



HOUSE OF LORDS

Children and Families Act 2014 Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Children and Families Act 2014

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Members present: Baroness Tyler of Enfield (The Chair); Lord Bach; Baroness Bertin; Baroness Blower; Lord Brownlow of Shurlock Row; Lord Cruddas; Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon; Baroness Massey of Darwen; Lord Mawson; Baroness Prashar; Lord Storey; Baroness Wyld.
Evidence Session No. 4 Heard in Public Questions 33 - 46

Witnesses

I: Joanne Alper, Director, Adoptionplus; Natausha van Vliet, Chief Executive, Parents and Children Together; Mandy Davies, Assistant Service Director, Parents and Children Together.

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Examination of Witnesses

Joanne Alper, Natausha van Vliet and Mandy Davies.

Q33 The Chair: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to this meeting of the Children and Families Act 2014 Committee. Today, we continue our focus on adoption, following our session last week. This session is being broadcast online and a transcript will be taken. Could we start by asking our three witnesses to introduce themselves?

Joanne Alper: I am director of Adoptionplus. We are part of the Barnardo's group. Adoptionplus is a therapeutic adoption agency, and we have a different model in the UK in that we find families for older children who have experienced significant early abuse and trauma. We provide a multidisciplinary clinical team for our families right the way through childhood until the children are 18. We take an early intervention and prevention approach to support. We have a service for birth parents; we provide therapeutic support for birth parents and birth relatives who have lost children to adoption. We also have a clinical therapy service that is available to other families around the UK for assessments and support.

Natausha van Vliet: Hello, everyone. I am the chief executive for Parents and Children Together—PACT. We are a family support charity based in the south-east of England. We run a number of support services for families affected by domestic abuse and for women who have experienced the criminal justice system, as well as being one of the larger voluntary adoption agencies in England. We also have an adoption support agency.

Mandy Davies: Hi, everybody. I am the assistant service director at PACT.

Q34 The Chair: Thank you very much. We are very grateful to all three of you for coming to the committee this afternoon and helping us to dig a bit deeper into the world of adoption. I have a very general first question about something that we have been quite focused on since we started this inquiry. Could you give your views on why the numbers of adoptions have fallen steadily since 2015? Would you like to say anything about the growing wait between entry to care and adoption?

Joanne Alper: It is complicated, and I do not think there is one reason. The case law with the "nothing else will do" focus shifted things and encouraged a whole rethinking about adoption, particularly the issue of severing the relationship between children and their birth parents. We should be looking at that, because it is such a huge thing. I do not know whether, at the same time or shortly afterwards, regionalisation and the separation of adoption from local authorities and the early planning process may have had an impact. A combination of factors might have contributed to that.

Mandy Davies: I agree with Joanne. I do not think there is one single factor. There is probably a combination. It is quite complex. The rulings in Re B-S and Re B probably had an impact. Social workers and agency decision-makers lost some confidence in making plans for children, and

did not feel as confident perhaps as they were before that placement orders would be made. There are other factors as well. There has been a rise in the number of special guardianships. The pandemic is fairly recent, but that will also have had an impact on the numbers of children being placed for adoption.

The Chair: Could you just elucidate on that last point about the impact of the pandemic on adoptions?

Mandy Davies: We at PACT have seen quite lengthy delays in decision-making. Courts were not able to sit as they did before, so decisions on adoption orders were being delayed. Staff turnover and sickness in local authority social workers also had an impact on planning for children.

Q35 Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: In July 2021, the government strategy was to combine the resources and expertise of individual local authorities in the creation of a regional adoption agency. How is that working? Have you been able to join your resources together in order to have a better impact on adoptions?

Joanne Alper: There have been lots of benefits and lots of positives. We have very good relationships with the local RAAs that we are involved with. Coming together as professionals, focusing on adoption and sharing good practice is really positive. Whether it needed to be done through an agency and all the disruption that caused, I do not know.

There are still challenges. One of the risks is that creating strength here could create a gap between children's services and adoption planning, which means that a lot more proactive work needs to be done going into relationships with local authority social workers and decision-makers.

Now that you have all the expertise on adoption and planning out of the local authority, I wonder what the impact might be, over time, on people thinking about adoption.

Natausha van Vliet: I agree with everything that Joanne has just said. The regional adoption agencies have been created for local authorities. As voluntary adoption agencies, we are outside that. Just like with Joanne, here at PACT we have continued to make great relationships with a number of RAAs in our area. We work in partnership and collaboratively where we can. I agree that there is still some work to do, and it is too soon to say whether they have had a positive impact yet, because not all local authorities are in an RAA. Only a small number—three or four—are yet to become part of an RAA.

That has made it easier for voluntary adoption agencies to work with RAAs. Previously, we had to work with more than 150 local authorities. Now it is with 31 RAAs, which makes collaboration and partnership working easier. There is more that VAAs and RAAs can do collaboratively to look at placements for children, and to look earlier. I know that conversations are already happening there. With the RAA structure, the opportunities for joint commissioning are clear, and we in the VAA sector are really looking forward to seeing how that evolves.

Overall, there have been some positives, but there is still work to do and it is a bit too soon to give a complete judgment on that.

Q36 Baroness Wyld: I want to ask about the fostering for adoption/early permanence arrangements. It would be very helpful if you could tell the committee what has and has not worked well, and particularly whether there have been any unintended consequences, for better or for worse.

Mandy Davies: One of the real positives from fostering for adoption and early permanence is the outcomes for the children. They really are child-focused and mean that children are not moving around and they have a lot more stability. In PACT, over the last five years we have had 34 families, with 33 children placed through the fostering for adoption scheme. We have had one child who has returned to live with their birth family. For all those children, having that stability worked really well for them.

One of the challenges is that, when children return to their birth family, there is an additional support need for the foster carers who were hoping to adopt. There is also a need for more resources and support for everybody involved in the time before an adoption order is made. Quite often, there is ongoing contact between the birth family, the child and the adopters, so it is about managing that, with support for the birth family; for the child, if they are old enough; and for the adopters. It is a challenge and it is complex, but the positives of it are really good for children.

Baroness Wyld: In the way the momentum is set, therefore, is the balance right? You talked about some children going back to their birth parents. Some courts felt that it drove the assumption that children would go on and be adopted. Do you have a view on that? I know that is a very simplified way of putting it, but I put it that way in the interests of time.

Mandy Davies: It is complex. Part of our challenge is preparing carers when plans have not been made by the court yet, and there is that uncertainty. I have found that families we work with do not assume that the child will remain, but the court cases are taking longer and longer and seem to be more complex. Again, that is difficult for carers, who can be nine or 10 months into caring for a child and the decision still has not been made. I see that as quite a challenge.

Natausha van Vliet: At PACT, the amount of support that we have to put in for those families is crucial. That needs to be factored in, but I completely agree with what Mandy had to say.

Joanne Alper: Support in these situations is crucial. For parents who want to develop an attachment with their new baby, it is hard for them emotionally to hold something back. If it does not go ahead, that is a difficulty for them. We need to make sure that we are aware of the emotional impact of this on people, not just the practical situation. That may also have the impact of people not wanting to come forward to

adopt again, if they have tried it. That is the area that we need to focus on.

Baroness Wyld: That is very helpful, thank you.

Q37 Baroness Prashar: Good afternoon. My question is about the Adoption and Children Act register. What has been the impact of the suspension of this particular register on the matching process?

Joanne Alper: Previously, there was a statutory requirement for local authorities to enter the details of children after three months if they were still finding a family for them. There is now no longer that statutory requirement, and local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies are using Link Maker, which is an online system.

In some ways, it is very convenient, because it is a digital system, but there are challenges. In the past, there was a more aspirational, national approach to trying to match children, because all families in England and Wales could see all the children who needed families and you could move fairly quickly. Now, there is more of a regional focus, which may slow down matching. I do not know, but I do wonder.

In terms of the human element, I am aware from an adoptive parent's perspective how difficult it is to have all this information about children. They are often putting themselves forward for children but it does not happen. It is really painful for parents or prospective adopters to have that experience repeatedly. It is a number of things.

Mandy Davies: I agree with what Joanne said. There are some benefits to Link Maker. Feedback from our adopters has been fairly positive on that. With the online Link Maker system, they feel that they are perhaps a little more in control than they were with the register. They had no input into that, whereas, here, they do.

I agree with Joanne that the challenge is that regional adoption agencies can just keep the children in their agencies and not share them with the rest of the people on Link Maker. I do not know, but it could cause some delay for children. We wanted adopters and children to have the opportunity to be matched across the country with the best match rather than the closest match in geography terms and because they are part of an RAA. I see that as a slight challenge with Link Maker, which we did not have when we had the register.

Baroness Prashar: You said that from your observations there have been some benefits and some challenges. Would this area benefit from a bit more research and monitoring of how it is working?

Mandy Davies: Yes, definitely. We know that there is a mismatch at the moment between the children who are waiting and the adopters. There are children who are still waiting for far too long to have adoptive homes, but we know that some adopters are not able to adopt, or it is not recommended that they adopt, children who are seen as being harder to place.

As a VAA, we do not have access to all that, so I could not answer that question completely, but further investigation and monitoring of it would

be helpful. I know that the CVAA is doing a mapping exercise at the moment, on the children and the adopters who are waiting, to see if we can overcome some of that mismatch. It needs a lot of collaboration with the regional adoption agencies to make that work.

Natausha van Vliet: I would just reinforce what Mandy was saying about the work that is being done to understand the waiting adopters in the voluntary adoption agencies across the country. That piece of work is being carried out right now. Once we have its findings, that will help us to consider against the needs of the children waiting. We have a shared responsibility for those children to find them the right families, so that is a good piece of work. I like your suggestion. That is a good point.

Q38 Baroness Blower: We know, of course, that the statutory requirement to give due consideration to a child's religion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background has been removed. Against that background, what racial and ethnic disparities exist in the adoption system? Perhaps you would also like to say whether any legislative change is required, if you have identified issues.

Joanne Alper: We know that the percentage of black and ethnic minority children who are adopted is lower than white children. We are aware that the focus on encouraging more transracial adoptions is very complicated. Although it was previously thought of as a way to encourage more adoptions, we have learned more about issues of identity over recent years, listened more to the experience of young people who have been transracially adopted, and become more aware that it is a much more complicated area than thinking about it purely in terms of legislation.

We need to look at recruiting more black and Asian adoptive parents, but on its own that is not necessarily the answer. When there is more analysis and we identify the children and the needs of the children who we are currently family-finding for, they may have more complex needs, so we also need to look at support as well as ethnicity. It is those issues combined that could help to provide a solution to the difficulty and find more families for children who need them.

Natausha van Vliet: I completely agree with everything that Joanne has said there. As a voluntary adoption agency, PACT has had a significant focus on family finding and recruiting for adopters who are black or from different ethnicities. We brought a specialist role into our organisation back in 2018, and we have seen a year-on-year increase in the recruitment for that, which has been really positive.

I agree with Joanne about the focus on identity. That is really important to factor in, ensuring that there is really good support for adopters and the young people and children throughout their journey. It is really complex and, as Joanne said, sometimes it is not just about ethnicity. There are other, more complicated factors in that that we have to consider. There is a lot of work being done in this area, not just in VAAs but across the whole sector, which is really positive.

Q39 Baroness Blower: I am picking up from all the witnesses that it is not legislative change that is needed, just more understanding and research. Can I ask you about adoption panels? How are they recruited and what is done to ensure that they are diverse?

Natausha van Vliet: We have done a lot of work in the last few years on increasing the diversity of our panel. We actively recruit, as we would for volunteers and staff, panel members with specific experience requirements. We really want our panel to reflect the families and children in our communities, so that is what we are working towards. We have had a real shift there: 43% of our panel are now black or from another ethnicity, 21% are LGBTQ+, 65% are women, and 35% are men. We are really pleased with that progress. We also have an adopted person on our panel and we would like to further develop having people with lived experience on there. That is something that we are very actively looking at. That is for us as an agency. Nationally, I do not know.

Baroness Blower: When you say that you recruit as for volunteers or staff, you mean that you put adverts in the press.

Natausha van Vliet: Yes, we put adverts out, but where they are put is quite selective. They are sector-relevant. We follow safer recruitment practice, as we would for any other appointment.

Joanne Alper: It is really important that we have more younger people on adoption panels, maybe in their 20s, who have had recent lived experience in relation to adoption. Ultimately, adoption is supposed to be for children, so it would be really helpful to have people who have recent lived experience. It is also really important that we start to think about including more birth parents on our panels.

The Chair: I fully understand that you might not know the answer and that we will have to look elsewhere. On this issue of diversity of members of adoption panels, you mentioned some figures, Natausha, but do you know whether national figures are collected? Are you asked to feed your diversity figures up to a national level at all?

Natausha van Vliet: I do not know. From what I understand, we do not have to feed the numbers through. It might be something that Ofsted asks us about when we have our Ofsted inspections. That is probably where that gets picked up. Outside our agency, I do not know.

Q40 Lord Storey: In terms of the adoption panels themselves, you would hope and expect that the adopters were all treated equally. Can we be assured that gay parents or parents from black, Asian and other ethnic minorities are able to adopt in the timescale of white adopters? Do we have any information about that?

Joanne Alper: I do not know whether that data is collected in that way. However, Ofsted is very carefully evaluating timescales for all families. That information could probably be obtained, but it is not currently gathered, as far as I am aware.

Lord Storey: So there is no sense or feeling that, for example, gay adopters are treated in any different way from normal adopters.

Joanne Alper: No, because to be honest we all have very tight timescales in relation to Ofsted's requirements. It is in everyone's interests to try to move families through the system as promptly as possible, and we want them to be available for children as quickly as possible.

In terms of complaints, I have not heard about anything in the system, but if it needs looking at, perhaps information could be obtained.

Natausha van Vliet: I have not heard of anything either. My understanding is that all adopters are taken through the process in a timely way to meet those regulatory requirements, so I would agree with Joanne.

Q41 Baroness Massey of Darwen: You very helpfully talked about the recruitment of adoption panels. Once you have a panel—you have talked about expanding panels to include other people—is it given any collective or individual training to help it with its task?

Mandy Davies: From PACT's perspective, once we have recruited the panel members, they go through an induction and have a yearly appraisal, which is a good way of monitoring. We hold joint training quarterly with social work teams and panel members, which will look at any current research, learnings from when things have not gone right and disruptions, and feedback on where things have gone really well. We have a really good, close working relationship with our panel members.

Joanne Alper: At Adoptionplus, we have a training programme for our panel members, and we have training services, so our panel members also have access to our training services on a range of adoption and therapeutic support-related issues.

The Chair: The committee is very interested in the diversity of the membership of adoption panels, so we will need to pursue it with Ofsted and with DfE, Theo, and ask for more information. But thank you very much for highlighting the issue.

Q42 Lord Mawson: Do families receive the right information and support to assist them post adoption? What is the continuity of engagement with people in the system for families and children? Is there any sense in which you can have a grip on what that might be like for families? Often, when you are dealing with systems of the state, in my experience, there is a chain of people coming in front of you all the time, and there is no continuity. In this particular field, I suspect that continuity and relationships rather matter.

Joanne Alper: I could not agree with you more. How many other times, in terms of government and the state, do you have to look 18 years into the future at how we provide support? It is so important. At Adoptionplus, our model is unique in the UK, in that we believe very strongly in the importance of a longer-term focus on support. We provide our families, like I said, with access to our multidisciplinary clinical team. They are invited in every year for a keeping in touch day, which is a full assessment. That means that we can provide support

before it becomes a crisis. Rather than waiting for people to be in crisis and for families to be on their knees and really distressed, we can be proactive and preventive, and provide support.

It means that they are coming in every year, so they are building a relationship with our staff and our team, and we are normalising support. If you are caring for children who have experienced relational and developmental trauma, it is very likely that they will need support. We want to minimise shame in coming forward. We want to make their relationship with us feel as comfortable as possible, so that they can come and ask for support early on and not wait until it is a crisis.

Our model is fairly unique and is something that we have wanted to trial because we feel that it is a really important way of exploring different ways of providing family placement for children with complex trauma histories. We do clinical evaluations of our families, so that we can share that information with researchers and learn whether this approach helps children as they move through their life and into adulthood.

In relation to adoption support nationally, the situation is very different. The adoption support fund is a wonderful idea; it is about having funds available for families who need therapeutic support. The system is considerably overly bureaucratic, so that social workers who previously would have been supporting families are spending much more time on administrative tasks, which is deskilling for them.

It also means that limited resources are spent on administrative tasks rather than on therapeutic support in the system as a whole. A knock-on effect when things are very admin heavy and social workers feel deskilled is potentially a faster turnover of staff, which in turn will impact on relationships. It is so important, because if families are having to tell their story about what has been difficult, they do not want to have to tell it again to a different social worker every time they phone up and ask for support.

It is not necessarily about spending more but about thinking how we work better with what we have, so that the limited, precious resource that we have is used most effectively where it is needed, which is in supporting families, skilling up social workers, and enabling families who need therapeutic support to get it as quickly as possible.

Q43 Lord Mawson: What changes are needed to modernise and improve the post-adoption contract? Do these changes require new legislation? For those of us who know people who have been adopted and who have been through this, one is conscious that these traumas can go on for a lifetime, into your 70s and 80s. One has witnessed that and observed the disaster of some of that, and the real challenge.

One becomes aware of the fact that human beings are not simply individuals but are connected to a whole range of other people. I think it was Nelson Mandela who said that a person is a person because of other people. I wonder how simplistic the idea is when it is about individuals on a panel ticking a particular ethnic or other box, when human life and

relationships between people and communities are rather complicated. It is rather more than just ticking a Civil Service box. I just wondered what you had to say about that. I worry whether we are asking the wrong questions about human beings and producing many unintended consequences as a result.

Joanne Alper: It is interesting that we have 20-year plans for roads, but a one-year adoption strategy. Thinking much more long term is crucial. We need to look much longer term into adulthood. We need to be thinking about how to enable people who have had traumas and losses in early childhood to have as emotionally healthy adult lives as possible, and be thinking much more longer term when we plan. All our decision-making and our focus on support needs to be thinking absolutely in the long term.

Relationships are crucial there—I completely agree—not just with the system and with local authorities but with people in their lives as they have grown up. It might be friends at school, foster carers, grandparents, siblings or birth parents. Right the way through, often children lose those relationships as they move, and we need to value them more. We need to value their relationship with the social worker as well. So I completely agree, and I think there is room for changes in legislation here.

Natausha van Vliet: I was going to ask Mandy to share some insights on our adoption support. Joanne covered lots of it, but there are some elements that we want to pick up, and then we can come back on post-adoption contact.

Mandy Davies: You were asking about continuity and support. Anybody who adopts through a voluntary adoption agency will get that. We are committed to supporting our families for life. My concern is that that is not always the case for people who adopt through regional adoption agencies or local authorities.

The challenge that Joanne spoke about, which we also see, is that although the adoption support fund is excellent, and we are really pleased to have it, accessing it and the administration of it are really quite a challenge. Voluntary adoption agencies do not have direct access to it, so there are more layers and processes that families have to go through in order to get the support that they need.

In PACT, like many voluntary adoption agencies, we have an excellent support offer, which includes our online adopter hub, adopter champions and therapeutic social workers, so we can support families while they are waiting. The access to that longer-term therapeutic support, which is funded through the adoption support fund, can be a challenge to get for our families.

Natausha van Vliet: Going back to your question about post-adoption contact, it is a really sensitive area that needs incredibly careful planning and resourcing to make sure that any changes made are funded properly and can be delivered consistently.

Joanne talked about birth families. The adopted children and the adopters all need support to make sure that there are positive contact connections. It is important to note that no one size fits all with contact. Different children and families will need different approaches to that, and I am not quite sure how that would be captured in legislation, because not all children will want the same kind of contact.

Colleagues across the sector are very interested in this. The Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies—the CVAA—has an annual conference. We had one last November, where the focus was contact. It was a really interesting couple of days. We heard about some great practice from other countries. Here in England, I know that colleagues are actively looking at what we could do differently. That is really exciting for children, and keeping children front and centre in all this is crucial. The right support for the birth family is also important to factor in.

The Chair: These are also areas that the committee is very interested in and will be wishing to pursue, so thank you for that.

Q44 Lord Storey: Thank you for your insightful and important contribution. In October or November, we will have to produce our report. I wonder what you hope would be the top recommendation for the English adoption system.

Joanne Alper: You want me to say one, but can I say a couple?

Lord Storey: Yes, of course.

Joanne Alper: As we said right at the beginning, adoption has to change. At the moment, it feels like it has been either/or—either SGO and family placement, or adoption. It is either living with family members, or severing relationships. I do not think that it has to be either/or. Going forward, it has to be both. Adoption is a wonderful opportunity to provide stability for children who cannot live with their birth families, but that does not mean to say that they do not have to have an ongoing relationship with birth family members.

Our challenge is how we do that when no one size fits all. In some situations, we need to be really careful. In others, it could be done with less support. The skills required to support those kinds of situations are really high. The resource and time needed is really high to do it properly and safely. It is about being more open and balanced in relation to adoption.

The other issue is the long-term planning, as I mentioned before. We need to have a much longer-term focus on planning and support in general. Like I was saying, in terms of adoption support, we need to be thinking right the way through childhood and into adulthood, and those changing needs over time.

With regard to the challenge in relation to special guardianship or adoption, the key challenge in lots of local authorities is trying to think about which decision is right for the child. I am aware that some decisions are made where babies are placed with people in their 80s. That is not long-term thinking or planning. We cannot be making

decisions that work today. We have to be thinking about decisions for children that last absolutely into the future. Having adoption that includes those relationships and support for them is crucial.

The other challenge or opportunity is how we encourage more people to come forward who may be open to that kind of adoption—a shift from asking, “What can a child do for me?” to asking, “What can I do for a child?” Those are probably my key areas.

Natausha van Vliet: Following on from what Joanne was saying, I would want to see us all ensuring that there is excellent choice for children when we are family finding for them, and that support is in place for those children and families. That long-term view is important, empowering adopters to access the support that they need, when they need it.

Thinking about potential barriers to that, it would be great if we could work together to uncouple the challenges with the adoption support fund and to simplify that so that we make it even more accessible for our adopters with the timeliness of it. We also need to think about the interagency fee and how that is managed across England to help improve the speed of matching children when we are family finding for them and increasing those positive outcomes.

We know that adoption does provide excellent outcomes for children who cannot stay with their birth families, and that long-term impact on children is significant. Those are really positive outcomes, so we need to keep that focus. Neither of us gave just one change, I am afraid, but we are ambitious for these children, so it is right that we cannot narrow it down to just one thing.

Q45 Lord Mawson: People like me worry about the atomisation of our society and how we are putting people into simplistic little boxes, because it makes it neat and tidy, particularly for civil servants and Governments, who love to tick boxes and to decide who I am or who you are on the basis of gender, ethnicity and all that stuff. In my experience, human beings are far more complicated than that, and so are these children. I just wonder whether we are asking the right questions about the complexity that we are dealing with.

I can imagine some older people—I can think of one now—who may well be well into their 60s and would be brilliant with children. I have also come across the young mum of 23 with four kids and who is a brilliant mother, and others who are not. It has nothing to do with being a woman. It has to do with all sorts of other things.

I just wonder whether we are sighted on the real questions about what a human being is and the complexity of that. They used to say that it takes a community to bring up a child, and there is some truth in that, but we are getting lost in atomisation that tries to put us in these simplistic boxes and dehumanises us all in all sorts of ways. I just wonder whether any of you have thought about that. What is the relationship between an individual child and their parents, and the communities in which they live

and are set?

Joanne Alper: Are you thinking about the assessing of prospective adopters? Is that the question?

Lord Mawson: I am thinking about how we think about this matter. We are talking about panels and we are ticking boxes. "Have we got this person?" There are many unintended consequences of those kinds of approaches for the people we say this is about. I have lived with some of them myself and seen them for real. I just wonder how much that conversation is happening about the idea that children are fundamentally social beings, as are parents. They are not individual, atomised little things that we put into Civil Service boxes.

Joanne Alper: I completely agree. That is why, as I was saying, it is so important that we recognise the complexity of a lot of the discussions that we need to have. It would be dangerous to jump to a quick conclusion. We need to make sure that the right people, with the right skills, are involved in decisions, assessments and support. This takes time and training, and it takes us to recognise that we cannot compartmentalise and just tick boxes. We have to recognise that each child and each family, and their situations, are unique. That takes thinking about. We really have to get to know people.

One of the advantages of regionalisation, having social workers in the same field of adoption coming together and thinking about these things together, is that we can think about assessments together. We can learn and share good practice. It is about recognising that this work takes time and skill, and that none of us is an expert. We always have to be open to and curious about the lived experience of the people we are talking to, supporting and listening to.

Natausha van Vliet: The voice of the child and of the adopter is really important in all our decision-making. We as an agency are passionate about making sure that when we are designing services we hear from the people who will be using them.

I agree completely with what Joanne was just saying about looking at the individualities with every family and every child. That is important, and I would like to think that in our sector we recognise that. As we have already been talking about today, we are now shining a light on post-adoption contact. We understand that there is not just one tick box, so that you have letterbox access and that is it. That is not going to be right for every child.

As Joanne has alluded to, in order to get this right we need to take time to consider and to listen to the voices of the people it will impact, and to make sure that we have the right resources and training for staff so that that is delivered well.

Q46 The Chair: Thank you very much. We are drawing to the end of this session now. Could I ask one additional question? It is relevant to issues that we will be looking at in subsequent weeks. What has been the impact of the 26-week timeframe in the family courts on your work in

relation to adoption? Joanne, is there anything that you would like to say on that?

Joanne Alper: There probably is, but could I take some time to have a think about that and come back to you?

The Chair: Yes, of course. Would you be able to perhaps send us a note?

Joanne Alper: Yes, I can send you something.

The Chair: Natasha or Mandy, is there anything that you would like to add, or would you also like to get back to us on that?

Mandy Davies: It might be helpful to come back to you on that when we have had some time to think about it, because we are not directly involved in that process, so it will need some reflection and some thinking time.

The Chair: I quite understand. That would be really helpful, because one of the things we are trying to do is to join up the dots, if you like. When we start looking more at the family justice system, it is one of the issues that we will be pursuing, but I cannot help feeling that there must be some join-up with what is happening in the adoption world.

We have asked all the questions we wanted to, so I just want to give you a last opportunity to say anything that you were very keen to tell us before we bring this session to an end.

Joanne Alper: It would be really good if we could invest more in research. I do not know whether you have any role in that. We were just talking about learning and understanding more. We have put together a proposal for longer-term research into direct contact with birth families, having therapeutic life story conversations between birth parents and children, in order to help explain why they were removed from their families.

We know that, as adults, if we have an understanding of our early trauma experience in a coherent way, it is more likely to lead to good adult mental health. We wanted to look at how that could also be helpful as a really solid foundation for direct contact, and we have had difficulties finding anywhere to get funding, although we are partnering with Cardiff University. It is not just us; I am sure that there is potential for research all over the country. There are a lot of organisations that are really keen to learn and understand more and to trial new things. If we want to get this right, we really have to be very pro-learning and pro-research, particularly longer-term research.

Natausha van Vliet: Just picking up on some threads of the conversation we have had today about continuity and that longer-term view for families, and the commitment that we in the VAA sector make to families for life and how important that is when we are factoring in robust and well-resourced support all the way through, those are crucial.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The need for a longer-term perspective is one of the real takeaways for me from this session.

Joanne, I think it was you who said that we have a 20-year road plan or strategy and a one-year one for adoption, and that one will stay with the

committee. It was a very good way of putting it.

I would like to thank all three of you for your expert witness. It has been very helpful, very interesting and very informative to the committee, so I thank you very much for coming and to say please keep up the good work. Thank you very much.