

THE TRANSPARENCY PROJECT : PRESS RELEASE

ENGLISH COUNCILS CONFIRM THEY SET TARGETS FOR THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN TO BE ADOPTED

In response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOI) request made by The Transparency Project to 172 councils, 12 English councils have confirmed, sent or published documents showing that they use numerical targets for adoption. Some councils provided an actual number of children in care they aimed to have had adopted annually, and some provided a percentage figure.



Although the government “benchmarks” councils on the speed of achieving adoptions for those children who are approved for this type of placement (through Adoption Scorecards), this is the first time that councils are thought to have admitted operating to numerical targets for adoption, since targets brought in by the Blair government in 2000 were abolished in 2008.

The Transparency Project, which is a charity whose aim is to bring clarity to family law, undertook the comprehensive FOI exercise in response to persistent but un-evidenced criticism that targets were driving the removal of “adoptable” children, particularly babies.

The Transparency Project takes the view that there is *a risk* that ‘targets’ and ‘key performance indicators’ *could* come to drive or contaminate decision making which becomes divorced from the needs of the individual child. Even if this is not happening in practice, it is still important that families are not given the impression that it could be happening. The perception is potentially as harmful as the reality.

Lucy Reed, Chair of The Transparency Project, said :

“In law, the decision that a child should be placed for adoption must be solely based on the needs of that individual child. The setting of targets to encourage faster placement of those children for whom adoption has been identified as the right outcome are unobjectionable, but targets to increase the absolute number or proportion of looked after children who are approved for adoption are in tension with the very clear law in this area that ensures that each child and family is treated as unique. The law recognizes that adoption is neither necessary nor appropriate for every child that cannot remain with its birth family. It also recognizes that for many (though not all) babies and young children for whom return home or to relatives is not in their interests, adoption may offer the most secure alternative permanent option.

“We had anticipated that the answers to our information requests would lay to rest some of the anxiety that decisions about non-consensual adoption were being driven by targets rather than individual needs. Unfortunately our enquiries suggest the picture is more complicated. More work is needed because the picture remains unclear.

“Whilst we have found no evidence that individual social workers are performance managed by reference to targets, and some councils specifically denied this, it is clear that some councils operate their own internal targets for broader management and performance purposes. Campaigners have highlighted the risk that targets of this sort could potentially have an indirect effect on decisions about whether or not an individual child should be placed for adoption, but our study did not produce evidence that helps to answer this question.

“We did find evidence of one council’s adoption reform strategy extending to employing community nursery nurses in children’s centres to target permanency planning work with vulnerable babies and young children, which runs the risk of being perceived as an effort to seek out adoptable babies.”

The study was carried out by Alice Twaite, of the Transparency Project who is a non practising freelance solicitor who advises families at the Family Rights Group. It was completed over a period of a year and took the form of Freedom of Information Act requests to each council in England & Wales.

The Transparency Project recognizes the limitations of this study and urges those with the appropriate resources to carry out further, more in depth work in this area in order to ensure policy objectives are being met and to ensure that public trust and confidence in the adoption and family court system is promoted. Given the proposed reform of the adoption system announced by Government earlier this year, this seems like a timely moment for such issues to be addressed.

A blog post giving more detail will appear on The Transparency Project blog www.transparencyproject.org.uk shortly.

Other background

Comparative Adoption Scorecards for all councils in England are published here : <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards>

In November 2015 the government pledged further adoption reform, ostensibly to increase the speed of adoptions for those children who would benefit from it. In a speech at that time David Cameron went further however and said *“I’m a huge fan of adoption...we’ve had some good successes. The number of children adopted is up 72%... .. at the moment LAs haven’t got enough choice of children to be adopted...I’m a great fan of adoption and this government has big ambitions to help make sure we adopt more children.”*

The resulting Children & Social Work Bill is currently going through Parliament. One of its aims is to Increase the number of children being adopted from care to a permanent home when it is in their best interests.

The Transparency Project

The Transparency Project is an educational charity set up in 2015, which aims to explain and discuss family law and family courts in England & Wales, and signpost to useful resources to help people understand the system and the law better. The project carries out work aimed at improving the quality, range and accessibility of information available to the public both in the press and elsewhere. The Project does not take on individual cases or provide legal services. The Project was launched in 2014, became a charity in 2015 and until October 2016 has been run entirely by volunteers. This project was carried out by Alice Twaite in her own time and has been very time consuming.

In October 2016 The Transparency Project was able to launch its Family Court Reporting Watch with the assistance of a grant from the Legal Education Foundation. The grant also enables the charity to publish further guidance notes on tricky family law topics, for use by families or professionals. See www.transparencyproject.org.uk/family-court-reporting-watch-project-is-go/

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