

Written evidence submitted by About Adoption UK

About Adoption UK and why we are responding:

1. 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.
2. Children who are care experienced, including those who are adopted, face many challenges in education.
3. 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 disorders.² This all has a huge impact on the experience of adopted children and young people throughout school and further education.
4. Adoption UK research has consistently shown that adopted children, on average, achieve significantly less well in exams than their peers, are more likely to have a range of higher-level learning needs and are permanently excluded twenty times more than their peers.³ 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 system⁴.

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

Evidence of challenges in education pre and post lockdown:

5. Just prior to the pandemic, Adoption UK research showed that three quarters of adoptive families were at that point experiencing challenges – half of them severe challenges.⁵
6. In April, one month into lockdown, Adoption UK surveyed families on the impact of school closures and found that most children, both at school and at home, had not been offered any additional support in respect of their care-experienced status. Parents and carers of children with special/additional learning needs reported feeling particularly marginalised and concerned.⁶
7. A month into lockdown:
 - 85% of care experienced children were reportedly not getting any additional support from school
 - 50% of parents and carers reported their child was experiencing emotional distress and anxiety
 - 31% of families reported experiencing an increase in violent and aggressive behaviour from their children
 - 63% of parents and carers reported feeling their child will need extra support during the transition back to school
8. Most parents and carers were worried about the transition back to school for their child, and most believed that their children would need additional support to transition back to education. In our report, 'Home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown', Adoption UK called on the government to begin early planning for the return to school, and to provide clearer guidance to schools about communicating with families, as well as specific guidance to schools about supporting care experienced children and those with special and additional learning needs during school closures.
9. However, it was also clear that some children and families were experiencing unexpected benefits during the partial school closures:
 - 54% of parents and carers reported that the time spent together was improving their relationship with their child

⁵ Adoption UK 'Adoption Barometer' (2020)

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

⁶ Adoption UK: 'Home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown: The impact of school closures on care experienced children' available at: <https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b3326f3b-4cdf-46fe-94e1-8724bbb75475>

- More than half of all secondary aged pupils were reportedly calmer without school
 - 62% of parents/carers were not worried that their child was falling behind in their learning
10. For children who had found school difficult before Covid-19, who had experienced school-based anxiety, or who were already struggling to access the curriculum, the opportunity to learn entirely at home, or through attendance at school but in smaller groups accessing a more diverse range of learning activities, allowed families to sample a way of approaching education that was, in some cases, an improvement on what they had experienced before. One in ten respondents indicated that they were considering elective home education because of their experiences during the early part of lockdown.

Adoption UK's response to the education recovery package:

11. Adoption UK wrote to then Secretary of State for Education in June 2021, Rt. Hon. Gavin Williamson MP, to express our disappointment with the school recovery package announced and to add our voice to the many across the sector calling for greater investment and a plan which uses the upheaval of the pandemic as an opportunity to re-set the balance between academic results and wellbeing.
12. Adoption UK felt the government's education recovery plans – both at the time and subsequently - did little to account for the needs of children impacted by adverse experiences, loss and trauma, including those who are adopted or in kinship care and for whom school can be a very difficult place.
13. We know that some children – especially those who find school particularly difficult – benefitted from the opportunity to learn at home during the pandemic, reducing the anxiety attending school can cause. We urged the government to consider how technology could be harnessed in future to increase flexible educational opportunities in a way that accounts for this.
14. Throughout the lockdown we saw the benefits for vulnerable children of very small class sizes, of a curriculum with more opportunities for outdoor and creative activities, of consistency of staffing, of improved home-school communications; and the positives of involving whole

families in a child's education. We urged the government to show understanding of the positive lessons learned during the pandemic by allowing for them in the educational recovery plan.

15. Conversely, we saw the negative impact on the development and wellbeing of many children caused by missed opportunities for socialisation, extra-curricular activities, physical activity and play throughout the pandemic. We therefore urged government to consider meaningful investment in a broad curriculum and greater pastoral support across the educational stages.
16. While Adoption UK called for the provision of 1-1 support and tutoring following the pandemic, this should have been just one of several strategies – as advocated by Adoption UK and many across the sector. Equal weight should also have been given to the provision of mental health and wellbeing support, and an investment in SEND so that children who had missed out on diagnosis, assessment and support during partial school closures could be fast-tracked through the system.
17. However, the focus of the recovery programmes introduced from November 2020 onwards has been almost exclusively on catching up on missed learning through school-based programmes and the National Tutoring Programme. Disappointingly, the benefits for some children of access to a broader range of learning approaches and activities, smaller and more stable group sizes, partial attendance at school, and use of virtual and hybrid approaches to learning seem to have been overlooked in favour of an expedited return to pre-Covid normality.
18. The focus on prioritising vulnerable learners, although well intentioned, has the effect of pressuring children who may already have been 'behind' before Covid to 'catch up' rapidly to their peers. Tutoring, however effectively administered, does not necessarily address the underlying causes of these children's vulnerabilities and subsequent lower attainment. Instead of maximising the potential benefits of promoting healthy socialisation, physical activity, extra-curricular opportunities and play, these children are now most likely to be spending more hours in a classroom and at a desk.
19. Additionally, new guidance intended to tackle persistent absence and challenging behaviour falls short of providing the intense support for wellbeing and mental health that Adoption UK and many others were calling for as recovery plans were being developed. Instead, families who

testify to the positive impact of a different approach to education during the pandemic are now expected to co-operate with increasingly stringent attendance targets as part of an attempt to return to the pre-Covid status quo, and the wider investment proposed by Sir Kevan Collin's recovery plan has not materialised.

Adoptive families experience of the tutoring programme:

20. Evidence that adopted children and young people are benefitting, or even being offered, extra tutoring or tutoring via the National Tutoring Programme, is sparse. In our most recent Adoption Barometer survey (to be published in May 2023) we found that 65% of respondents adopted children received no extra tutoring at all following Covid-19; for a further 6% of children, respondents were unsure whether tutoring had been received.
21. In addition, just 8% of respondents adopted children had received tutoring through the National Tutoring Programme; 12% of children had received tutoring but parents were not sure whether it was NTP tutoring. 62% of parents are worried that their child will leave school with few or no qualifications.
22. Guidance for the National Tutoring Programme indicates that tutoring courses should be 12-15 hours long and should be arranged so that children still have access to the full school curriculum. Although it is possible that parents are not aware that their child is receiving tutoring, it seems likely that the majority would know if their child was receiving 12-15 hours of extra teaching, presumably outside of the classroom and outside of normal classroom hours.
23. Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that the large majority of more than 1,500 adopted children represented by *Adoption Barometer* respondents have not received any tutoring through the NTP since November 2020, despite the programme being targeted towards children eligible for pupil premium.

Adoption UK Recommendations:

24. The Government is correct to be concerned about children who are, or who have been missing out on education. Covid-19 certainly had a significant impact on the education of all children and young people.
25. However, thousands of children continue to miss out on education, especially the most vulnerable children. According to Adoption UK's

latest *Adoption Barometer* report (to be published May 2023), 17% of adoptive parents have been told that their child's school cannot meet their needs because of funding restraints during 2022. 38% of adopted children missed school due to anxiety or mental health concerns during 2022, one in ten were suspended from school and 18% were internally excluded. Covid-19 focused the nation's attention on the needs of our most vulnerable learners, but these needs were evident before the pandemic and continue now.

26. Rather than attempting to return to education as it was before Covid-19, the Government should take this opportunity to:

- 1) *Commission research into the feasibility of hybrid and remote learning as a temporary or long-term option for children who face barriers to school attendance and end the practice of issuing fixed penalty notices for persistent absence*
- 2) *Reduce the frequency of statutory testing, especially in primary schools, to relieve pressure on children and teachers*
- 3) *Ensure that the SEND review includes significant new investment in SEND, especially SEN support, and a guaranteed right to an assessment of EHC needs for all care experienced learners*

February 2023