

GUIDANCE NOTE ON IMPROVING PRACTICE ON THE PLACEMENT OF OLDER CHILDREN FOR ADOPTION

INTRODUCTION

This guidance note was commissioned by National Recruitment Forum to help agencies consider how to improve the opportunities for placement for older children over 4 years of age who are waiting for families to adopt them.

76% of children adopted in 2012-2013, were under 4 years of age and it is a recognised challenge to find families who will consider older children.

The Adoption Register Annual Report 2012 - 2013 notes that in the past “older children” who were considered hard to place were 6 - 7 years old. It is now considered more difficult to find a family for a child **aged 4 and over** as younger children have become available for adoption.

AIMS OF THE PRESENTATION

- To highlight the areas that agencies need to consider when thinking about their agency policies and strategies that will support the placement of older children for adoption.
- To re-enforce the best practice that already exists and support the work of child care and adoption social workers and adoption panels in Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies.
- To build on the experiences of some agencies who have been initiating successful strategies for recruiting families to adopt older children.
- To provide a checklist to be discussed in agencies’ management groups and adoption teams. The checklist will identify any areas of policy or practice where changes could be made to improve opportunities for recruiting families for older children.

STATISTICS

- Between 2012 and 2013 there was a 16% increase in the number of looked after children for whom a placement order was granted.
- During the same year there were 510 children more children adopted, an increase of 15%. In all 3980 children were adopted.
- Adoption was achieved for more children at a younger age. 76% of children adopted between 2012 and 2013 were aged 0 - 4 years.
- 21% of children adopted in the same year were aged between 5 - 9 years.
- More than half of the children aged 5 and older, waiting for adoptive families, were part of a sibling group. The CVAA (Consortium of Voluntary Agencies) reported that during the year 2012 - 2013 there was a significant increase in the number of younger children available for adoption and the voluntary agencies had placed fewer sibling groups.

- These patterns may change as the statistics for 2013 - 2014 are suggesting that there has been a significant fall in the numbers of placement orders granted following the Court of Appeal judgement in [Re B-S \(Children\)](#) [2013]. This is likely to alter the range of children needing adoptive families in the immediate future.

IS YOUR AGENCY DOING ALL YOU CAN?

- Does your recruitment policy address the need to recruit adopters for older children over 4 years old?
- Do you know your audience and have you got a targeted approach?
- Does this policy address robustly the areas that prospective adopters perceive as a barrier, e.g, the age of those who can adopt, the health and financial circumstances and diversity of families who can adopt?
- Does your website and published information about adoption reflect the need for adopters of older children? It is important to show the general profile of the agency's waiting children to encourage interest in this group of children.
- Older children are often part of a sibling group which presents a further challenge for recruitment. How is your agency addressing the challenge of recruiting adopters for sibling groups? See practice paper on placing siblings - <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/NRF-Sibling-Guidance-Notes.pdf>
- Does your Fostering Service have an active policy for recruiting foster carers for older children over 4 who could consider becoming long term foster carers or adopters of the children they care for?
- Has your agency considered using Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) who offer specialist family finding services? Several agencies offer specific packages to local authorities for family finding. The most recent joint initiative from CVAA is **Its All About Me**(IAAMS) initiative provides a service so that Local Authorities can contract with Voluntary Adoption Agencies to find families for harder to place children which include older children. See Resources below and http://iaamadoption.org/?page_id=13

CHILDCARE MANAGERS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

- Research has found a strong association between children's age at entry into the care system and their level of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Ref. Sempik See further reading. A psychological and developmental assessment will help identify a child's future needs as social workers seek an appropriate family. Children with a complex background will need a comprehensive assessment by a multi-disciplinary team.
- Do you have good links with CAMHS and Child Development Clinics for the children in your care? Ref. Messages from Research confirms that poor assessments of children led to placement breakdowns. See further reading.

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- Are social workers able to develop their skills to communicate directly with children and build a good relationship? Is training offered to enable social workers to build a full picture of a child? See BAAF or other training opportunities.
- Life story work: what training is offered to social workers to help children make sense of their experiences and the decisions affecting their future? There are resources available to both social workers and children. See [BAAF bookshop](#) and Life story books for Adopted Children: a family friendly approach, by Joy Rees
- If part of a sibling group, is there clarity for social workers about the tools available for assessing the placement needs of sibling groups? If children are to be placed separately, how are contact issues to be met?

ADOPTION MANAGERS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

- Does your recruitment and training material reflect the need for adopters of older children?
- Are you targeting your advertising at groups that research has shown are more likely to respond to a campaign for adopters of older children, eg. those active in religious communities, gay and lesbian groups and those with personal experience of adoption and fostering?
- Many potential adopters perceive barriers because of their age, being single or being in a same sex relationship. Do you address these myths in your recruitment and training material? Are social workers open minded about the type of family that can adopt an older child?
- Does your training for prospective adopters address some of the fears of taking an older child with reassurance that such concerns are reasonable and setting out what can be put in place to reduce risks e.g providing accurate and realistic assessments of older children and appropriate adoption support?
- Do prospective adopters of older children have the opportunity to hear from experienced adopters early on in their contact with the agency? This helps prospective adopters to see and hear about real examples of older children needing families and the rewards as well as challenges. Social workers, too, have to believe that placing older children is possible and it can and does have positive outcomes.
- Have social workers developed excellent working relationships with the virtual school to advise and collaborate on school transitions and to assist with the choice of school?
- Are social workers working with local schools to help them understand the needs of adopted children?
- For many older children a long term foster placement can provide a good permanent placement, sometimes leading to adoption. This can maximise protective factors for a child by providing a secure attachment with continuity of school and friendship group.
Some agencies have a scheme for supporting the placement of older children with complex needs where there is an expectation that a fostering placement will lead to legal permanence. See scheme run by PACT voluntary adoption agency called

FACTS: Fostering and Adoption Consultation and Therapeutic Support or FACTS.
<http://www.pactcharity.org/adoption/facts-and-placement-support>

- What policies and procedures does your agency have in place to support foster carers considering adopting a child in their care? Fear of losing financial help and support were cited by half of foster carers who had considered, but not pursued, adoption of their foster children. How would your agency address these concerns?
- Is your agency proactive in identifying support packages prior to matching which offer both financial and emotional support? If an older child has complex needs or is part of a sibling group, then adopters will need reassurance about the availability of realistic and ongoing support.
- Do you ensure that **full information** about the child is shared with the adopters? Successful matching needs to be based on clear and accurate information about both the child and the prospective adopters. It is important that time can be given to social workers to really get to know the children for whom they are family finding so that they can talk with great knowledge about the child to potential adopters.
Most adopters welcome the idea of the worker who knows the child best continuing to provide support during the transition and early stages of placement.
- It is important to have good quality photographs and DVD's which show the child behaving as naturally as possible. This takes time and creativity on the part of the person working with the child before and during the filming. Photos and DVD's need to be reviewed regularly and updated.
- Does your agency singly or as part of local consortia use Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days to give older children more visibility? There is some evidence that allowing a child to become known to prospective adopters may enable adopters to reassess what may be manageable in their family. <http://www.baaf.org.uk/ourwork/activitydays>
- Is your agency using your consortium exchange arrangements to maximise matches for older children. Are you using Family Finding magazines and Video Profiling services run by BAAF and Adoption UK. Using a variety of methods enables a potential adoptive family to identify a child having seen them in more than one setting.

FURTHER READING

- McNeish and Scott, DMSS Research 2013. What works in achieving adoption for looked after children: an overview of evidence for the Coram/Barnardos partnership.
- Caroline Thomas, BAAF 2008. Adoption for looked after children: messages from research.
- Research Insights from Market Research, DfE April 2013. Understanding attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption and fostering.
- Selwyn, Sturgess, Quinton and Baxter, BAAF 2006. Costs and outcomes of non-infant adoptions.

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- Cousins. BAAF 2008. Finding Families, Top 10 Tips.
- Luckock and Lefevre, BAAF Journal of Social Work 2008. Direct work: social work with children and young people.
- Biehal, Ellison, Baker and Sinclair BAAF 2010. Belonging and permanence: outcomes in long-term foster care and adoption.
- Selwyn, J. Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster care Studies. Research Report 2014 Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, interventions and disruptions.
- Farmer, Dance, Beecham, Bonin and Ouwejan. Research Brief DfE: An investigation of family finding and matching in adoption.
- Sempik, Ward and Darker. 2008 Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry 13, no 2: Emotional and behavioral difficulties of children and young people at entry to care.

RESOURCES

- **First4Adoption**
The Government has funded the website and telephone helpline to inform and encourage those interested in adoption. <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/>
First Steps is an e-learning programme to help build adoption readiness. <http://firststeps.first4adoption.org.uk/>
- **Recruitment Marketing Resources**
The Department has commissioned First4Adoption and Kindred to develop, test and evaluate, and then make generally available, a new suite of recruitment marketing materials which will be available to all agencies. Early materials have been tested with a group of agencies in the North East and in the East of England, and they will be tested with the general public in these areas during September in order to see how potential adopters respond to them. The materials are hosted in the adoption professionals section of the F4A website. <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/professionals/marketing/>
- **BAAF**
Life Story Work and Direct Work with Children. Books and digital resources and training courses are available on the BAAF website. <http://www.baaf.org.uk/info>
Life story books for adopted children, a family friendly approach: by Joy Rees, published 2009 by Jessica Kingsley
- **IAAM: Its all about me.** The additional assessment of the children and the support and training for adopters is funded by a Social Impact Bond (SIB). This bond enables agencies to invest the additional funding needed to find a permanent adoption placement for the harder to place children. Currently eight Voluntary Adoption Agencies are partners in this project. http://iaamadoption.org/?page_id=7 It offers special focused training to adopters for up to 2 years after placement. If the placement is successful the Local Authority would repay the SIB over time. It is hoped that up to 300 older children with complex needs can be adopted with the support of this programme.

EXAMPLES OF TARGETED RECRUITMENT

- Find 40 families. A campaign by Southwark Adoption Service in 2013.
[http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/1450/
find_40_families_campaign_soars_as_council_celebrates_national_adoption_week](http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/1450/find_40_families_campaign_soars_as_council_celebrates_national_adoption_week)
- Communications excellence winner: Staffordshire County Council campaign to find specialist foster parents for more challenging children.
<http://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2013/nov/13/public-services-awards-staffordshire-county-council>

ABOUT THE NATIONAL RECRUITMENT FORUM

The National Recruitment Forum is working to support LAs and VAAs in addressing the overall shortfall in adopters and the need to recruit adopters for specific groups of children. Senior representatives attend from:

Adoption UK
Association of Directors of Children's Services
AdoptWestMids Consortium
British Association for Adoption and Fostering
Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies
Coram
Essex County Council
First4Adoption
Leeds City Council