



HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

Joint Committee on Human Rights

Oral evidence: [The right to family life: the adoption of children of unmarried women 1949-1976](#), HC 270

Wednesday 25 May 2022

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Members present: Ms Harriet Harman MP (Chair); Joanna Cherry MP; Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen; Lord Dubs; Florence Eshalomi MP; Lord Henley; Baroness Ludford; Baroness Massey of Darwen; Dean Russell; David Simmonds MP; Lord Singh of Wimbledon.

Questions 25 - 34

Witnesses

I: Nadhim Zahawi, Secretary of State, Department for Education; Sarah Jennings, Deputy Director of Adoption, Family Justice and Care Leavers, Department for Education.

Examination of witnesses

Nadhim Zahawi and Sarah Jennings.

Q25 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this session of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. We are a committee made up of half Members of the House of Commons and half Members of the House of Lords. As our name suggests, we are concerned with human rights. One of the most fundamental human rights is the right to family life, and that is the subject of the inquiry that we are participating in today. We are looking at the right to family life and the adoption of children of unmarried women between 1949 and 1976. I am very grateful to all of you who have come here today—those women whose children were adopted during that time, and those people who were adopted.

In previous evidence sessions, we have heard from academics who have researched the question of the adoption of children of unmarried mothers in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. We have heard directly from those who, as unmarried mothers, had their children adopted during that time, and we have also heard from people who were adopted, having been born to unmarried mothers during that time.

This is the last session we will hold on this issue before we publish our report, which we expect to do before the House of Commons and the House of Lords rises for the Summer Recess. In this session, we are very grateful indeed that we are going to hear the Government's position on this. We have as our witness today the Secretary of State for Education, who holds responsibility within government for the question of adoption, Nadhim Zahawi. We are very grateful to you, Secretary of State, for coming to give evidence to us today.

Perhaps I could ask the first question. It is hard to think, is it not, of a more important right than that of a mother to be with her child and the right of a child to be with their mother? Yet over these three decades, the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, hundreds of thousands of babies were removed from their mothers because the mother was not married. It is said that these women "gave up" their babies for adoption, but the evidence we have heard has made it clear that that is not right; the babies were placed for adoption. Do you recognise that those mothers did not have any real choice in that matter and that their right to family life, as we understand it today, was violated when their children were taken from them and placed for adoption?

Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to join you today. I hope you will allow me to open with a few words, as Secretary of State and the representative of the Government.

I want to start by saying how grateful I am to the committee for shining a light on this terrible injustice that thousands of women and children have suffered because of past adoption practices over many decades, as you quite rightly have outlined. Through this work you are giving women and their children the chance to have their voices heard. I can assure you—and I want to assure the Public Gallery as well—that we have listened and

the Government have heard the pain that these women, and of course their children, have been put through.

I agree that women were not really given a choice to keep their babies. Societal attitudes and pressure around unmarried teenage mothers were the main drivers for mothers effectively being forced to give their consent. It was those same attitudes that put barriers in the way of single mothers receiving support, for example, on housing and employment. Go leir

I want to take a moment to acknowledge and go into some detail about the widespread and long-lasting impact of forced adoption practices, including the devastating effect on women, but also the children who were adopted, siblings and birth fathers. I heard personally from seven birth mothers involved when I met them in 2016, during my time as the Children and Families Minister in the Department for Education. They were able to tell me about the impact that these practices had on their lives. Of course, through this inquiry we have had even more stories, which are truly harrowing and shocking.

I am horrified to hear the accounts of mothers not being provided with pain relief during labour, being verbally abused during labour and childbirth, and of their sometimes incredibly cruel treatment after the birth. In many ways, it is hard even to articulate this, but this could never have been acceptable at any stage in our history, let alone in the 20th century. The evidence leaves me in no doubt about the huge and unending suffering of the birth mothers. These experiences have made an immense difference to their whole lives and done damage that can never truly be repaired, even when some have been able to reunite with their children.

I would also not forget that there are birth fathers too, as I mentioned earlier, who will have suffered as a result of losing their children. Many of the birth mothers involved have never told their family or friends about losing their child, feeling too ashamed and embarrassed, yet they have done nothing wrong. The pain of a life of secrecy must have been really hard to bear.

I have also heard how many adoptive children have had immense challenges in coming to terms with their past, even where they have grown up in loving new families. I know how difficult it has been for some to find out details about their birth parents. I see how earlier practices of secrecy meant that some children did not know that they were adopted until adulthood, so did not even know there was a birth mother they might search for. Some found out only in later life that their original birth name had been changed. Again, it is that secrecy, and the hidden nature of these adoptions in the past, that has been so destructive.

Many of the children have gone on to be mothers themselves, but have explained their embarrassment and hurt that they were unable to answer the most basic health questions during their pregnancy about possible

hereditary conditions. Even worse than that, some of the children involved

did not go to loving new homes. Instead, they were subsequently abused by their adoptive parents. The details of such abuse are truly shocking to hear and will clearly leave a lifelong legacy for those who suffered that mistreatment. There were knock-on effects for adoptive parents, some of whom were lied to and found out only later that their children were not orphans at all, as they had been told. Other family members too share that pain.

I do not forget those health and social care professionals who now regret any role they played in supporting these adoptions, even though at the time they may genuinely have thought it was right for the children involved.

I just want to say that these practices were simply wrong and I am sorry that this was the case, and more generally for what happened. I recognise the hurt and the pain that occurred and I am deeply sorry that so many went through this ordeal. I acknowledge the profound and lasting impact that this had on them, on their sons and daughters, and in some cases the fathers of their children. I am deeply troubled that they were not only so pervasive but that they persisted for so long. It is particularly distressing to see something so joyful and precious as parenthood being treated as something shameful which must be kept secret, despite those involved having done nothing at all wrong.

Of course, today, society's attitudes are very different. Single parenthood is now completely acceptable, and parents and their children are supported both by society and the state, whether they are single or married, just as they should be. Adoptions today are also very different. The legislative framework and local practice have been transformed since the period that this inquiry is looking at. Lessons have been learned and birth parents and children are now better protected by the courts and doctors are carefully selected, prepared and trained. None the less, this inquiry is playing an important role in giving a voice to those with lived experience and helping us all understand much more about what happened, as well as its ongoing lasting impact.

I look forward to talking to you about these issues further today. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity. I hope that lays out where I am coming from to this inquiry.

Chair: Thank you very much, Secretary of State. Can we go to Dean Russell for the next question, please?

Q26 Dean Russell: Secretary of State, reading the testimonies and being involved in this inquiry is incredibly painful, and I can only imagine how difficult it is for the families and those here today to relive this over and over.

One aspect of this is understanding the size and the numbers involved.

As I understand it, 500,000 children were adopted between 1949 and 1976. Do the Government know or have a best estimate for how many of those

were the children of unmarried mothers, so that we can look at the context and the size of this? Of course, behind each one of those numbers is a person, a life, a family, and potentially a lost opportunity for family life. If you could share those details, it would be appreciated.

Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you very much, Mr Russell. I guess the straightforward answer is that this is a difficult question to answer. Records do not really tell us exactly which adoptions fit this description. I know experts have submitted estimates in their evidence for this inquiry, and these too seem to vary to some extent.

What we do know, Mr Russell, is that adoptions during this period took place for a range of reasons. Step-parent adoptions were particularly common, and account for a significant number of total adoptions. Of the remainder, it is very difficult to say how many fall into the category of forced adoptions, but I understand and completely accept that many unmarried women felt then, or later, that they had no choice.

CoramBAAF's evidence shows us that adoptions peaked at 26,399 in 1968, but had fallen back sharply to around 12,000 by 1976, contrasted with today's numbers, where we had 2,860 adoption orders in 2020-21. I am very aware that your committee has received evidence on the proportion of children born outside marriage who were given up for adoption. Judith Mason of the University of Bristol has indicated that one-third of adoptions in 1976 related to children born outside of marriage, but our understanding is that estimates vary throughout this period.

Q27 **Baroness Massey of Darwen:** Thank you, Secretary of State, and thank you for your very sympathetic introduction. I do well remember those meetings you held with the mothers when you were Minister for Children and Families.

To what extent do the Government and other institutions, such as the Church of England or the Catholic Church, through the work of social workers or so-called moral welfare officers, bear the responsibility of separating mothers from their children?

Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you, Baroness Massey. I guess as far as the state goes, national government was not actively engaged in any adoption arrangements, but legal protections and state support for birth parents and their children were certainly insufficient. Arrangements for adoptions were also much less regulated and protections for children were far fewer. Things are very different now. The Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England and the Salvation Army managed many of the mother and baby homes and organised many of the adoptions. Voluntary organisations such as Barnardo's and Coram also had an important role in providing adoption services, which they still do today, though it now very different.

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Some evidence does suggest that, in this period, there will have been some good practice, with families treated with sensitivity and care, but I know that church groups in this country, and abroad, have apologised for their

role in forced adoptions, where the way women were treated was very far from what it should have been. I think culturally we have come a long way from a world where it was seen as shameful and hidden away, or in many ways forced to be hidden away. We are in a different world.

Q28 Joanna Cherry: Good afternoon, Secretary of State. Thank you for your very important remarks at the outset.

We talked a little there about the churches and said the Government were not actively engaged, but from the evidence we have heard, some of the very unpleasant experiences that these women had come at the hands of healthcare professionals who were part of the National Health Service, for which the Government were responsible at the time. We heard awful stories, which you have alluded to, of women not being given pain relief, women being left for hours after they had given birth with the child crying in the corner of the room and nobody coming to them and nobody cleaning them up, and people being spoken to in a totally inhumane fashion by representatives of the social work department—during those years, we had a functioning social work department, for which the Government were responsible. What do you think of the question of an apology for what has happened by the Government?

Nadhim Zahawi: I hope in my opening remarks I addressed that issue, including some of the healthcare workers. Do I regret what happened? Am I sorry for what happened? Yes, of course. I already expressed that regret when I was Children and Families Minister and I repeat it today. I think society as a whole failed these women and children and they have my deepest sympathy, but I do not think there is anything that I could say that would undo the traumatic experiences of those involved.

I can, however, reiterate what I said earlier, that these practices were wrong and I recognise the hurt and pain that occurred. Again, I repeat that I absolutely deeply regret that so many had to go through such an ordeal, but I do not think there is anything I could say today that would undo that.

Joanna Cherry: It is not so much about undoing it, but the evidence we have heard suggests that an official apology would be appreciated by some of the women that suffered in this way and by their children.

Member of the Public Gallery: Yes, it would be.

Joanna Cherry: We have heard that very loud and clear, Secretary of State. Other countries have done so. For example, in the Republic of Ireland, after its Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation, the Taoiseach—its equivalent of the Prime Minister—issued a full apology.

Member of the Public Gallery: It was a sham also.

Joanna Cherry: We saw in the past that the Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, apologised.

Member of the Public Gallery: That is what we want.

Joanna Cherry: We are hearing comments from the public here today that very much fit with the evidence we have heard that people would like an official apology. I wonder whether you could give us an undertaking today that the British Government will give an official apology.

Nadhim Zahawi: The evidence I have seen I hope supports what I am trying to say here, which is that the Government were not actively engaged. Look at, for example, the child migrant issue from the same period of history, where the Government played a central role in that; it is a very different treatment.

Members of the Public Gallery: Oh!

Joanna Cherry: I do not think anyone is saying the current Government are responsible, but the point I am making is that—

Member of the Public Gallery: Your predecessors.

Joanna Cherry: —many of the individuals who were engaged in these heinous practices and who meted out the very inhumane treatment that these women, and indeed their children, suffered were people who were employees of the state, whether in the social work department or the National Health Service. Other countries have taken—[*Applause.*]

I hear what you are saying, Minister, and I believe that you are sincere, but other countries have taken this so seriously that their Prime Ministers—and in Ireland, the Taoiseach—have got to their feet in public or in Parliament and made a fulsome apology. The evidence we are hearing is that a similar fulsome apology from the British Prime Minister on behalf of the state for what employees of previous government agencies did would be appreciated. What is stopping that happening?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think I tried to address that in both my opening remarks and to your earlier question, Ms Cherry. Do I regret what happened? I am Secretary of State for Education and, as I said, I came to this committee as the spokesman for the Government. Do I regret what happened? Of course I do. Am I sorry for what happened? Yes, of course.

Respectfully, in my view, the difference is around what I said earlier. Look at the case of the Government giving an apology on child migrants, from that same period in history, who were transferred to Australia and other parts of the country. The difference in that case is that the Government played an active role in that migration; we passed specific legislation to introduce that programme.

I think in this case—and this may be uncomfortable to hear—culturally the country was in a different place. There was a culture of blame and

secrecy and being ostracised from society almost. That is the difference here, but as I said—

Joanna Cherry: I am not sure I completely agree with you. I understand the difference and what you saying about child migration to Australia,

where the Government brought the scheme in, but you will have heard of the concept of vicarious liability. These midwives who treated women badly and did not give them pain relief, and left them for hours without any comfort after they had given birth, did that in the course of their employment of our National Health Service, so the Government are vicariously liable for that.

Member of the Public Gallery: And people in the homes.

Joanna Cherry: That is equally true for social workers, who are not employees of religious organisations but employees of the state. We have heard evidence of forcing women to sign consent for adoption. They were doing that on behalf of the state.

I do not understand, given everything you have said, what is stopping your Government putting somebody up in Parliament to make a proper apology. What do you have to lose by doing that? We can hear from the feeling in the room today, and we certainly know from the evidence, that it would be hugely appreciated by these women and their children, and indeed by some of the fathers of these babies. *[Applause.]*

Nadhim Zahawi: I hear what you say. I am going to repeat my words again. I have expressed my deep, deep regret, very publicly and repeatedly, as I do again today, but I genuinely feel that the whole of society failed these women and children, and that is where I come to this from.

Joanna Cherry: Have you been advised that the Government cannot make an apology for legal reasons, such as civil liability? Is that the reason for the reluctance to make an apology?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have not been advised of that. My very strong view is that much of what happened at the time was cultural—

Member of the Public Gallery: It was the Government.

Nadhim Zahawi: Whether it was driven by CoramBAAF or Barnardo's or Church groups, that is what happened. However, I am happy to say that, once you have completed your report, I will write to you with my position on this.

Joanna Cherry: I just want to be clear on this question of whether or not you have been advised that you cannot make an official apology because of civil liability. A note was passed to you there; I do not know if you want to say something more.

Nadhim Zahawi: It says, "Offer to write to the committee". Do not worry, Ms Cherry, I am not hiding anything from you.

Joanna Cherry: I am not asking you if you are hiding anything, I am just giving you an opportunity to add to what you said.

Nadhim Zahawi: You were sort of insinuating that the note said something, but that is fine.

Joanna Cherry: I am glad you have clarified that that is not what the note said. You have said that you are going to write to us, so I suppose I will leave things by asking you to reflect on what a huge difference it would make to these mothers and their children, and indeed some of the dads, if there were to be official recognition. Perhaps you will write to us further about an official apology.

Nadhim Zahawi: I will write to you.

Member of the Public Gallery: If the Government are not willing to apologise, are they willing to put things right?

Chair: We are going to move on to some of those issues in a moment, but I want to follow up the points that Joanna Cherry was making. I emphasise that, from the evidence that we have heard, these mothers have had a lifetime of pain and suffering and are owed the whole world of apologies because they did nothing wrong. Being the same age as them, I remember there was no sex education, there was virtually no birth control, there was no abortion, and there was a whole world of secrecy and shame. To then be told for decades that they "gave up" their baby, and that this would give the baby a better life, all of this was untrue and compounded the suffering of the separation.

There are lots of things government cannot do, but there are some things that the Government are in a position to do and can do. It seems to me that this is quite a small and easy thing for the Government to do—but it is a huge thing to recognise officially what you already said in your very empathetic comments: that what happened to them was absolutely dreadful and wrong and we would never dream of letting that happen today.

Because you are the Government—there is no other Government—it kind of falls to you to make the official apology. I ask you to reflect on that. There is nobody else; we do not have a president or somebody else who can give an apology on behalf of the state, not just for what the state did but for what happened. Perhaps you could rethink that and ask whether you can do a bit of good here as a Secretary of State. There are many things that are very difficult to do good on when you are in government, but if this is something that will make a big difference, and is a small thing for the Government to do, perhaps you can think about that. There is nowhere else to go.

Nadhim Zahawi: I try every day of my life, Chair, to do some good.

Chair: You do, and I appreciate that you understand the situation.

Member of the Public Gallery: These are our memories, every day of our lives.

Chair: You have met the mothers and you have heard from them, and you understand that they did not give up these babies for adoption but that they were taken from them. Can we hear back from you on that?

In the meantime, we are very grateful to Sarah Jennings for coming with you today, as the Deputy Director for Adoption, Family Justice and Children's Rights in your department.

Q29 **Baroness Chisholm of Owlpen:** There is an argument that support for these individuals, who continue to be affected by the adoption practices from 1949 to 1976, has been patchy, to say the least. Are you able to outline what the current adoption support services are for those individuals? Could these services be improved?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will let Sarah come in on this as well; she has sat here very patiently. Obviously support is available to those who need it through the NHS.

Members of the Public Gallery: There is none.

Nadhim Zahawi: However, I recognise that some of the mothers and children involved have sometimes had very long waits for therapeutic support to help come to terms with the impact that the practices had on them. [*Interruption.*] The commitment I will give you is that we are committed to improving the capacity of the service to provide mental health services, as part of our Covid recovery programme. This will help improve access for the mothers and adopted adults who need this.

In the *NHS Long Term Plan* there is a commitment to spend on mental health services that will grow faster than the overall NHS budget. It is supported by extra investment, which will be at least £2.3 billion a year for mental health services by next year. This will increase capacity, with another 27,000 mental health professionals coming into the system. Our aim is to ensure that the NHS supports an additional 2 million people who will need that support. Access to therapy will be expanded, so that an additional 380,000 people with the most common disorders, such as stress, anxiety and depression, come through as well.

The other area is around consulting on the Ofsted requirements, which I think your committee has heard about. I do not know whether you want to say something on that, Sarah.

Chair: I have to say that I know it is the hardest thing to sit in silence when you are hearing somebody talking about your life and your experience and you know better than anybody the situation and what it has cost you. It is hard to hear somebody else talking about it when you

are not able to interrupt. However, it is my responsibility to keep order in the committee today. The purpose of today is to hear from the Secretary of State and from his official. We will produce our report, taking into account the evidence we hear from the Secretary of State and his official and also what we have heard from you, not just in your evidence session

to us but what we have heard at the round-table session, when so many of you came to speak to us. I know it is a very difficult thing not to interrupting, but if you could try to bear with us, I would appreciate it.

Member of the Public Gallery: Will be allowed to ask questions at some time?

Chair: I am afraid that the questions have to come through the committee members. Thank you for your forbearance.

Sarah Jennings: Thank you, Baroness, for the question. The Secretary of State was just beginning to touch on the issue that we know has been raised through evidence to this inquiry about the barriers to accessing support because of the requirement that professionals providing therapy and support that relates to adoption services must be registered with Ofsted. We are aware that this has been raised as one of the reasons why people are struggling to access support. I think the Secretary of State was just going on to say that this is an issue that we are very keen to look at.

Nadhim Zahawi: Currently, the requirement that services are Ofsted registered can be a barrier to adult adoptees accessing and receiving support. I want to try to get rid of any bureaucratic barriers where this will, I hope, improve service delivery. However, we need to be careful that we do not sacrifice quality, which cannot be compromised in any way.

I will give you my commitment and pledge that my officials will look at the options as to how we do this. We will consult very shortly on removing the requirement for providers of support services for adult adoptees having to register with Ofsted. In practice, that should make it much easier, and also more cost effective, for these providers to run their businesses. It will mean that support is more accessible for the adults who need it.

Q30 **Baroness Ludford:** I am a Liberal Democrat Member of the House of Lords. You have pre-empted my question. Like others, I appreciate the empathy that you have shown, referring to injustices and pain, and to the huge and unending suffering from these traumatic experiences.

You have emphasised the importance of the ability to access therapeutic counselling and say that you want to try to get rid of the bureaucratic hurdles of the Ofsted registration process without compromising quality, and that you are going to consult. First, can you give us an idea of timescale of that consultation? Was it already in the pipeline before this

inquiry prompted you to think about that? Secondly, does removing altogether the need to register with Ofsted contain some dangers of quality dilution?

Nadhim Zahawi: Baroness Ludford, thank you for the question. Because it is a regulatory matter, we need to consult on it. However, we have been following your deliberations and evidence here as well. When I looked at this with my officials, we thought that we should move on it quite quickly because it is something that we should be able to do reasonably well and rapidly, and in a way that does not compromise quality. I think we can do that, and it will, I hope, inject more capacity in the system.

Sarah Jennings: We are already in active discussions with Ofsted colleagues about it. I think your point about the balance of risk and how to avoid compromising quality, as the Secretary of State alluded to, is why we are very keen to make sure that we consult and that we balance those risks and seek views from the sector as well.

Baroness Ludford: Will that be soon?

Sarah Jennings: I hope so.

Chair: There have clearly been decades of unmet need in this respect and obviously you are addressing it now, as you have told us. Do you have a budget for this? Are you confident you will be able to resource this?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think so. My department will be spending £86 billion a year by 2024. It is a big department and I think we can do this and do it well.

Chair: Perhaps when you write to us you can give us a sense of whether there will be any ring-fenced budget of any sort and what sort of scale it might be on. For these services to be high quality and accessible to those who need them, there obviously need to be funding streams behind them.

Nadhim Zahawi: I do not want to repeat myself and repeat the numbers, but I can send you the numbers on the increased investment in the NHS that I outlined earlier.

Chair: If you could, you should be quite specific about it.

Q31 **Florence Eshalomi:** Good afternoon, Secretary of State. To echo my colleagues' comments, some of the people who held the round-table session with us are here today, including my constituent, Ann Keen. You can hear their passion and anger, and I think an apology would go a long way in addressing some of this hurt and pain, Secretary of State.

One of the issues raised, and you touched on it earlier, is that because adoption was seen as taboo, a shorter birth certificate was issued, which did not detail the adoption. An adoption certificate replaced the original

birth certificate and it just stated "adopted". Should an adopted person's birth certificate and an adoption certificate make clear the identity of the child before and after adoption?

Nadhim Zahawi: I recognise how important it is for adopted children to understand their identity, including to know their birth name, where this has changed. Birth parents will often want to trace their children. I also completely appreciate that tracing can be quite difficult, especially for birth parents from this period of time.

It is of course right that new adoptive names are not routinely put on original birth certificates to protect children. However, we have introduced processes to aid tracing where both parties want this to happen, including for mothers and children from this period. Adoptive children over 18 and birth parents can add themselves to the Adoption Contact Register, which is held at the General Register Office. The Registrar-General may disclose that information from the Adopted Children Register and the Adoption Contact Register to the adopted-out adult in order for them to obtain a certified copy of their birth certificate.

For birth mothers or other relatives, there are intermediary services, and they can help find adopted children and establish if they want contact with their birth relatives. They are also able to provide essential support and counselling as well.

Chair: Thank you. We will go to David Simmonds for the next question, following on with the issue of intermediary services.

Q32 **David Simmonds:** Good afternoon, Secretary of State. Perhaps I will just start on a point that has been raised by a number of members. The adoption Act which brought to a close the period that this inquiry covers was passed about a month after I was born. I appreciate there is an issue about direct responsibility, but I think it was very clear from the evidence that I and others heard that an apology on behalf of the state for the fact that this happened on our watch would be appreciated. That is not to say that it is finding fault with the conduct of people who have done a lot to try to resolve this situation, but a recognition of the impact that it has had.

The specific question I would like to put is this. We have heard from a lot of individuals who have been trying to trace birth relatives that the process takes a very long time and that people are not always treated as a priority. Given how long ago this period is now, and that many of the mothers in particular are now quite late in their lives, time is becoming acute. What, in your view, might the Government be able to do to assist with making that process quicker?

Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you for that, Mr Simmonds. We hear mixed views from adult adopters. Some services are excellent and very helpful. Their work obviously can be complex and does take time, particularly because of the challenges we have discussed around the historic record issue. I accept that, for many of the mothers and children involved, they

will need support provided quickly, to your point. As you say, for some, time is not on their side.

Intermediary services are, as you know, because you are an expert in this area, delivered locally by a range of local organisations. It is important to note that regulations govern the way that intermediary services operate and they must obviously be registered with Ofsted, which we have just discussed. That means that Ofsted reports publicly on their performance, which I think is a good thing. Transparency in data is our ally in reforming complex systems. Intermediary services provide a valuable role, but I expect them to be helpful, to respond quickly and to focus on easy access to support. I want to know if they are not doing these things and we will absolutely act on it. Whatever recommendations your committee makes around intermediary services, I will absolutely look at that.

Q33 Lord Singh of Wimbledon: Good afternoon, Secretary of State. I am Indarjit, a Cross-Bench Member of the House of Lords. I was at the round-table sessions, and we heard movingly from mothers who were affected by adoption practices in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and who felt particularly distressed at not knowing whether their child was alive. What process might be put in place to at least notify mothers of the death of their child?

Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you very much, Lord Singh. I am very familiar with your voice from Radio 4's "Thought for the Day".

I understand how soul-destroying it must be for birth mothers not to know about their children's outcomes and whether they are even still alive, as you quite rightly point out. I guess where it is really difficult is that I cannot see how this would be possible, when no single organisation or person would have the necessary information.

Let me try to give you an example. The adoptive parents may not have the details of the birth parents to tell them if the adopted child has died. Sharing information of this nature in any structured or ordered fashion will be extremely difficult, but I absolutely commit to you that I will look at any practical suggestions that can be done. If something comes through your inquiry that you think could help us to do this, I would certainly be interested in looking at it. I give you that commitment.

Lord Singh of Wimbledon: That is helpful, but from the evidence we heard, it seems that people felt that the details were available and it just required effort to get them out and to use them.

Nadhim Zahawi: If you can share with us any evidence of how that can be done and structured at scale, I will happily look at it. I have not seen anything since I have been back in the department as Secretary of State, or when I was Children and Families Minister, to show how I could do this in a structured way that would allow that to happen.

Lord Singh of Wimbledon: We were told that much of the evidence is available, but we need to take it up further. Thank you.

Nadhim Zahawi: My pleasure.

Q34 **Chair:** I will put the final question. We have heard about a woman who was unable to visit her mother overseas, in Australia, which gave an exemption during Covid for relatives; she did not count as a relative, although she was going to see her actual mother, because of the adoption process. There are a number of barriers like this. What can the Government do to help overcome these very painful barriers?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have heard the same thing. This was particularly an issue during the global pandemic and the Covid challenge. Regulations were clearly delivered rapidly and created these anomalies and restrictions. I want to make sure that that never happens again. I am very happy to look at any practical suggestions that your inquiry delivers, so that we can co-ordinate around the world. If we are ever again in a situation like the one that we found ourselves in over the past two years, we would very quickly deal with this issue.

I suspect it is one of those things that, because of the speed at which countries had to lock down, was an oversight, which should not happen. I will happily take that up with the Transport Secretary and other countries to see how we can do it better—though I hope we will never be in that position again, now that we have the vaccine and the ability to produce the new variant vaccines at scale.

Chair: Secretary of State, thank you very much indeed for coming. I appreciate that you have come in person and have not sent a junior Minister, and you have come on the date that you said you would. That is proper accountability to Parliament on an issue of huge importance. I know you are here because you recognise that, so I very much appreciate that. I thank your department for its written evidence and for attending previous evidence sessions and the round table, and for helping you reply to the additional issues that we have raised.

We will be producing a report on this later this summer, which will deal with what happened at the time. We will be considering whether we should be calling these women “birth mothers” at all; are they not just “mothers”? We should also be considering the language used and whether we should talk about “giving up” for adoption, which implies agency. The evidence we have had is that there has been no such agency and no such choice. We want to set the record straight, commensurate with the evidence that we have heard, and to make practical proposals to the Government if there are things that we think, in practical terms, the Government can and should be doing, even so long after the event, which will make a practical difference. That will happen in our report in the summer.

That concludes this evidence session. I thank all of those who have attended and who have also given us evidence.