resolve the structural problems in the system. The vast majority of adoption agencies' services will continue to operate as they currently do. To address the adopter shortage we need swift and far-reaching reform. Chapter 3 explains the short-term support we are providing to adoption agencies.

Our vision of a new system

41. We set out here a vision for a new system. We also put forward a proposition for how to bring about this change. We are not ideologically attached to this solution – and are asking local authorities in parallel to offer an alternative approach. But we are adamant that change must be swift and dramatic, and that it must address the problems described above.

42. We believe there is a more sensible and responsive way of organising adopter recruitment and assessment that would make the system much better equipped to recruit adopters. We need a system where there are fewer organisations recruiting and assessing enough adopters to meet demand for adoptive families across the country – with most of them operating at much greater scale.

43. Their greater scale would allow these organisations to become more effective and efficient at recruiting, preparing and assessing adopters. It would be their core business to ensure that adopters felt welcomed, valued and supported. They would be better able to respond to rises or falls in the numbers of children going through the care and adoption system across the country. They could also work to introduce adopters to the range of needs of children awaiting adoption. In response to the critical shortage of adopters we currently face, and motivated by their charitable mission, these organisations would sharply increase the scale and continually improve the effectiveness of their adopter recruitment work and so bring many more approved adopters into the system.

44. Local authorities would base their choice of adopter solely on the degree to which they meet the needs of a child, as opposed to now where they tend automatically to use adopters approved in-house first. Adoption agencies would therefore be under pressure to innovate and improve their service in order to approve more prospective adopters who better meet the needs of children, and so persuade local authorities to use them. We would expect to see a greater focus in these agencies on the care of, and even advocacy on behalf of, those adopters who they had approved and trained. We would also expect to see a clearer focus on the on-going support for their adopters in meeting the challenges of adoption.

45. Other organisations, such as independent fostering agencies, could be encouraged to set up new adopter recruitment and assessment services, providing an additional source of innovation and improvement. Economies of scale and new more efficient approaches to adopter recruitment and competitive pressure should in the long-term bring down the cost of recruiting and assessing each adopter. Some agencies might specialise in finding adopters for the hardest to place children, such as those with severe disabilities or large sibling groups. They would incur additional costs associated with more intensive recruitment and preparation work, but local authorities would be willing to pay them more to find a loving permanent home for these children.

How to get to this better system?

46. The step change in the numbers of adopters recruited and the quality of service that they receive is being held back by one particular feature of the present system. We need to remove the in-built link between adopter recruitment and assessment and individual local authority areas. It is this that dictates the small scale at which adopter recruitment and assessment is done, fragments and dilutes the efforts to find enough permanent homes for all children, and holds back effective voluntary adoption agencies.

47. We believe that this is an essential step towards having enough of the right adopters for the children who so badly need them and we are, if necessary, willing to use the law to make sure that this problem is addressed. We therefore propose to take a power that would enable us to require some or all local authorities to outsource adopter recruitment and assessment. If we had to use this power, local authorities would continue to be responsible for identifying children in their areas in need of adoption, obtaining placement orders where needed, swiftly finding appropriate adoptive parents and supporting adoptive families, but would have to pay other agencies to recruit and assess adopters, rather than doing so themselves. In this eventuality local authorities would either cease to have adopter recruitment teams or alternatively they would support them to spin out, perhaps creating a single not-for-profit independent organisation from a number of former local authority teams. Many of these 'new' voluntary adoption agencies might be owned by their employees and motivated by a social mission to find happy stable homes for children who need them. They would compete with existing voluntary adoption agencies and any wholly new entrants to the market to provide adopters to local authorities.

48. All adopter recruitment organisations would need to register as voluntary adoption agencies and operate under the regulatory arrangements that apply to existing voluntary adoption agencies. They would be inspected by Ofsted. Competitive pressures would drive these organisations to improve the quality of the service they provided to adopters and the quality of placements they provided to local authorities, and encourage them to grow or merge to achieve economies of scale.

49. The foster care sector is benefitting from these kinds of effects following legal changes in 2000 which permitted independent fostering agencies to make a profit. There were a number of new entrants to the market who managed to secure significant market share, leading to much stronger competition.

50. It is currently contrary to both domestic and international law for profit to be made and distributed from adoption. This is an important safeguard against the trafficking of children. Decisions about the adoption of children should be made in their best interests, and we would not want to risk their distortion by a profit incentive. While we recognise that profit could be a potential incentive to growth, it does not form part of our proposals. We believe our proposal to require local authorities to outsource adopter recruitment has the potential to deliver the benefits we have seen in the foster care market without the need for a profit motive. And we are wary of the perverse incentives that could be created by applying it to a system in transition. In recognition that our proposal would expose local authorities to some new and additional costs we will make funding available for one year to support the transition.

51. Our proposal would fundamentally restructure the way the system recruits adopters, building on the successful model through which local authorities already use voluntary adoption agencies. Local authority recruitment and assessment teams which currently do a great job for their area could become independent of the local authority and be encouraged to make a bigger contribution to the system as a whole. It would give all those recruiting and assessing adopters the scale and the incentives to value adopters as they deserve and meet the needs of the nation's children.

52. We also recognise that change of this order, particularly if undertaken when we are expecting partners to expand their services does, of course, create risks. One of the concerns that have been voiced as we have begun to discuss these ideas is that the very act of taking a statutory power, whether or not we use it in the future, will cause organisations to de-prioritise recruiting adopters or destabilise teams and staff recruitment. We simply do not accept that argument. The many people working to recruit and approve adopters for children are, and will remain, committed to doing that. It is the Government's job to help them by making sure that the system supports their work. We are all working hard to implement changes that have

already been put in place but that is not an excuse not to address the systemic issues.

Is this the only way?

53. We are listening to the representatives of local government who tell us that systemic improvement can be made across the whole country without Government compulsion. We are also listening to those who believe that such a change would be for the best in the long run, albeit with significant risks.

54. We think there is a compelling case for taking a power to address a problem of this scale and systemic nature, but we do not enter into it lightly. A local authority's adoption service is only a small part of its responsibilities but in the context of the adoption system this would nonetheless represent a significant change and would carry risks as well as the benefits set out above. There are risks inherent in transferring provision from the public to the voluntary sector. We are committed to ensuring that local authorities remain accountable for outcomes for children in their care, so there would be increased need for effective practice in commissioning of adopter recruitment and assessment. Local authorities would still be accountable for the adopter recruitment function but would administer it through contractual arrangements with other adoption agencies.

55. We cannot be sure how many new mutuals would be formed out of local authority adopter teams, or whether there would be other new entrants to the market, so we would monitor carefully how providers develop. New mutuals would have access to professional support from the Government's Mutuals Support Programme to help them set up, but local and central Government might need to consider providing further support. We would be able to draw on local authority experience in spinning out other services, such as school improvement, adult social care and social housing.

56. This kind of reform would offer new professional routes to social workers to work in innovative ways to find permanent loving homes for a larger number of children. However, we also acknowledge that they will prompt legitimate concerns about job design, terms and conditions and pension rights. Again, we would work with local government to understand and address these concerns, drawing on their experience in other service areas.

57. Many children in care need adopters now, so we intend to use our next legislative opportunity to take the power we need to require local authorities to outsource adopter recruitment and assessment. Nonetheless, we want to take more time to explore and understand the associated risks and to refine our proposals accordingly. We also think it is right to offer the local government sector time to put forward alternative proposals for addressing the systematic problems we have identified, if it thinks there is a better way of achieving our shared objective of a system which consistently provides sufficient adopters to meet the needs of growing numbers of children waiting for adoption.

58. Because we are determined to address this problem as quickly and fully as possible we would need to have confidence that an alternative set of reforms is comprehensive and soon starts to drive significant measurable results. We therefore ask that the representative bodies of the local government sector, ADCS, LGA and SOLACE, coordinate and submit initial alternative proposals to Ministers by the end of February. The proposals need to address the systemic problems identified in this document as hampering increases in adopter recruitment – the small scale at which agencies operate, the lack of incentive for agencies to seek to meet national demand for adopters, and the unfair decision-making that disadvantages voluntary adoption agencies. These need to be addressed without creating new problems that limit competition through closed agreements or contracts that are too big to be competed for by most agencies. They also need to be able to make a difference swiftly, so we would expect them to build on and incorporate some of the short-term proposals set out in Chapter 3.

59. The proposals need to be credible, in that they can be implemented and where appropriate enforced; they should be sustainable, in that they involve systemic change which will lead to lasting changes in behaviour; and they should be substantial, in that they amount to a response that is consistent with the scale of the problem. Above all, they need to plan for and bring about a clear increase in the numbers of the right adopters being recruited and approved, which the sector will be able to monitor and demonstrate through the Department for Education quarterly survey of local authority adopter recruitment. This data is already helping us understand issues in the adoption system and will be essential in securing the Government's confidence in the progress that the sector is making. We hope, in

working up alternative proposals adoption agencies will see the collective value of this data to the sector and that this will support a higher response rate to the quarterly survey, and a transparent process for setting and monitoring national trajectories for adopter recruitment. Finally, the proposals should be accompanied by a clear timetable for implementation, including a series of dates at which Ministers can review progress against the timetable.

60. We know these are difficult issues to address and we also know that to address fully the shortfall in adopters will take some time. So we do not expect February's proposals to be the final word – rather, the first step in a clear plan to develop a persuasive national strategy, and then to implement it decisively so that as soon as is possible there is a loving family waiting for each child in need of adoption. As we have described, recruitment and approval of the right adopters at a national level has fallen behind where it needs to be. This gap should have been spotted – it is a failure of the current system to focus on the national rather than local needs that allowed this to happen. We have put forward our own proposition and are telling the local authority sector that it must demonstrate convincingly that it can put this right. But, we simply cannot let the best chance of happiness and well-being for thousands of children continue to be wasted or placed at risk through institutional sleep-walking. We would be happy to see effective change under the leadership of the sector but are committed to taking a new power so we can act swiftly to change the role of local authorities if the sector cannot dramatically change itself. We will not hesitate to use that power if we do not see the kind of proposals, action and success that we outline above.

Chapter 3: Finding more adopters quickly

61. The shortage of adopters is causing harm to children in care now. The kinds of systemic changes set out in Chapter 2 would take time to take effect. Indeed, in the immediate short-term, the prospect of such change might reduce the incentives on local authorities to invest in adopter recruitment and so act as a temporary brake on efforts to increase adopter numbers. Whether we exercise the proposed power to require local authorities to outsource adopter recruitment and assessment, or we pursue alternative systemic reforms proposed by the sector, we need to take more immediate action to ensure agencies do all they can to increase adopter recruitment.

Short term measures to boost activity

62. As mentioned previously, adopter recruitment and assessment is currently conducted by about 180 different adoption agencies. Our short-term response needs to maximise the effectiveness of this infrastructure, while paving the way for longer-term systemic changes – either the proposal set out in Chapter 2 or an alternative proposal put forward by the sector. Our proposals seek to improve agencies' understanding of the scale of the adopter shortage, increase or clarify the incentives on them to help address it, and support them in doing so.

63. Central Government collects rich data about children in the adoption and care system in the form of the annual children looked after data return. As part of our wider adoption reform programme, we have recently also begun conducting a voluntary quarterly survey of all local authority adoption agencies. This provides more up to date information and provides data on adopters. Using these sources, we propose to develop and share with local authorities a data pack containing a range of analyses to help adoption agencies understand the scale of the adopter shortage nationally, regionally and locally. It will also help support the expansion of voluntary agencies by giving them confidence that local authorities will place children with any additional adopters they recruit. Local authorities will already have a closer and more up to date understanding than central Government about needs of children and the need for adopters in their local area. But the data pack will allow local authorities to understand the adopter shortage beyond their own borders, and so support the development of a response coordinated across local authority boundaries.

64. This kind of regional collaboration cannot be imposed by central mandate. Local government organisations, ADCS, LGA and SOLACE, are best placed to lead these discussions using the regional networks of the Children's Improvement Board, of which they make up the membership. We would expect to see this as part of any alternative set of proposals put forward by the sector. We want to see local authorities coming together to consider their local data on children waiting, to assess projections for adopter recruitment and to decide how together they can meet any shortfall. In some cases this may involve each individual agency investing a little more in its own adopter recruitment and assessment service. More often, we expect it to mean jointly identifying one or two agencies (whether voluntary or local authority) who have the potential to address the adopter shortage across the region, and supporting them to dramatically expand their activity in order to do so. Local authorities will be able to track the impact of this activity on adopter numbers through the quarterly survey. We hope, in working up alternative proposals, adoption agencies will see the collective value of this data to the sector and that this will support a higher response rate to the quarterly survey, and a transparent process for setting and monitoring national trajectories for adopter recruitment.

65. Local authorities have a clear responsibility for investing in adopter recruitment and assessment activity to ensure permanent homes are available for children in need of adoption. It is also in their financial interest because they bear the costs of foster care while children wait for adoption. We recognise, however, that given the fiscal situation it is extremely difficult for local authorities to find the money to expand adopter recruitment and assessment teams – even where this would swiftly lead to money being saved. Earlier this year we provided local authorities with £8 million one-off additional funding to support the implementation of the adoption reforms. This has been used to expand adopter recruitment and assessment capacity in some local authority agencies.

66. We are providing financial support for greater investment in adoption in the form of a one-off £150 million Adoption Reform Grant. This funding will have a specific focus on securing adoption reform. In particular, the funding will help local authorities to provide more support to adoptive families to ensure the best possible outcomes and prevent the disruption and breakdown which can give rise to more costly interventions in the future. It will also support local authorities to recruit sufficient

adopters to meet the needs of the large and growing numbers of children waiting to be placed in permanent and loving adoptive homes. £100 million of the £150 million will not be ring-fenced and will be available to support local authorities in supporting adoption reform and enable them to target funding at the entire adoption process and the specialist support children need. Local authorities will retain the discretion to use this funding to address their highest priority needs, such as the major backlog of children waiting for adoption. £50 million will be ring-fenced and paid to help local authorities address structural problems with adopter recruitment and tackle the backlog of children who are waiting for adoption. To achieve this, it will provide one-off funding to support local authorities in the equalisation of the inter-agency fee and to help address the needs of those children who have been waiting the longest for adoption.

67. Finding the money to invest in expansion is also a challenge for voluntary adoption agencies. They have to make an upfront investment from their charitable resources in order to employ additional staff and increase their capacity, because they receive payment only if and when an individual adopter has been recruited, trained, assessed, approved, and matched to a child. They face additional risk because of local authorities' tendency to use voluntary adoption agencies only as a last resort. Nonetheless the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) reports a 20% increase in voluntary agency capacity in 2011-12 from 500 to 600 adoptive placements, and has committed to the same rate of increase in each of the next three years. We have agreed to provide £1 million additional one-off funding to the voluntary sector to give them financial security to enable them to recruit adopters for an additional 200 children in the first year. The boost from the fees earned would then enable them to recruit more adopters in subsequent years. We are asking voluntary agencies to target any extra recruitment activity at adopters of harder to place children.

68. The CVAA have now also launched their Enhanced Family Finding initiative which uses a Social Impact Bond to generate additional investment in finding adoptive parents for children who have proved particularly difficult to place. Launched in National Adoption Week last year, the initiative uses investment capital to pay for targeted recruitment work, intensive adopter training, and guaranteed high-levels of adoption support to provide adopters for children with complex characteristics. Local

authorities pay a higher amount for this service, but the payments are spread over the time, so they can be more directly funded out of the money they save on foster care costs.

Chapter 4: Promoting and supporting best practice in adopter recruitment and support

69. The focus of much of this document is on the structure of the system, and on proposals which seek to ensure that the key agents in it – adoption agencies – have the right information and the right incentives. It is individual agencies not central Government that have responsibility for recruiting and assessing and supporting adopters.

70. However, we are making a range of complementary but more direct interventions to improve the marketing of adoption, to drive improvements in the service adopters receive, and to empower adopters to help improve the system. A number of these proposals were first set out in the *Action Plan* – many still in the early stages of development. They build on the recommendations of the Expert Working Group made up of leading experts from across the adoption sector which helped develop the *Action Plan*.

Marketing

71. Aside from the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)'s national campaign during National Adoption Week, there is currently no national marketing activity to attract prospective adopters. Individual agencies conduct their own campaigns often with significant success but, like the agencies themselves, these tend to be localised and small scale. In response to these shortfalls in the marketing of adoption, the Expert Working Group proposed that the CVAA and the ADCS convene a National Recruitment Forum to improve the coordination and effectiveness of recruitment activity.

72. The National Recruitment Forum has now been established and, following discussions with marketing and customer insight experts with broad experience in the public and private sectors, and with the help of Sir Martin Narey, it quickly identified a shortage of robust evidence on adopter motivations. We have a number of surveys about the experiences of people who go to on adopt, and a few studies into the experiences of people who enquire about adoption, but there is no nationally available market research – which is an essential foundation for effective recruitment

activity. At present, few local agencies operate at sufficient scale to warrant investment in this kind of activity.

73. In response, we have worked with the National Recruitment Forum to commission research from a marketing agency to identify motivating factors and barriers to people applying to be adopters, and to describe the target audiences at which marketing activity should be directed. The research involved both qualitative and quantitative methods. A nationally representative survey of just under 5,000 people was conducted and revealed a number of key insights into the motivations and barriers to adoption experienced by individuals with a higher than average propensity to consider adoption. For example, the groups identified as being highly predisposed towards adoption identified a clearer understanding of what adoption agencies are looking for from potential adoptive parents as something that would motivate them to engage with the system in the future. Other motivators identified by these groups included clearer information about how the application process works and making the process of applying to adopt simpler. These findings were mirrored by the fact that one of the most significant barriers to adoption identified by these high propensity groups was the worries they had about the process of being approved as a suitable adoptive parent. The findings of the research will be disseminated so that they can inform the development of national and local recruitment activity. Our vision of adopter recruitment and assessment service being conducted at larger scale would mean that agencies themselves would develop sophisticated recruitment and marketing functions, conducting detailed and sustained analysis of barriers and motivations, developing effective messages, and testing and applying them in practice.

74. But effective marketing is just one element of attracting more people to adopt. As we noted in Chapter 1, anecdotal and survey evidence shows that one key reason why people who consider adoption do not go on to apply is widespread negative perceptions of the adoption system. Our more recent market research also suggests it is fair to assume that many people are put off from enquiring in the first place for the same reason. Many of the myths of the adoption system are based on some element of truth – and their prevalence is a result of poor and inconsistent practice. So, if attracting more adopters is partly about improving the reputation of

the system, it is not just a question of communications – it is about improving the adopter experience.

From enquiry to approval

75. Adoption UK's survey[16] of its members about their experiences of being recruited to be adopters gives cause for concern about how effective the system is at encouraging or welcoming people to apply to adopt. More than a quarter of those who had enquired were turned down or turned away by the first agency they approached, and an eighth were turned away more than once. In almost a sixth of such cases the agency said they were not currently recruiting; in a tenth, they gave no response at all. Of course there is no automatic right to be assessed for adoption, but these findings are concerning.

76. Experiences like these are one of the key reasons the Expert Working Group proposed a new Gateway to the adoption system, providing independent advice and information about adoption and how to become an adopter. We have now awarded the contract for providing this service to First4Adoption, a new partnership between Coram, Coram's Children's Legal Centre and Adoption UK. The first element of this service – an adoption helpline – is now up and running. The website and social media presence is under development and we expect it to be launched in the spring.

77. We are confident that the impact of the Gateway will be substantial. It will help ensure that prospective parents are drawn into the system with encouragement and information. As the system develops in line with the vision set out in Chapter 2, it will help ensure prospective parents are directed to agencies which are recruiting. For these reasons we think it will increase the numbers who move from enquiry to formal application to adopt. We also expect it to support the transition to a system where agencies doing adopter recruitment and assessment are more focused in the adopter experience. By giving prospective adopters information about agencies – data, inspection evidence, and peer feedback – to inform their choice of agency, the Gateway will help them drive improvement in the quality of the service, training and support agencies provide.

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[16] Adoption UK (2011) *Waiting to be parents: adopters' experiences of being recruited*.

Training, assessment and approval

78. Adoption UK's survey[17] found that for nearly one quarter of prospective adopters, the training and assessment process – the period from a formal application to approval being granted or refused – took more than a year. Ofsted have recently released data[18] showing that for almost half of adopters this period takes more than 8 months. The new two-stage approval process is designed to deal with this and other common concerns raised by adopters. The new standard for the completion of both stages will be six months.

79. The process will also be designed to place an emphasis on adopters exploring adoption with the help of online materials before commencing stage 1. The first stage will gather essential information and identify issues for assessment in stage 2 as well as introductory training and preparation. The second stage will incorporate more intensive training and a rigorous but streamlined assessment by the social worker. We think this new process presents agencies with a clear opportunity to find innovative ways of improving the experience for the adopters while making more effective use of social worker time.

Being matched to a child

80. Once individuals or couples have been approved as adopters they have to wait to be matched to a child. They have very little role in that process. It is telling that, despite the chronic shortage of adopters, many adopters wait for months and sometimes years after being approved to be matched with a child. There have been some improvements in timeliness, but even after that improvement, adopters remain on the Adoption Register for an average of eight and a half months in addition to any time they will have been waiting before being referred to the Register. We intend to make it a statutory duty for agencies to refer adopters to the Adoption Register no later than three months after they have been approved, unless a local match is under consideration. Approved adopters can also self-refer to the Register and we shall make that easier.

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[17] See footnote 16 above.
[18] See footnote 7 above.

81. Some practitioners both in local authorities and in voluntary adoption agencies argue that matching is a precise science. Department for Education guidance has, historically, supported that view. In reality, there is a significant shortage of evidence to support the delays in matching. As Selwyn and Quinton have concluded:

"Given the effort that goes into matching, it might be thought that there is good evidence that we know how often matching is achieved and that a good match makes a difference. Such research evidence is lacking; not just sparse, but virtually absent."

82. We believe that a great deal more pragmatism in matching and a greater role for adopters in initiating matches would not endanger placements. That is not to argue that the suitability of a child for adopters can be established only by the adopters themselves. But we need to trust adopters more to start the process. And we need to be absolutely clear that there are no limits on the characteristics of children for whom adopters are approved. Once an adopter is approved, they can be considered for any child/children. Panel advice on this matter is intended only to assist in matching, not to create a barrier to other matches. The belief that one set of adopters is suited to one sort of child (whether categorised by age or gender) but not another is not evidence based.

83. An analysis of the relative success of transracial placements exposes the wider myth of matching. Research both in the USA and the UK has consistently revealed that problems of adjustment and self-esteem are no more present in inter-ethnic placements than in same ethnicity placements. Yet, ethnic or cultural considerations have taken absolute precedence in matching decisions for many years. As Julie Selwyn, quoted in BAAF's Top Ten Tips on Matching (2011), has found:

"Social Workers' top priorities when searching for adopters are firstly ethnicity, culture and promoting positive identity while warmth, love, commitment and putting a child's needs first comes a poor second."

84. We are proposing amending the law to address this imbalance but that alone will not change practice. Another approach is to allow would-be adopters a much greater role in initiating matches. We should recognise that there is an essential chemistry involved in that process. This can best be done through the wider use of adoption activity days or, as they are known in the USA, adoption parties. In the USA, research has shown this approach to be twice as effective as other sorts of family

finding. BAAF have taken a courageous step in pioneering such events in in the UK. These are, essentially, an extension of practice of using video profiles to interest adopters in children who are waiting. The events emphatically recognise the role of chemistry in forming a bond between adults and children.

85. Scrupulous efforts are made to protect children and ensure that, as far as they can understand, they do not feel disappointed by any failure of a match being initiated for them. The days are enjoyable, action packed with play and activities (climbing, zip wires, shelter building, circus skills and face painting among others) and children enjoy them for that reason alone. But also, and counter to the assumptions of critics, those supervising the events tell us the days reassure children that they are not alone in waiting for adoption and they are a reassurance that everything possible is being done to find them a family.

86. The results of the BAAF days have been very encouraging with a number of matches being made even for children considered particularly difficult to place. One would-be adopter who attended one of the days said:

"For the first time, these children featured in magazines were suddenly real and we could potentially be their new forever parents… I don't think I would have approached some of the children just by reading their profiles or seeing a picture… It was a very effective way of dispelling some preconceived ideas or anxieties about children waiting for placement."

87. We want to see adoption activity days being held regularly and in all parts of the country. Additionally, we intend to legislate to develop a version of the Adoption Register which can be accessed and searched by would-be adopters. And working closely with BAAF and academics, we shall provide new guidance on matching, its benefits and limitations, which will stress the need to give adopters a greater role.

Adoption support

88. As the Prime Minister announced before Christmas, we have developed a range of proposals for improving the quality and consistency of support available to adoptive parents. We know that good quality support during and after adoption is valued by parents and can have a real impact. Last year our Expert Working Group identified adoption support as one of the most important areas for reform. Surveys show that some parents do not even know about their right to request assessments of their

support needs, and where assessments happen families are too often left without the support that they need.

89. We will put adopters in the driving seat by introducing an Adoption Passport from April 2013, to tell them about their rights and entitlements in relation to adoption support. This will be given additional force by a new statutory duty on local authorities to inform adopters and prospective adopters of their rights. The Passport will specify national entitlements and will be available through the Adoption Gateway. It will also be supplemented with a range of other useful information including how to make a complaint, and we expect that local authorities will supplement these core, national components with details of their local services and entitlements

90. Adoptive families deserve equal treatment with birth families but have needs in common with children in local authority care. We have already given children adopted from care the same priority in school admissions as looked after children. These children will also be eligible for free early education from two years old from September 2014. We will also ensure that from 2015 adoptive parents have the same rights in relation to pay and leave as birth parents. All of these rights will be included in the Adoption Passport, as and when they become available.

91. We will put more choice into the hands of adoptive parents by piloting personal budgets for adoption support in a number of local authority areas. Where local authorities have agreed to provide adoption support, personal budgets will enable parents to exercise more choice and control over the type of support provided, and the provider of that support. Not only will this give parents more of a say, but it could also help to stimulate the market as parents buy the most effective services. We intend to take powers in legislation to allow a full, national roll-out of personal budgets for adoption support in due course.

92. Adopters consistently tell us of particular issues in accessing mental health support to help their children overcome the effects of early trauma and disruption[19]. We will improve access to services by:

- Commissioning the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) to produce guidance on attachment. This will both help to increase responsiveness and stimulate referrals where appropriate.

- Raising awareness and understanding amongst all those working with adopted children, particularly health professionals, of the behavioural and mental health issues that some adopted children may face.

- Encouraging local and national commissioners of key services, including CAMHS, to recognise and address the needs of adopted children.

Implementing these changes

93. This chapter has set out a comprehensive set of reforms to every aspect of the adopter experience that seek to ensure adopters are valued, well treated and empowered. However, the changes to policy, legislation and guidance will not, by themselves, change local practice. Over time, changes to the structure of the system will increase the incentives on those recruiting and assessing adopters to adopt these reforms. Parents should be able to expect the highest standards in the services and support they receive from agencies. As part of our work to communicate and implement the reform, we propose to appoint a new Champion to help drive improvement in social worker decision-making. This role will build on the work Sir Martin Narey has done on an informal basis during his time as Ministerial Adviser on Adoption. In a small but significant number of cases he has challenged poor practice and successfully asked that decisions be reconsidered. This is a relief to frustrated adopters and would-be adopters – but it also plays a significant systemic role by exposing entrenched bad practice to the senior leadership of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies.

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[19] Adoption UK (2012) *'It takes a village to raise a child: Adoption UK survey on adoption support'*