

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 Massey of Darwen; Baroness Prashar; Lord Storey; Baroness Wyld.

Evidence Session No. 11

Heard in Public

Questions 103 - 112

Witnesses

I: Adefunke (Ade) Larigo, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Agency Connection; Yoni Ejo, Chief Executive Officer, Diversity Adopt.

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Examination of witnesses

Adefunke Larigo and Yoni Ejo.

Q103 **The Chair:** Good afternoon, everyone, and a very warm welcome to this session of the Children and Families Act 2014 Committee. I thank everyone for joining us, particularly our two witnesses. We are very much looking forward to hearing from you this afternoon. I apologise for the fact that we are starting a few minutes late due to one or two technical issues. I remind everyone that this session is being broadcast online and a transcript will be taken. I will start by asking our two witnesses to introduce themselves briefly.

Yoni Ejo: I am the CEO of Diversity Adopt, which is an independent organisation. I will tell you a bit more about that in a second. I am a social worker with 30 years-plus of experience. I am adopted myself—I was transracially placed at 18 months—and an adopter of two young ladies. I am an adoption coach and I run a membership to support adopters.

Adefunke Larigo: I am the CEO of Agency Connection, a service I set up about a year ago to help adoption and fostering agencies to recruit panel members, particularly those with an interest in diversified panels. I am also a social worker. I have worked in the fostering industry and adoption sector for a while and have been qualified for nearly 20 years.

Q104 **The Chair:** Thank you. It is great to have you both here this afternoon. The purpose of the panel this afternoon is to give the committee an opportunity to explore in a bit more detail the racial and ethnic disparities in the adoption system. You are obviously both steeped in this area, and the committee is looking at ways to increase diversity because we have been concerned about some of the issues that we have found already.

I will kick off with a very general question to you both. What do you feel are the main reasons for ethnic disparities in the adoption system, particularly the increased waiting times for black and minority ethnic children?

Adefunke Larigo: I did recent work with Home for Good on recruiting black adopters, because we are particularly trying to raise the profile of adoption among the black community. Some of the feedback I got from that piece of work is that sometimes black children might not be on their own; they might be in a sibling group, and sometimes adopters only want to adopt a single child. Therefore, when it is a sibling group, sometimes they are left waiting longer.

Some black children also tend to have additional needs, and adopters tend to want to have a younger child. A lot of the time they want a baby, so an older child with additional needs is perhaps not as attractive when people are looking for a child to adopt. That adds to the reason why children are—I do not want to say left waiting, but they are not adopted as quickly as we would like them to be.

Of course, there is also the issue that there are not enough black adopters anyway, partly because work needs to be done to regain the trust of the black community, given some of the historical reasons, which I am sure you have heard, so I will not take our time going over them. There needs to be a piece of work to repair those relationships so that people in the black community feel that they can trust authority, the Government or government agencies, including adoption agencies. Sometimes that puts people off.

Black people are very interested in adopting, and many families take on children who are not their birth children anyway. A lot of that goes on in the community. You will find that if something happens to a parent, many families will automatically receive the child as part of their extended family and will look after them. I have grown up in a family where it was not just me and my parents; there has always been a cousin, aunty or somebody who lived with us. I can barely remember any part of my life where it has just been me, my siblings and my parents. That is very common among the black community.

The black community is very eager to look after children who need looking after, and I suppose sometimes those numbers are not taken into account, because they are not necessarily reported as a child in need as somebody is obviously already looking after them. There are the children who are left waiting, but there are also children who are already being looked after and we do not necessarily have the numbers for them.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is helpful. I was certainly struck by the fact that black children made up 7%, I think, of looked after children but only 2% of those adopted. You are starting to throw some very helpful light on that. Yoni, what are your thoughts on this area?

Yoni Ejo: Yes, absolutely. There is impact on each part of the system, essentially. Black families, when the child is living at home, are under strain. They are disproportionately more likely to be impacted by physical ill health, mental ill health, poverty, homelessness, the whole gamut of things that happen to families that then cause children to be removed in the first place. There has

also historically been an effort to provide same-race placements for children and young people, but perhaps not recognising that the same impacts that happen for black families when the children remain in the family also impact on the reasons why black families struggle to incorporate a new child under adoption regulations.

Sadly, there is an impact on unconscious bias, so perhaps people might not automatically think of a black child, particularly a black boy. As we know, African boys wait significantly longer than any other child. We are all impacted by the images that we see in the media. Fortunately, I have seen a shift more recently, but historically we have seen quite a lot of stereotypes of boys and black boys, which then makes people a little more reluctant even to consider it.

The whole industry of adoption agencies and adoption social workers is also predominantly white. They are predominantly looking at and communicating to white communities, so they are not always that good at making black families feel like they are included in some of the advertising, some of the systems. I have worked as a recruitment manager for a local authority, which included fostering and adoption. I found it helpful to have some targeted campaigns, because then you start to speak to communities and find out what messages will encourage people to perhaps think about it when they had not previously.

It is quite complex, but it needs some concerted effort, because doing the same as we have been doing up to now will not encourage black families to put themselves forward.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You have raised a lot of very important issues, which I know some of my colleagues would like to pursue as we move through.

Q105 **Baroness Blower:** I think both our witnesses may feel that they have covered some elements of this question, but quite specifically we would like to hear your view on what the impact has been of the removal of the requirement to consider ethnicity. Then, very straightforwardly, we would like to hear whether you think that was the right thing to do. I should tell you that we have already covered this to some extent and we have had a variety of views. We are really interested to hear from you.

Yoni Ejo: I think that the legislation was perhaps created to solve a problem that I am not convinced actually existed. I am not convinced that there was research or significant evidence that children were being delayed in finding families just because of political correctness or however we want to describe it. It perhaps

came out of some very high-profile discussions in the press that made people feel that that might be going on, but working in the industry I have not seen that. What I have seen is people struggling with the variety of needs of children and young people, including race.

I think the impact of it was to make social workers and adopters a bit reticent to talk about race, and that has been quite damaging, because we need to talk about it. If we are placing children and young people with black families or white families, we need to help them understand the context of race and how that will impact on their child. I have talked to a lot of white adopters who have adopted transracially. It is a real wake-up call for them, because there has been no impact on their life or need for them to understand the impact of racism on their child in a very practical and sometimes quite hurtful way. That is a new experience.

Sadly, the legislation almost closed down the conversation. I probably do think, if I am honest, that race almost eclipses a child's every other need, but only because it has such ramifications for every aspect of a child's life. That is not to say that you prioritise that over anything and anyone else, because I very much support transracial adoption, despite its challenges. Sadly, the UK does not have the figures, but I know that in the States black families would have to adopt at four times the rate of white families currently to be able to meet the needs of all the black children in the system. If we do not incorporate transracial adoption, a lot of children will not have a family. Having a family has such a big impact that we need to maximise the opportunities that every child has to have it. Sorry, that was a long answer.

Baroness Blower: No, that was a very interesting answer. Thank you very much. Ade, perhaps we could hear from you.

Adefunke Larigo: To be fair, this is not my area of expertise, but, looking at the figures, I understand that the removal from the legislation does not seem to have made a lot of difference, because at the end of the day the children are still waiting. I am struggling to see how it has benefited one way or another. That is my response. I hope that is clear.

Q106 **Baroness Bertin:** Hello to you both. My question is essentially: how could more adopters from different backgrounds be encouraged to adopt? How could they be recruited? You have both touched on this in previous answers. I would particularly like to ask Ade, because she talked about what more work in this area could look like. Ade, could you expand a bit on how you think we could make that work better?

Adefunke Larigo: I started talking earlier about the black adopters pilot. I was involved in the first one, and there has been a second one, which I did not work on. However, I spoke to some of the people who wanted to adopt on that pilot. Lots of people came forward, and I was so excited when I was working on this project because I thought that we would be able to make such a difference. We felt like we were raising awareness about adoption and many people responded, but the conversion rate was quite poor and I felt quite disappointed.

One reason for this is that many people who came forward did not have the bedroom space to be able to adopt a child. The legislation does not say that you need to have bedroom space, but the reality is that when applicants go through the process it is an expectation. That created a barrier that I did not foresee before the project started. I would say that I was naive in thinking that we would raise awareness, that there would be lots of people, and that, I suppose, we would be able to have an impact on children who were waiting, but it did not turn out that way. That is one of the barriers that I observed in that project.

I have been working as part of the national adoption strategy and we have been doing lots of work nationally educating social workers, I suppose. I think my colleague Yoni touched on it earlier. As it stands, there are more white social workers in the adoption system. There is a need to target and recruit black social workers and to help social workers in general to understand cultural humility and faith. It is important that my colleagues understand it; well, not just my colleagues, that we all understand it, because when we are working with a group of people and we do not understand their culture, we are not taking on the whole person. Therefore, some of the recommendations that we are making may not be as whole as they could be.

There is a need to work with social workers, there is a need to recruit more black social workers into the system, and there is a need to work with grass-roots community agencies such as "My Family Group", I think it is called. Home for Good is another agency that works alongside people's faith and understands how some of these communities operate. There is a need for the Government to work with those agencies, because they have the reach and are already doing a lot of work in those communities. There is definitely a need to reward them financially and help with the work that they are doing so that they have a lot more reach than they have already. Does that answer your question?

Baroness Bertin: Thank you. That is a very full answer. Yoni, do

you have anything to add to that, particularly about areas of best practice that we could look to where it is working?

Yoni Ejo: There is some innovative work happening, probably more in London, but there is not one place where I could say, "Yes, that's working". That is partly because different agencies and different areas have different needs. I do not think it is helpful to do a blanket, "Yes, we want more adopters from a particular general ethnicity", if we do not have the corresponding children who could meet their needs.

It is important to look at the children who are waiting and try to engage with those communities as a service or as an RAA. There used to be situations where we would provide adoption support grants or ongoing adoption support for children who were considered to be hard to place, which at that point encouraged black and ethnic minority children. I am not sure that that happens as much now as it did five to 10 years ago, but we need to recognise that the families we want to encourage are the ones who are disproportionately economically disadvantaged, and we sometimes might need to provide additional support. As Ade mentioned, a lot of children are in a sibling group, which is a lot to take on. I cannot remember the exact statistics, but I know that, on average, black people earn less than white people—I think it is between 60% and 70% of what white people earn on average. We cannot pretend that that does not have an impact when we are doing the assessments and the due diligence.

I absolutely agree with Ade that RAAs and agencies need to include voluntary agencies and community agencies, because they do not have the expertise in them to be able to engage with communities in a way that will be proactive and successful in some situations.

Baroness Bertin: Thank you both for those answers. They were very helpful.

Q107 **The Chair:** Ade, I think you used the term "cultural humility", which I read about in a briefing that I read over the weekend. Could you expand on that term, very briefly?

Adefunke Larigo: Yes, no problem. I have had the opportunity to attend a session on cultural and faith humility. It is basically helping us to understand that when you come into a situation you do not understand the person's culture. It is ways of asking questions that help your understanding as the person who may be assessing or the professional in that situation. It gives you techniques that you may not have already thought of and helps you to be mindful of the language that you are using so that you are

careful not to exclude somebody or to assume that you know about something when you really do not.

It is about culture, and it is also about faith. It is when you are in a situation where you do not know a lot, and being mindful that you are not the expert, because the person you are assessing is the expert of their situation. It is their story, so it is for you to tease it out, understand it and record it accordingly, rather than assuming that you understand it all and misrepresent them.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is really helpful and I am very grateful to you.

Q108 **Baroness Wylid:** Hello to both of you. They have been very interesting answers so far, and this question leads on from them. I want to talk in a bit more depth about adoption panels. Obviously you cannot comment on every one, but in broad terms how effectively do you think they are working? Do you think they are sufficiently diverse, in every sense of the word, to address some of the issues that we have been talking about?

That is the first part of my question. I am afraid there is a second part. It would be very helpful if you could tell us how the process works and whether you think that any tangible changes need to be made in setting any rules or making changes to compulsory membership.

Adefunke Larigo: As I explained earlier, I set up Agency Connection. What I omitted to say is that I also work on panels. I have been doing that for about eight years or so. Before I became a panel member for the very first time, it was a difficult task. It took me about two years to be able to navigate the system, to understand who I need to contact, who I need to speak to, what skills I need and all that. I am a social worker, so you would think that I should be able to navigate these things, but it is really difficult. I know now that it is because the agencies do not necessarily advertise if there is a space on the central list, because a lot of them look to recruit in their network. If you already have people who are panel members and you need to recruit a certain type of person, you simply ask them. It makes it difficult for people who do not know about becoming panel members to find out how to become one.

To your question about how diverse the panels are, my observation is that they are not very diverse. That is why I set up the service I did: because I was trying to support the agencies to become diverse, and I do not mean just ethnically. I set it up, because originally I observed that there was a lack of ethnic diversity, but on the journey of serving the agencies I have realised that it is not

just about ethnic diversity. There are also not a lot of men, for example, on panels. People with lived experiences are not very well represented on panels. Young people are not very well represented on panels.

I am currently doing some work with the RAAs, and we conducted a survey. Some of the feedback from that survey suggested that about a third of the agencies did not feel that their panels were diverse. I do not know the exact numbers, but many of them did not have representation of young people. People of 18 to 25 are hardly represented on panels. There are some, of course, but not compared with number of women between the ages of, say, 45 and 56. They make up around 40% of panel members in the RAAs. So no, I do not believe that the panels are diverse. More work needs to be done with panels to encourage diversity.

Baroness Wyld: That is a hugely helpful answer. You said that the agency just holds on to its central list and goes to that. Talk me through the process for establishing that central list. Does the agency draw it up itself, does it sit with the local authority, or is it a patchwork?

Adefunke Larigo: I imagine that when the panel was formed it recruited the panel members. Obviously I do not know the process for each agency, but my experience is that many agencies perhaps ask ex-colleagues or people they know, basically, to join and to become panel members. That is often how the central list is made up: you start with who you know and it tends to remain that way.

Do not get me wrong; some agencies advertise when they need new panel members, but many agencies have reported that they largely look to their network. They ask people they know to join the panel. That tends to be the recruitment process. Of course I am not suggesting that they simply bring them on and do not interview them or anything. I am just saying that they default to asking those people to apply and then they take them through whatever the recruitment process is. That tends to be the process.

Baroness Wyld: Thank you, Ade. That is very helpful. I am sorry I do not have more time, because I would love to ask you more, but I want to come to Yoni for her views, please.

Yoni Ejo: I have sat on a variety of panels for more than a decade, probably, and they are predominantly white female. I certainly agree with Ade. Sometimes authorities or agencies can look to get more diversity in their panels, but they do not necessarily look in the right places. We need to value the time that people have. A lot of panels are not paid, so you are almost guaranteeing that

whoever wants to be involved is either retired or affluent, because somebody of working age is probably unlikely to be able to dedicate the time. It is time-consuming. There is a lot of reading and a lot of preparation to do.

I think the same is true for young people. Sometimes panels will have one young person, which is valuable, but young people are sometimes not sufficiently supported in the day-to-day panel arrangements. They might find that there are few young people who want to sit on a panel for an extended length of time. I often think that it might be better to have a couple of young people so that they have support for each other and will feel a bit more confident perhaps about challenging something that comes through the papers.

Having sat on panels and presented to panels, you get a bit of a sense. Some panels will pick up certain issues. Obviously, there are people who have certain roles, like health, and will raise those things in their roles, but you get to know. Somebody will ask about training, so you need to ensure that that is covered.

Q109 **Baroness Massey of Darwen:** I was going to ask this as part of my main question, but you have raised issues that are so real that I think I must ask it now.

I would like to know where the voice of the child, the voice of young people, is in all this. I do not see much. We have had witnesses before who have talked about young people and said that the experience of being transracially adopted comes at a cost to their sense of belonging and to knowing where they fit into the world. This is very serious. You have talked about young people on panels. What about young people who have gone through the system and have had adoption experiences that are very valuable to hear about? Where is their voice coming from? Are we listening to young people in all this? Ade, you are nodding.

Adefunke Larigo: That is a really good question, because this is exactly part of the issue. I talked about young people not being represented on a panel, but it is not just that panel. If we are going to change and improve the system, it is very important that we hear from the very people who have experienced this system and for them to feed back and say, "This is what didn't work for me. This is how I think you can make it better". From my point of view, they are missing. There are not enough of them there to give us that feedback.

As Yoni said earlier, it is important that we support the few we have, that we mentor them, that we make sure they do not get overwhelmed with the task that we are asking them to do.

Sometimes agencies have a representation of young people, and not just at panels. In fostering, for example, some agencies have a group where they regularly get feedback from young people, but it is important that those groups are nurtured and looked after well so that they can do that work for longer. What tends to happen is that we overrely on the few who are feeding the information, they get overwhelmed and do not do it any more. Then we are back to square one with a lack of representation.

Yes, I agree with you: where are they? We need to work with them, to support them and to pay them well to be able to do the work.

Yoni Ejo: There are young people's governments or committees in local authorities that theoretically have an influence, but that is dependent on how that group is supported, whether there is a strong youth focus in it, that it is not just a few young people who are not represented meeting with senior managers who influence their answers. Those groups tend to be the older male, white, young people in residential care or in foster care, and perhaps not those who were placed with relatives, friends or placed out of the authority. There are lots of reasons why that voice is not really that representative.

I was involved in a group called Black and in Care in Manchester, which provided support services for young people who were in the care system. We were all social workers, but we all felt that young people were not getting the level of support that they needed. My experience was that the young people came to us and said, "This is all very well, us going out once a month or whatever, but we want a children's home". It just grew and grew, because those young people wanted that. They were able to influence that, and we got some money and developed a children's home.

I do not see those committees, or whatever they are, being able to be influenced by what young people really want, and it might be that rather than having a meeting with the senior execs once a quarter, you bring in young people. You go to activity centres and you do it creatively in a way that is meeting children and young people where they are, not trying to make them fit into our systems and our committees.

Q110 **Baroness Massey of Darwen:** What support do you think is needed for adopters and adoptees, particularly those in transracial adoptions? I do not really know what support means. Is it training? What is it? Maybe you can help me to define that for myself and then go on from there.

Yoni Ejo: I will start, because that is how I grew up, so I have a bit of personal experience. It absolutely starts with the assessment. It starts with the adopters knowing the impact of being an adopter transracially, because there will be additional responsibilities in bringing up the child to feel positive about themselves in what is quite a negative environment—or can be quite often, nationally. They need to feel that they can ask questions and that they can get advice and support. I am reminded of the fact that people do not necessarily know what they are taking on until they have done it. Sometimes adopters can experience racism in their families and have to negotiate things like that.

Support also means lifelong support for that child. It is not just until they are 18, because some of the impacts of adoption globally and of transracial adoption will follow them right the way up to adulthood. It is about having a variety of flexible approaches and recognising that adopted young people may need additional support that is over and above what mainstream services can offer at different points in their life.

Adefunke Larigo: I was mesmerised listening to Yoni. I go back to the point I made earlier. It is important to work with community groups who already understand certain communities, who are already in those communities and who can signpost and demonstrate the innovative ways in which they have been working with certain groups of individuals from the global majority. It is important to embrace what they are doing and support them, because I do not feel that adoption agencies necessarily have all the answers. They often do not understand people's culture and people's faith, so it is important that they work alongside those who do. That is my contribution.

Baroness Massey of Darwen: Thank you.

Q111 **Lord Bach:** Good afternoon, and thank you very much for the answers you have given so far. Are the existing models for permanence, including adoption and special guardianship orders, the right models necessarily for ethnic minority groups? In other words, are the Government too focused on adoption as such? I think both of you talked about the importance of kinship among ethnic minority groups. Would you like to expand a bit on that and whether the system could take those into account more than just the principle of adoption?

Yoni Ejo: I was a manager of a service that assessed kinship carers, so I am really supportive of special guardians and carers who take on the care of children in the extended family.

I do not think you need a separate system. I think there needs to be more parity. The support that special guardians get should be equal to adopters'. The evidence suggests that adoption has a slight edge, with longevity and stability for children and young people, so, where children cannot return home, adoption in most situations will be the best outcome for the younger children. That does not mean that the older children or children where that is not a possibility should not have the same opportunities for support and consistency.

Special guardians need to be better supported, because even now they are not always aware of what they are entitled to. They do not always get the same level of support as adopters do. We need to do a piece of work with black communities to help them understand the benefits of special guardianship and fostering. It is no coincidence that when black families want to care for children, they often do it through fostering rather than adoption because of the level of ongoing support and financial support.

Adefunke Larigo: I agree with Yoni. I think there is a lack of understanding and clarity. It is just not very clear. I have heard of foster carers who want to take on a child permanently as part of their family, but they choose to not do that because they know that the support, the service and the access to financial support that they receive when they are no longer the child's foster carer will diminish. They choose to continue to look after the child through fostering, which then means that the child, theoretically speaking, is not adopted into a family. Although in every sense they are adopted into a family, on paper they are not.

It is forcing individuals and certain families to make a choice when they clearly want to bring a child in. They are not able to do that because they know that there will be financial implications if they choose either special guardianship or fostering. The system needs to make it so that people are not forced into that kind of situation. There is a need to give families additional financial support and to make sure that they are able to receive all they need, that whatever their child is entitled to, they will be able to access it.

We talked about bedrooms earlier. Sometimes for families there is not enough space. There can be housing issues. There is a need again to look at how we do that creatively so that we can help some families to move. Maybe they need different accommodation so that they can adopt children or provide a permanent home for children in a way that they cannot do now. There is a particular extra need for black communities, because, as Yoni pointed out

earlier, people in the black community are not necessarily as financially well off as some of their white counterparts.

The Chair: Thank you. Lord Brownlow has our final very important rounding-up question.

Q112 **Lord Brownlow of Shurlock Row:** This has been another fascinating session, so thank you to both our witnesses. What is one thing you would like to see done to improve the adoption system? You have given a couple of examples, such as changing the composition of panels, but is there another thing that you think is very important?

Adefunke Larigo: It is difficult to answer this question, because there are so many changes that I would like to suggest, to be honest. What I am observing is this. It is one thing to change panels, but we need to change the way we recruit. We need to look at it all. We cannot just improve diversity on panels if we do not improve the way we recruit adopters. We need to look at how we bring in diversity on all levels, and we certainly need to support the families a lot better.

Going back to the panel thing, there are some things that are barriers, but I cannot stress enough the financial reward for people's time. If we are not willing to reward people for their time, we will not find the right people who have the skills, the experience and the capacity to do panel work. At the end of the day, this is about making decisions for children's lives, so if we want the panels to look different we need to do differently what we have been doing for the past however many years.

We need to have a way of regulating the fee that panel members get. I hear things like one panel member getting paid £80 for doing a day and a half's work and somebody else getting paid £400. It makes no sense. They are doing the same work. For goodness' sake, £80 is not even minimum wage if you calculate all the hours that people are doing. That is not okay, so I will go with that change.

Yoni Ejo: I would like to see almost a consortium of RAAs, community groups, people and young people represented who could look at these issues in the whole. When each agency is doing piecemeal bits here and bits there, it will not have the change and the impact that we want. Race has an impact throughout the process. Obviously, we are talking about adoption, which is the end, the conclusion, but we need to look at why we are intervening in certain families over and above other families. That whole process needs to be culturally sensitive and more innovative. We

need to be disseminating good practice where it is happening but local authorities or RAAs might not hear about it because it is happening in a different area that has a different constitution than theirs. There is a lot that we could do, but it cannot just be about RAAs, because they do not have the expertise.

Lord Brownlow of Shurlock Row: That is extremely helpful.

The Chair: Good, that is excellent. I want to thank both our witnesses, Ade and Yoni. It has been an excellent session. It is such an important area, and early on in our deliberations we highlighted the whole issue of racial disparities in the adoption system as a key area of concern. I am sure we will have some quite powerful things to say about it, so, as we carry on with our thinking, if we have any further ideas and potential recommendations and we would like to test them out on you, would we be able to come back to you?

Adefunke Larigo: That is fine.

Yoni Ejo: I am very happy to help. Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you so much for that. Thanks again for your participation and to all colleagues.