

Written evidence submitted by Adoption UK

About Adoption UK and why we are responding:

Adoption UK is the leading charity providing support, community and advocacy for adopted people and those parenting children who cannot live with their birth parents. We connect people, provide support and training and campaign for improvements to adoption policy and practice. With a national membership of over 6,000 Adoption UK is the largest voice of adopters in the UK.

Every year, around 4,000 children in the UK are placed in permanent adoptive families. There is a common misconception that once adopted, the trauma these children have experienced ends, but it does not. Adopted children spend an average of 15 months in care, often moving through several foster families, losing everything that is familiar to them along the way. 71% of adopted children have suffered significant trauma and neglect¹. They are much more likely than their peers to have neurological disorders such as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and Autistic Spectrum Disorder and are at elevated risk of several psychiatric disorders². This all has a huge impact on the experience of adopted children and young people throughout school and further education.

Adopted young people are more than twice as likely as their peers not to be in employment, education, or training, more than twice as likely to seek help with their mental health and are over-represented in the criminal justice system³.

The factors causing persistent and severe absence among Previously Looked After Children, including those who are adopted:

Education is consistently noted as the top concern amongst adopters, including in every year of the Adoption Barometer survey (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). In last year's Adoption Barometer survey (2022), when asked about the aspects of family life that respondents found most challenging, 58% said that 'supporting their child through education' was one of their top three challenges⁴. Adopters repeatedly report that trauma-informed schools that can meet their children's needs is one of the services that would most help meet their family's needs, but policymakers refuse to implement this at a systemic level. This can mean adopters feel the best option for their child is to educate them at home: 10% of respondents to our Barometer survey in 2021 reported home educating their child⁵. Of these, 71% felt that their child was happier and/or calmer learning at home than when they were in school, however, the same proportion would prefer their child to be in school if the right school was available.

Adoption UK research, including five years of Adoption Barometer reporting, highlights the discrepancy between adopters' perceptions of the willingness of schools and individual teachers to work with them to support their child's education, and the level of understanding those teachers

¹ DfE, Children Looked After in England including Adoption 2014-15:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015>

² Adoption UK 'Adoption Barometer' (2020)

<https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c79a0e7d-1899-4b0f-ab96-783b4f678c9a>

³ Adoption UK 'Adoption Barometer' (2019) (2020) (2021) <https://www.adoptionuk.org/the-adoption-barometer>

⁴ Adoption UK 'Barometer survey' 2022

<https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=ebb3a36d-cc0d-45dd-aca9-7dd1d5dbbd23>

⁵ Adoption UK 'Barometer survey' 2021

<https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=a5226daa-dc16-4d9f-a498-0f9ff7ab0d9e>

have of the needs of care-experienced children. In many cases, the challenge being faced by parents and children is not one of unwillingness, but of lack of skills, resources and knowledge.⁶

More than four out of five children (81%) represented in the Adoption Barometer survey last year (to be published June 2023) were reported to need more support in education than their peers, rising to 85% of secondary school aged children. The proportion who feel their child needs ‘much more support’ has increased slowly but steadily in each of the five years of Adoption Barometer surveys. Despite this, 68% of parents surveyed in 2021 agreed that it feels like a battle to get the support that their child needs, an increase of 6% since 2018.⁷

Also in last year’s survey 79% of parents say their child’s adverse experiences have impacted on their ability to cope academically and 85% say it has impacted on their ability to cope socially and emotionally in school. This has impacted attendance: 38% of respondents’ adopted children reported missing one or more days of school because of their mental health, anxiety or emotional wellbeing; and 15% reported missing more than 5 days of school for this reason.

The survey also shows 9% of survey respondents’ adopted children had absence levels that had triggered a written communication from school about being ‘persistently absent’ (10% or more of possible sessions missed – around 5-7 days per term, depending on term length) and 2% of adoptive parent respondents had entered, or been asked to enter into a written agreement to improve their child’s attendance at school.

Problems with existing support measures for Previously Looked After Children in school:

There do exist some measures at national and local levels aimed at improving the support available for previously looked after children in education settings, however our research shows that much more needs to be done to improve their effectiveness. The weaknesses in these measures ultimately impact the amount of time adopted children and young people need to spend absent from school.

➤ Priority admission:

Finding a school where the needs of care-experienced and adopted children are understood and effectively supported is a priority for adoptive parents.

In 2021, 61% of respondents to our Barometer survey with school-aged children stated that finding a trauma-informed and attachment-aware school was one of their top priorities, and 13% had changed their child’s school during 2021 to find one that could better meet their needs⁸. For some, this change of school came only after a considerable battle to secure an appropriate school place.

Despite measures to give previously looked after children priority admission, this does not necessarily help parents to secure a place at the school of their choice. This is because, unlike with looked after children, the local authority does not have powers of direction to ensure that schools offer a place to previously looked after children in these circumstances.

Where a child has an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), priority admissions have no bearing and there are no measures in place to give previously looked after children priority in the naming of suitable provision on the EHCP. This can mean that an adopted child without an EHCP can automatically gain a place at a mainstream school through priority access, but an adopted child with an EHCP can be refused a place at the same school.

⁶ Adoption UK Barometer survey 2021

⁷ <https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=ebb3a36d-cc0d-45dd-aca9-7dd1d5dbbd23>

⁸ Adoption UK Barometer survey 2022

Adoption UK have long campaigned for education and health professionals, especially mental health professionals, to be trained in early childhood trauma and associated conditions. From initial teacher training and beyond, all education professionals should be trained and resourced (through targeted funding) to support the needs of care-experienced children, including those adopted internationally. Training for education and health professionals should include understanding of highly prevalent conditions such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Attachment Disorder.

➤ Pupil Premium Plus:

There is little formal monitoring of the use of pupil premium funding for previously looked after children (post-LAC PP+) with which to measure its effectiveness. However, adoptive parents' perceptions of the impact of post-LAC PP+ suggests this measure is not achieving its objective of improving support for their children in school. 96% of respondents to the Adoption Barometer 2021 were aware of their child's eligibility for post-LAC PP+, but only 73% knew that their child's school was receiving the funding in respect of their child in 2021.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of this funding are very low, with 30% agreeing that their child's school was transparent in its use of the funds, and 38% agreeing that the school was using the funds appropriately for the needs of previously looked after children.

Adoption UK's From Both Sides report (2022)⁹ highlighted barriers faced by schools, including lack of clarity around the purpose and appropriate use of post-LAC PP+ for schools, inadequate information sharing within and between settings, problems with sufficiency and timing of delivery of the funding, and the lack of a suitable framework (such as a Personal Education Plan) within which to plan the best use of the funding and monitor outcomes. We have urged the Department for Education to commission thorough research into the effectiveness of Pupil Premium Plus, the designated teacher and the role of the virtual school in supporting the educational outcomes of previously looked after children.

➤ SEND and Previously Looked After Children:

There is considerable drift and delay in identifying, assessing, and providing support for children's SEND. Adopted and previously looked after children are particularly vulnerable to missing out on identification of need and provision of support owing to a lack of stability required for an assessment. This is because after removal from their birth home, adopted children typically experience several moves through the care system before settling into their adoptive home.

In addition, the Adoption Barometer 2020 found that 53% of adopted children with SEN Support were not receiving the full provision outlined in their plan.¹⁰

The current SEND Code of Practice makes no mention of previously looked after children as a cohort with particular needs, and there is no intersection between the Code and other provisions made for this cohort, such as post-LAC PP+ and the Adoption Support Fund, leading to a situation where professionals are uncertain as to which route to follow in order to meet a child's needs and parents frequently report being sent from one professional to another with nobody taking overall responsibility.

⁹ Adoption UK 'From Both Sides' 2022

<https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=be019ca2-7092-4c5a-9a1a-41381a44a26e%20>

¹⁰ Adoption UK Barometer survey 2020

Care-experienced children and young people, and their families, deserve an integrated approach to addressing their needs across all domains. In our response to the SEND Review (2022) Adoption UK urged the SEND Review team to conduct a thorough impact assessment of their proposals on this cohort and produce clear guidance on how all proposals will interact with existing policies, guidance, statutory guidance and legislation relating to looked after and previously looked after children.

➤ Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP):

Adoption UK's Barometer 2019 report found that of 388 parents in England whose children had been assessed for, or received an EHCP in 2018, 45% of assessments had been initiated by parents and only 41% initiated by schools, indicating the SEND of adopted children is being under-recognised in schools.

Considering high rates of SEND and the impact of early childhood adversity, neglect, abuse, trauma and care-experience, Adoption UK recommends that all care-experienced children should have an automatic right to an EHC assessment on request to reduce delay in identification and provision of support.

There are concerns around accountability where deadlines are not met, documentation is late or poor quality, independent assessments and reports are disregarded, EHCP assessments are initially refused but then overturned after parental (and sometimes legal) advocacy, and provisions outlined in the EHCP are not met. The Adoption Barometer 2020 found that 55% of adopted children with an EHCP were not receiving all the provision outlined in their plan during 2019.

➤ Multi-agency collaboration:

At a local level, schools sometimes implement multi agency working and respondents to our Barometer survey in 2021 reported this was effective in having a positive effect on children's education and their ability to stay in school. Successful examples involved social workers and education professionals working together, sharing knowledge and understanding of specific issues, and co-ordinating support provided through education and via adoption support funding, including the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) in England. While the ASF does not fund educational interventions, therapeutic interventions provided by adoption support services can have a positive impact on children's ability to manage in the school environment, and similarly, school-based support that meets children's needs can help to reduce challenges in the home.¹¹ Adoption UK would like to see all professionals working with children who are adopted to be effectively resourced and trained so that all can benefit from this sort of collaborative approach.

The impact of the Department's proposed reforms to improve attendance:

An emphasis on attendance which prioritises children being present in school but does not effectively address the barriers to their attendance (see evidence above), nor ensure that their needs are being met effectively once they are in school, is unlikely to improve levels of persistent absence among the most vulnerable children in our education system.

While DfE guidance states that children and families should be offered support in the first instance, the way that schools are judged on attendance data, and the threat of punitive actions against

¹¹ Adoption UK Barometer survey 2022

families places intolerable pressure on both schools and families to get children into school at all costs.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, more than half of adoptive parents surveyed by Adoption UK reported that their secondary school children seemed calmer without the stress caused by school, and one in ten parents were considering long-term home education after a positive experience of home learning during the partial school closures.¹²

The Education Act 1996 states that parents must ensure their children receive an efficient full-time education either through attendance at school or otherwise. Considering the challenges faced by families whose children experience barriers to school attendance, Adoption UK urges the Department to balance a focus on attendance with greater consideration of supporting access to education. This might include hybrid approaches, flexible attendance and a creative use of alternative and specialist provisions for children with complex needs.

To level up education so that all children have an equal chance to thrive, there must be greater emphasis on adapting the education system to support the needs of children, rather than requiring children and families to adapt to fit the education system.

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¹² Adoption UK ' Home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown: The impact of school closures on care experienced children' <https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b3326f3b-4cdf-46fe-94e1-8724bbb75475>