

Councils making millions in incentives after snatching record numbers of babies for adoption

By SUE REID - 2nd July 2007

Councils are being offered bonuses of millions of pounds if they meet controversial State adoption targets.

Confidential figures obtained by the Daily Mail show that £36million in 'reward grants' has been promised to English councils in an attempt by Labour to increase adoptions of children by 50 per cent.

The money-earning targets were introduced by Tony Blair in 2000 and were intended to lift more older children out of the care system.

But critics say it is the most 'adoptable' babies and children under four who are being removed in the biggest numbers.



Court battle: Mark and Nicky Webster won the fight to keep little Brandon

More than 900 newborn babies are now being taken from their mothers each year, a 300 per cent increase in little more than a decade.

The number of children aged between a week and a month removed from their parents has risen to 1,300 annually, a rise of 141 per cent in the same time.

In the past two weeks alone, eight newborn babies have been taken from their mothers at hospitals in Newcastle and North Tyneside.

The number is so high there are not enough foster parents in the area. One baby - thought to be the ninth taken from its parents - is being cared for in a special hospital unit because there is no foster home available.

Liberal Democrat MP John Hemming has demanded an explanation.

He said: "We are seeing a massive increase in the forced removal of newborns. Babies are being taken before they can even be breastfed. Social workers are seizing very young children on the flimsiest of excuses and giving them to other families.

"This smacks of social engineering on a grand scale. The offer of monetary rewards for meeting the targets has created a frenzy among social workers. There are council targets for recycling rubbish and now targets for recycling children."

Figures prepared by the Department for Local Government and Community Cohesion show that two councils - Essex and Kent - were offered more than £2million over three years to encourage additional adoptions.

Four others - Norfolk, Gloucestershire, Cheshire and Hampshire - were promised £1million in extra funds.

Critics say very young children are specifically selected - even before birth - by social workers to get the bonuses. It is believed that 1,000 each year are wrongly taken from their parents.

Last week a court ruled that a couple whose first three children were taken for adoption should keep their fourth, now a year old.

Abuse allegations against Mark and Nicky Webster turned out to be false. But they will never see their three lost children again because adoptions are irreversible.

Despite the cash inducements, adoptions of older children - the very ones who were meant to be helped - have dropped dramatically.

The number of over-sevens adopted in England has fallen from 100 in 1996 to 50 last year out of a total of 5,400 adoptions.

Beverley Beech, of the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services - a body which advises new mothers - said: "The Government is denying that social workers are targeting babies for adoption.

"But the desperate calls on our helpline from pregnant women who have already been told by social workers, for no good reason, that they will lose their babies immediately they are born, or from mothers of new babies taken for adoption, prove these denials are not true."

Campaigners also want an opening up of family courts, where adoptions are overseen in utmost secrecy. Parents are warned that if they tell anyone - even their closest family - what goes on they could face prison for contempt of court.

Family law solicitor Sarah Harman, the sister of Labour deputy leader Harriet Harman, said: "It's not the welfare of the child that is being protected - it's the welfare of social workers".

North Tyneside Council said last night: "In the past few weeks steps have been taken to protect six babies at serious risk of significant harm. In all cases the mothers have frequent contact with their

babies and are encouraged to breastfeed."

Newcastle Council confirmed that two babies had been removed during the same period.

Websters' MP: Stop cash for adoptions

By LAURA COLLINS - Last updated at 22:15pm on 7th July 2007

The MP of a couple who lost three of their children because of a false abuse claim has called for an end to Government adoption targets.

Liberal Democrat Norman Lamb said the targets, introduced by Tony Blair, 'provide a perverse incentive', with councils winning cash rewards if a specified number of children are adopted.

Mr Lamb, who also wants family court proceedings to be opened up, has applied for a Commons adjournment debate over the tragedy of Mark and Nicky Webster.



Saved: Nicky with baby Brandon

Their three eldest children were taken from them by Norfolk County Council because one had a fracture that doctors said could only have been caused by physical abuse.

But later, four eminent specialists found that the boy was lactose-intolerant, would not take solids, and was probably suffering from scurvy, which would have made his bones brittle and liable to break.

These experts gave this evidence for Mark, 34, and Nicky, 26, from Cromer, when they won a landmark court fight to keep their fourth child, 13-month-old Brandon.

The Websters are fighting on for the right to have contact with their lost children, who are with separate families, but have been advised that the adoption order is irreversible.

Their story could only be told after The Mail on Sunday and BBC won a ruling allowing the media to report a family court case for the first time.

North Norfolk MP Mr Lamb said: "Theirs was an appalling miscarriage of justice and part of any proper discussion must mean rethinking social services' adoption targets."

The financial incentives were introduced in 2000 in an attempt to see adoptions rise by 50 per cent. The number of babies taken into council care in England before being adopted has risen from 970 in 1996 to 2,120 last year.

Mr Lamb said: "It ought not to be a factor that taking children into adoption means the social services bringing in money from the Government.

"I'm sure that when these annual targets were set, they were done so with the best of intentions.

"But it brings a financial motivation into a process which just should not be influenced in that way."

The Mail on Sunday has learned that a county council, which cannot be named for legal reasons, has won an injunction preventing ITV's Jeremy Kyle Show from featuring a mother whose five children, all under six, are being adopted forcibly.

The state stole our children

By SUE REID - Last updated at 22:41pm on 31st January 2007



Marianne and Peter with their five children

Looking back, Marianne Key says it was the worst day of her life.

At North Tyneside Hospital on a summer afternoon, the state took away her four children and threatened never to give them back.

The happily married former nurse watched helplessly as Nickolas, three, Alexander, almost two, and her twin five-month-old babies, Alfred and George, were carried off by Northumberland social workers.

Marianne was told that protest was useless. At every exit point of the hospital there was a police officer waiting to make sure that she did not try to stop them being taken.

As her weeping children were driven to foster homes, Marianne was left alone at the hospital, frantically ringing her husband, Simon, to tell him what had happened.

It would be six months before the family would be together again.

Today, the Keys are embroiled in a legal battle Marianne, 43, and Simon, 38, a self-employed cabinet maker, now live 230 miles further south in the village of Lower Swell, Gloucestershire.

In the sitting room of their home, the four boys play as their new baby sister, Harriet, is rocked by their mother.

The two older brothers attend the village primary school; the twins go to a local nursery. It appears an idyllic life.

At Marianne and Simon's instigation — and armed with the family's files — Northumberland detectives are now investigating the health visitors and social workers who accused Marianne Key of being an unfit mother before taking the four children into care.

The Keys' treatment has been criticised by Peter Atkinson, the MP for Hexham in Northumberland.

"The police must inquire fully so that those responsible for this are brought to book, and I will be telling the county's chief constable exactly that," he said this week.

The story the Keys tell is a deeply disturbing one.

They say they nearly lost their family on the say-so of a group of child-care professionals — some of whom, Marianne says, lied about her being a neglectful mother.

The litany of accusations against Marianne was lengthy: that she had hurt Alfred; that she sedated the children with an over-the-counter infant painkiller, Medised, so she could cope more easily; that they were given too much milk; that they did not have enough toys, and there was a lack of emotional warmth between Nickolas and his parents.

Marianne was said by one health worker to be suffering from Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP), a condition — unproved in science — where a mother is said to make up an illness in her child or even deliberately harm her own child to attract attention to herself.

The ailment is based on the discredited research of Professor Sir Roy Meadow, 73, the controversial paediatrician who was struck off the medical register two years ago for giving "misleading and incorrect" testimony as an expert witness in the case of Sally Clark, the mother wrongly jailed for killing her two infant sons.

He was found guilty of serious professional misconduct, but in February last year he successfully appealed against this ruling in the High Court and is now free to work again.

It was Professor Meadow who coined the term MSBP.

As a result of his theory, scores of women have been accused of harming their own offspring and jailed.

Hundreds more have had their children put into care or even handed over for adoption.

But there is another matter of concern.

Some of Marianne's records, and those of the children, were falsified to make the case against her, according to a report prepared on the family by their London medical negligence lawyers, Leigh Day & Co.

These allegations are also being investigated by the police.

On dozens of pages, the dates were changed, with extra information written between lines or added which completely altered the sense of what was being said.

Some of Nickolas's development checks even had the letters P for Pass altered to F for Fail.

Significantly, the entire sense of a report saying that Marianne had comforted her eldest son after a fall was changed.

The word "not" was added in different writing at a later date so that it appeared she had ignored her son when he hurt himself.

A few weeks after Alexander's birth, a health visitor filled in a routine questionnaire to diagnose any signs of post-natal depression — which Marianne has never suffered from.

It is based on a points system and Marianne's score was low, showing that she was a happy mother.

Mysteriously, however, a second identical questionnaire — dated April 30, 2002, when Alexander was eight months old — was also filled in and discovered in Marianne's file.

It had a points tally so high that it made her appear mentally ill and likely to harm Alexander and his brother.

She should, according to the score, have been immediately referred to a doctor for help.

Did someone fake it and, if so, why?

It was just one of many falsifications to records made "with the aim of painting a negative picture of the family and particularly of Mrs Key", says the Leigh Day report.

Marianne was also informed that the traditional Silver Cross pram she had for the children was dangerous, and that the white cloths the babies used to suck as comforters were unhygienic.

She was even told that the traditional stone flag floors in their cottage in the Northumberland hamlet of Coldtown made it an unsuitable place to raise a young family.

So why was this mother vilified?

Why were her children taken into care at all?

Is it possible that it was to help meet the huge hike in Government targets for adoption — designed to stop children languishing in care or foster homes but described by MPs last week as a "national scandal"?

The numbers of those adopted nationally has gone up from 2,700 in the year 2000 to 3,700 in 2004 — an increase of almost 40 per cent.

The biggest rise is among the under fours, exactly the same age group as the Key children when they were taken away.

As Liberal Democrat MP John Hemming said in a special debate in the House of Commons last Friday: "I have evidence that 1,000 children a year are being taken from their birth parents — not because they were being harmed, but to satisfy Government targets."

His views were endorsed this week by the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services.

The highly respected organisation said: "John Hemming is right. Children, particularly newborns, are being snatched away for adoption, and local councils criticised if they don't meet the adoption targets.

"We are appalled by the bias and lack of accuracy in many social workers' reports, and the selective evidence they give to the courts, which then use the information to decide whether a child is removed from a family."

Simon and Marianne believe this may be what happened to them.

"We now think that they wanted four young bonny boys for adoption and to help meet their adoption targets," says Marianne.

"But Northumberland County Council refused to investigate what was happening, even when our solicitors said that my records, and those of the children, had been deliberately falsified.

"The records were used in court against me. After the council finally withdrew the care proceedings, no apology was forthcoming. We hope now that the people who did this to us will be made to answer for it."

What happened to the Keys was terrifying. They had moved to Northumberland from Oxfordshire in July 2001 because they wanted to live near Marianne's sister, Sally Moss, and her husband, Roger, a professor at Newcastle University.

The couples were close friends.

"We loved the place immediately," says Marianne.

"I was eight months pregnant with Alexander when we moved, but I organised neighbourod parties and it was a wonderful time.

The health visitor would come to our home and we would give her tea. I thought she was lonely because she arrived so often."

Niickolas, their eldest boy, was a boisterous child and had just started to walk.

Over the next two years, he banged his head twice — once in front of both his parents when he fell down the stairs, and another time when he was playing outside with his father.

He also hurt his eye by running into the corner of a table at his aunt Sally's home.

The accidents were, insist Marianne and Simon, the rough and tumble of a normal childhood. Their GP agreed.

But the health visitor and a social worker were not convinced.

They officially alerted Northumberland County Council, and later the police, alleging that Marianne "frequently" overdosed her children on the painkiller, Medised.

Marianne denied that she had done any such thing.

But the family had to start an assessment, involving social workers visiting their home and watching how Marianne, a skilled paediatric nurse who used to work at Great Ormond Street children's hospital in London, was raising her sons.

Bewildered, the Key family co-operated fully.

But on July 25, 2003, two health visitors noticed a small bruise on baby twin Alfred's head.

Marianne and Simon said it might have been due to him rubbing his head on the back of the family's pushchair the previous morning.

The bruising was so light that when he was weighed at the local doctor's surgery on the day it happened, the GP did not even notice it.

Marianne and Simon were ordered by social workers to take the children to North Tyneside Hospital.

They were warned that if they did not go immediately the police would be called.

But as they waited at the hospital, Simon received a phone call from the family's solicitor warning him that social services were planning to remove Alfred and put him into care.

Marianne says: "Simon left to meet the solicitor and attend a hearing at Hexham Magistrates' Court, where social workers were asking, successfully, for an emergency protection order to remove the children.

"I stayed at the hospital. I had no idea that a social worker and a woman police officer were already waiting in the wings.

"They arrived in the ward and said that they were taking all four of the children away, there and then. And they did."

Marianne was arrested, taken to the local police station and released on bail.

She and Simon were told to go to a council family contact centre the next morning, a Saturday, where they would be allowed to see their eldest two children.

"The first thing Nickolas said was: 'Mummy, you left me.' When it was time to go, they cried and cried and fought to stay with us. The foster parents, who were also there, were crying too. It was awful."

The twins had been sent to another foster home, where they were looked after by an elderly woman who put them together in a single cot until the Keys complained about the danger of cot-death.

Intriguingly, while in care, George — Alfred's twin — also got a graze on the back of his head from the family's pushchair. It was in an identical place to the one that Alfred had suffered.

The council accepted the foster carer's explanation that the pushchair had caused the injury.

A week later, the Keys were told that the children could return home on one important condition: they had to be looked after by Simon —and Marianne must leave the house altogether.

She was allowed to have two hours of contact with the four children three times a week.

This was later increased to five times a week, under supervision, for the twins.

Reluctantly, Marianne moved to a flat in Hexham.

They were never permitted to visit her at the flat and she never saw them alone.

Simon, meanwhile, had to cope on his own with four children under four years old.

"The elder two boys would sleep in my bed because they were so upset," he says.

"They would wake during the night and cry for Marianne. But I had to hide this from the social workers and health visitors because they would have leapt on it as evidence that I was not coping."

Psychiatric reports on Marianne were ordered by the council.

They showed that she did not suffer from MSBP or any personality disorder.

Crucially, a report on the twins' pushchair, conducted by an independent engineer, concluded that the light bruising could well have been caused, as his parents said, by shopping bags pushing through the fabric.

The case against Marianne was unravelling. The police refused to take any action against her, saying they were content with the parents' explanation about Alfred's bruise.

In January 2004 — almost six months to the day since her children were taken from her — Marianne was finally allowed back home.

In June, at Sunderland High Court, Northumberland Council withdrew its application to keep the children in care.

A few months later, the Keys children were removed from the child protection register.

"We had been so scared of losing the children that we were prepared to run away with them, even secretly leave the country," Marianne admits.

"Simon hid all our passports in a biscuit tin in the cupboard."

Soon after, the Keys sold their house and left for the Cotswolds.

Yesterday, Northumbria Police confirmed: "We have received a number of allegations and our inquiries are ongoing."

Northumberland Council refused to comment because of the active police investigation into its own staff.

The council has made no secret, however, of willingly helping to meet the Government's controversial targets for adoption.

A report last September by the county's children's services department said it was sending "regular and detailed" returns on adoptions to Whitehall.

Over the five years up to last April, a total of 95 children had been adopted after being removed from their birth families.

Although the Keys' children escaped this fate, the damage was done.

Nickolas and Alexander still wake and cry at night.

"We have been told that all the boys may yet suffer psychological trauma from being separated from Marianne at a young age," says Simon.

He adds: "We found the strength to fight back because we desperately wanted to remain together as a family.

"We never want anything like this to happen to others."

Legislation promises tighter controls and support to reach adoption targets

25 October 2001

The Adoption and Children Bill began its journey through parliament last week, heralding the biggest overhaul of adoption law in over 25 years.

The latest version of the bill - which succeeds the bill that fell in the run up to the General Election - includes extra measures on adoption support services, such as a registration system to ensure quality, and a "clear duty" on councils in England and Wales to maintain such services.

The bill also promises stronger measures to stop people adopting from overseas without going through proper assessment and approval procedures, as well as tougher penalties if they get around the safeguards, according to the Department of Health.

Adoption organisations have welcomed the publication of the bill, which will receive its second reading in parliament next week. "Anything that ensures support services are available and functioning has got to be a good thing," said Adoption UK director Philippa Morrall.

But legislation alone would not result in the extra staff and resources needed to meet the government's target of a 40 per cent increase in adoptions by 2005, Morrall added. "There needs to be a public awareness drive. The public does not have an understanding of what modern adoption is," she said.

Other key provisions in the bill include: a new right to an assessment for adoption support for all adoptive families; an independent review mechanism for prospective adopters who have been turned down; allowing courts to set timetables to cut delays in adoption court cases; and the introduction of special guardianship orders.

Health minister Jacqui Smith said: "The adoption register and the national standards introduced earlier this year are key to transforming the adoption process and achieving this target, but an overhaul of existing adoption law is vital to enable us to match many more children with a safe and loving family who will support them throughout their childhood and beyond."

Babies 'removed to meet targets'

By Brian Wheeler

Political reporter, BBC News

Babies are being removed from their parents so that councils can meet adoption targets, MPs have claimed.

The MPs fear a rise in the number of young children being taken into care in England and Wales is linked to pressure on councils to increase adoption rates.

Lib Dem MP John Hemming, who has tabled a Commons motion on the issue, said it was a "national scandal".

The government said the courts decided on care cases but there had to be evidence a child was being harmed.

A spokesman for the Department for Education said there were "no targets relating to the numbers of children coming into care".

But Mr Hemming argued that social services departments are under pressure to meet targets set by government on children in care being adopted.

In an Early Day Motion, with cross-party support from 12 MPs, he warns of "increasing numbers of babies being taken into care, not for the safety of the infant, but because they are easy to get adopted".

In 2000, ministers set a target of a 50% increase in the number of children in local authority being adopted by March 2006.



The government insists it is protecting children

targets set by government on children

“ The decision to bring a child into care must be made on the basis of their best interests ”

Department for Education

According to the latest available figures, the number of "looked after" children being adopted had gone up from 2,700 in 2000 to 3,700 in 2004, an increase of 37.7%.

The biggest rise was in the one to four-year-old age range.

'Scandal'

These figures would be "laudable" if it meant children were being rescued from a life in care, said Mr Hemming.

But he said he had evidence from people who had contacted him, prevented from publication by contempt of court laws, that children were being separated from parents without proper grounds.

And he called on the government to reveal "how many of the children that are adopted would otherwise have remained with their birth parents".

Mr Hemming pointed to figures showing an increase in the number of children aged under one being taken into care.

"A thousand kids a year are being taken off their birth parents just to satisfy targets. It is a national scandal," said the Lib Dem MP.

Transparency

He said children were increasingly placed under "care orders" - where they remain with their birth parents but are kept under supervision by social workers - rather than with foster parents.

And this supervision meant some social workers were "gradually taking them away from the parents, step by step, and giving them to someone else," the Birmingham Yardley MP said.

He called for more transparency in the proceedings of Family Courts and an independent watchdog to scrutinise the work of social services departments.

In a statement, the Department for Education said: "The law is clear - children should live with their parents wherever possible and, when necessary, families should be given extra support to help keep them together.

"The decision to take a child into care is never an easy one, and it is a decision that is taken by the courts."

'Best interests'

The statement went on: "In every case where a child is taken into care on a care order, the courts will have considered the evidence and taken the view that the child has been significantly harmed, or would be if they were not taken into care.

"The final decision on adoption rests with the courts and before a court makes such an important decision it must be convinced on the basis of the evidence that this is the best way to meet the child's needs on a long-term basis.

"There are no government targets relating to the numbers of children coming into care. The decision to bring a child into care must be made on the basis of their best interests."

The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) said it was "dangerous" to suggest children were being taken into care unnecessarily.

Chief executive David Holmes said: "Children come into care for many reasons including parental abuse and neglect. The rise in the numbers of young children coming into care may be explained by a variety of factors including a rise in parental substance misuse."

He pointed out that the decision to take a child into care was scrutinised by an independent children's guardian and the courts. Adoption is scrutinised by the guardian, the courts and an adoption panel.

Mr Holmes added: "If birth parents believe they have had their child taken into care unfairly, they should lodge a formal complaint with their local authority. I believe that this is rare. I certainly do not believe children are systematically being taken into care to meet adoption targets."

Adoption targets were brought in to prevent children in care from waiting months or even years before finding an adoptive family.

System taking hundreds of babies for adoption

By Andrew Alderson, Ben Leapman and Tom Harper, Sunday Telegraph

02/07/2007

Campaigners are to renew an attempt to open up the proceedings of family courts, after figures showed that the number of babies aged less than one week being removed from their mothers has risen almost three-fold in a decade. More than 900 are now being taken and put up for adoption every year.

Until last month, it looked as though the system would undergo a significant overhaul. Ten days ago, however, Lord Falconer, who was then the Lord Chancellor, seemed to have crushed an attempt to make family court hearings less secret. Adoptions of very young children spiralled after targets were set in 2000

Now, with Gordon Brown as Prime Minister and Jack Straw as Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary, legal campaigners are newly optimistic of forcing a change.

Sarah Harman, a solicitor who has specialised in family law for nearly 30 years, said she would step up her fight to open up proceedings. Ms Harman is the elder sister of Harriet Harman, the new deputy leader of the Labour Party and leader of the Commons. Harriet Harman was Justice Minister until last week's Cabinet reshuffle and has supported her sister's campaign.

The total number of children aged under a year taken into council care in England before being adopted has also risen, by a similar rate, from 970 in 1996 to 2,120 last year, figures obtained by The Sunday Telegraph show.

The increases come after the Government set targets for adoption in order to cut the number of children languishing in foster care.

Family courts in England and Wales hear 400,000 cases a year, mostly divorces and child custody hearings following divorces. In 20,000 cases a year, councils apply to the courts to remove children temporarily from parents who are abusive or neglectful, often because they are addicted to hard drugs.

The courts also rule on bids by councils to put removed children up for adoption, which is irreversible. Yet, while criminal cases must be proved beyond reasonable doubt, family courts take decisions on the balance of probabilities and unlike criminal courts, cases are heard in strict secrecy. A mother whose child is taken from her commits an offence if she tells anyone outside a tiny, approved list of people.

John Hemming, the Liberal Democrat MP for Birmingham Yardley, who wants more openness in family courts, said of the latest adoption figures: "We are seeing a massive growth in the forced removal of newborns from their natural parents. Babies are being taken into care merely to satisfy government adoption targets."

In 2000, Tony Blair set a target for councils to increase adoptions by 50 per cent. Town halls were

promised cash rewards for reaching their goals. Critics claim that the target has given social workers a perverse incentive to break up more families. Mr Hemming said: "There are clearly masses of miscarriages of justice, but ministers want to prevent parents from campaigning against them by preventing these parents from talking about their children after a case.

"This is fundamentally wrong. The secrecy in the family courts acts generally to protect misbehaviour by some professionals, rather than to protect children."

The new figures show that, while adoptions of the very young have spiralled, those for children aged seven and over have halved in England, from 100 in 1996 to 50 last year. Figures for Scotland and Wales are not available.

Campaigners were given new ammunition last week by the case of Mark and Nicky Webster, who fled the country to have their fourth baby after they claimed they were wrongly accused of child abuse and had their first three children taken into care four years ago.

Mr Webster, 34, and his wife, 26, from Cromer, Norfolk, were told they could keep their fourth child, Brandon, aged 13 months, after Norfolk County Council withdrew proceedings to take him into care.

The couple had fled to Ireland for Brandon's birth before challenging their county council. Their other children were taken into care after one of them suffered unexplained leg fractures. The council has now conceded that the injuries might have been caused by vitamin deficiency. It said it was no longer relying on the evidence which had suggested that the fractures were the result of abuse.

The Websters are angry that because of the secrecy surrounding their earlier proceedings, the case would not have become public had it not been for their successful fight to keep Brandon. They accept, however, that they will not get their other children back because they were adopted two years ago.

Under the current law, reporters and members of the public cannot attend family court hearings, see documents, review evidence or obtain copies of judgments.

Sarah Harman said: "Social services are the only department other than MI5 who undertake their work in complete secrecy. It's not the welfare of the child that is being protected, it is the welfare of social workers. This cannot be justified.

"Family courts work for the community and should be more open. Family courts are very reliant on expert witnesses and there have been some real concerns about some of this evidence being poorly researched and unreliable." In 2004, she and others set up Families Action for Court Transparency and Openness (Facto).

Facto was formed a year before Ms Harman was found guilty of "conduct unbecoming a solicitor" for passing confidential court papers to her sister. She was suspended from practice for three months and resigned as a part-time judge. The papers related to a client whose daughter was taken into care after alleged abuse. Ms Harman had not revealed the identity of the parent or child to her sister but was punished after it was decided she had misled the court.

Others seeking partial reform of the family courts include Sir Mark Potter, the president of the High Court's Family Division, and Mr Justice Munby, a senior judge. Sir Mark said: "I share entirely the

concern about complaints of secret justice and lack of openness which I really believe the public would be assisted in forming a view about if there were more publicity available. The press seems to me to be the best safeguard of whether propriety is being observed."

Mr Justice Munby said: "The balance currently held between the confidentiality and privacy interests of the parties and the public interest in open justice, is badly skewed."

Lord Falconer's refusal to lift the secrecy surrounding family courts surprised many when he revealed a new discussion document, "Openness in the Family Courts", on June 20. This proposed tighter restrictions on what can be said about cases. He admitted that there had been a change of mind after consulting many groups, particularly young people. "The clear message was that the media should not be given an automatic right to attend family courts as this could jeopardise children's rights to privacy and anonymity," he said.

David Holmes, the chief executive of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering, said: "Social services do not take children into care to be adopted unnecessarily. It is dangerous to suggest that this is happening."

Urgent action on recruitment is needed to meet adoption targets

Posted: 27 September 2001 |

Achieving government adoption targets will require more front-line staff and extra funding, a national conference heard last week.

"There isn't long to get the staff," warned British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering chief executive Felicity Collier. "We need action from the government and we need it now," she said at the conference on adoption targets organised by BAAF and Children Law UK.

She welcomed the Department of Health's commitment to a national recruitment campaign for social workers, but cast doubt on its chances of success, especially given the expected adverse publicity during the Victoria Climbié inquiry.

According to BAAF's figures, the government aims to increase the number of adoptions by 40 to 50 per cent by 2005. This translates into 4,050 adoptions for the financial year ending 31 March 2005.

To meet the target, 4,050 children would need to be matched with prospective adopters during 2003 to allow for the 15 months on average that the courts take to grant an adoption order. Because 13 per cent of children approved for adoption do not successfully find matches, a higher number of children would need to be approved for adoption during the preceding year - about 4,650 during 2002, according to BAAF.

"That's quite a task when you look at the current figures," added Collier. She admitted there were some "potential unknowns" which affected BAAF's calculations, including the impact of the recently launched adoption register on finding suitable families and possibly speeding up the process.

But she remained concerned that the targets could skew adoption work from pursuing appropriate rehabilitative measures to return children to their birth families. Councils could also sideline older or damaged children or those with special needs in order to meet targets.

Meanwhile, a leading children and families charity has warned that adoption targets will lead to an "increased fear" of social services departments.

Family Rights Group chief executive Robert Tapsfield told the conference it was an "unintended consequence" of having targets that birth families would be less likely to become involved with social services departments because of fears of the removal of their children.

The targets would inevitably focus a "disproportionate energy on adoption as opposed to family support", added Tapsfield. This would lead to more adoptions which would be "at the expense of some children [who could] be rehabilitated to their birth families".

Friday, 13 July, 2001,

New adoption targets for councils



Adoption: some experts say it's not always the best option

The present law on adoption, passed 25 years ago, dates from a time when many of the children involved were infants being given up by single mothers.

Nowadays local councils are the main agencies trying to find adoptive homes for children that they have had to take into care.

These are often children "who have been neglected and abused", says the Chief Executive of BAAF Adoption and Fostering.

Difficult decisions have to be made about their lives by over-stretched social workers - sometimes to take them away from deprived families, who just cannot cope.

Best option?

Many experts in the field do not agree that adoption is always a better choice for these children, rather than giving more support to their birth families.

But this government has chosen to build a new system to help children that the former Chair of the Commons Health Committee, David Hinchliffe, describes as "locked up" in the care system.

The pattern of adoption services across the country is another lottery. In some authorities, only 1% of children in care are offered for adoption, in others up to 20%.

It depends on councils' resources, and whether they have been able to find enough new parents.

If councils have to look to other areas, or to voluntary agencies, to find parents, it can cost them as much as £15000 in what is called "Interagency Fees".

It is often cheaper therefore to keep them in care.

Register

With its new bill, the government is setting up a new National Adoption Register of children and parents. It has drafted new Adoption Standards.

But the Director of the campaigning Adoption Forum, Liv O'Hanlon, complains that the government has not

talked about money at all.

It has not promised funds to finance under-performing councils, who will still have to pay thousands for introduction to new parents.

And the President of the Association of Directors of Social Service, Moira Gibb, says setting new targets is hardly realistic, at a time when 85% of social service departments are already over-budget.

She also wonders how soon they could possibly meet the government's target of a 50% increase in the number of adoptions, when last year the courts sent over 20,000 more children into care.