

Voluntary agencies could speed up adoptions, says charity

Director of adoption consortium makes plea for more councils to consider voluntary agencies from the start of placement proceedings - rather than as a last resort



Children play in the grounds of a care home in Chelmsford, Essex. Photograph: David Mansell

Many [children](#) with an [adoption](#) recommendation are never found an adoptive family and grow up in care. These children are usually the hard to place – those above the age of four, children with disabilities or developmental delay, those from complex cultural backgrounds and groups of brothers and sisters who must stay together.

This is why, every year, national adoption week asks adults across the country the same question: could you be the parent a child is waiting for? The campaign focuses on the children who tend to wait longest – and it works. Moved by stories in the media of children whose lives have been transformed by their 'forever family', or photographs of children still in need of loving and permanent homes, thousands of people take the first step towards adopting a child.

Encouraging people to come forward is only part of the solution. Some of these adults will go on to be successfully approved as prospective adopters, willing and able to look after some of society's most vulnerable children. But what happens next is equally important.

A common approach in family-finding is for local authority adoption agencies to first look to their own pool of prospective adopters. If no suitable match is found, they widen the search to include families from other nearby local authorities, then they

advertise and refer the child to the adoption register for England and Wales, and finally – if no families can be found – **voluntary adoption agencies** are approached. These charities will often find the right placement and are known to be particularly successful at recruiting families for children considered hardest to place.

This process takes time and delayed decision-making has been shown to have a strong influence on the likelihood of a child being adopted. Some local authorities have reduced the time it takes to find families for children, partly by working with voluntary adoption agencies from the start, but this doesn't happen in every local authority and for every child. Why?

There is no doubt that money has a key part to play. When a child is placed with a family recruited by a voluntary adoption agency, a set fee of £23,000 is charged by the charity to cover the cost of finding, assessing and approving that family. A recent government study found that local authorities are sometimes reluctant to use charities because of a belief that this fee is too expensive. However, the report analysed the costs of recruiting, assessing and approving adopters and found that the fee charged by the voluntary agencies is, in fact, extremely good value for money: the actual cost for both local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies is in the region of £35,000.

Furthermore, the same research estimated that every child placed by a **voluntary adoption agency** saves the local authority around £25,000 a year in foster care costs. It is time to use these findings to develop further partnerships between local authorities and the voluntary sector. This will reduce the impact on local authority budgets in the short and long term and – most importantly – increase the number of placements for children.

Adoptions have been falling in recent years. In 2008-09, 3,300 children in England were adopted from the care system, a 13% reduction on the 2004-05 figure of 3,800. If the numbers are to improve, not only do we need recruitment campaigns such as national adoption week, but the process of matching must always be fast, efficient and in the best interests of individual children.

In 2008-09 **voluntary adoption agencies** placed 673 children with adoptive families and approved 567 adoptive families. However, at the end of the year they also had 494 approved families who were still waiting for a child to be placed with them. It makes no sense that a child can stay in care – sometimes at a cost of several thousand pounds a week – when the perfect adoptive family may be available.

The lack of knowledge among some local authority managers of the true costs of providing services must be addressed. The life-long costs to a child who is never found a permanent family cannot be underestimated.

Lyn Burns is director of the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies