

**Follow up evidence from We Are Family Adoption (GRC0033) September 2020
Relating to Second Special Report - The impact of COVID-19 on maternity and parental
leave: Government Response to the Committee's First Report (HC 770)**

Briefing on the House of Commons Petitions Committee report: The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave

This briefing sets out the response of We Are Family Adoption to the Petitions Committee's report and the Government's response, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by parents on adoption leave, in order to inform any future parliamentary debate on this issue.

Background of We Are Family (WAF)

We Are Family Adoption (WAF) is an adoption support community and registered charity. We run peer-to-peer (i.e. parent-to-parent), user-led events across London and also provide various member resources. All our events are designed and run by our service users, who are adopters, on a voluntary basis. We define 'adopters' to include prospective adopters (approved adopters in Stage 2 of the current adoption process), those with newly placed children and those who have been in it for years.

WAF was originally founded in 2013 by a small group of adoptive parents who wished to provide local peer-to-peer support for adoptive parents. From one group in Hackney & Islington, the organisation has grown to its current size of ten local groups and providing many pan-WAF resources. It was registered with the Charity Commission in August 2015 and is governed by a board of trustees, many of whom are adoptive parents. WAF currently operates seven local groups: East London, Hackney & Islington, Havering, Richmond, Shepherd's Bush, Southwark and Thurrock. WAF runs a further three cross-London groups: Prospective Adopters, Singles in the North and Singles in the South. WAF has supported approximately 800 families over the past six years. We have over 640 actively engaged individual members.

Summary

The early stages of an adoption placement are inevitably challenging, due to the traumatic early life experiences that many adopted children have experienced, the length of time it can take to build parent-child attachments, the prevalence of post adoption depression syndrome (PADS) and the risk of adoption breakdown. Building strong family connections in those early months and years is essential for the success of an adoptive placement. During the pandemic, and the lockdown which resulted, adoptive parents became cut off from their crucial support networks at a time when their children struggled with the uncertainty and change in routine. This increased anxiety levels among adoptive parents and the potential for more significant mental health challenges and adoption breakdowns. In light of these challenges, there was a genuine need for families to have an extended time to build attachments, develop routines and access the right support services. In our view, additional support from Government is crucial to prevent or reduce the negative impact of Covid-19 on adoptive families.

We welcome the opportunity to submit further evidence to the Petitions Committee following publication of its report on the impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave (the Report) and

the Government's response. We hope that this briefing will inform any future parliamentary debate on this important issue. In summary:

- a. We were grateful for the opportunity to submit evidence to the Petitions Committee inquiry and ensure that the experiences of adoptive parents on adoption leave during the pandemic were considered and reflected in the Report.
- b. We welcome the Report, and particularly the recommendations that:
 - i. benefits for self-employed adoptive parents should be equalised to those of other self-employed parents (paras 22 and 81); and
 - ii. the Government should extend adoption leave and pay for adoptive parents who have been affected by the pandemic for three months (para 80).
- c. We are disappointed by the Government's response to the Report, and hope that a future parliamentary debate will provide the opportunity for further scrutiny of the Government's response and particularly whether it is underpinned by sufficient and robust evidence.

1. WAF evidence to the Petitions Committee

WAF's briefing to the Petitions Committee inquiry drew on the first-hand experiences of its membership, including those on adoption leave, during lockdown. Our briefing highlighted that:

- a. It is vital that an adoptive parent is able to benefit from adoption leave and stay at home as long as possible following an adoptive placement, in order to ensure a secure attachment between child and parent. This is particularly important given the early trauma experienced by the majority of adopted children and the associated challenges which adoptive parents face.
- b. In the early stages of an adoption placement, there are very real risks of adoptive parents suffering from post adoption depression syndrome (PADS) and of adoption breakdown. The ability for adoptive parents to access parental leave on an equal basis with other parents facilitates the establishment of attachment and routine, reducing the risk of PADS and adoption breakdown.
- c. Parents on adoption leave have faced significant challenges during lockdown, given the:
 - i. disruption to the routines which are so essential to the development of attachment between child and parent,
 - ii. isolation which prevents access to the support networks which are deemed to be so essential during the assessment process which prospective adopters go through,
 - iii. reduced access to professional support including from social workers allocated to the case,
 - iv. impact on the progress of applications for Adoption Orders which have been delayed as a result of court closures, and
 - v. challenge of returning to work during lockdown, and associated concerns around availability of childcare and job security.

We are grateful to the Petitions Committee for considering the evidence we submitted and representing our views in the Report and welcome the recommendations that:

- a. benefits for self-employed adoptive parents should be equalised to those of other self-employed parents (paras 22 and 81); and
- b. the Government should extend adoption leave and pay for adoptive parents who have been affected by the pandemic for three months (para 80).

2. WAF concerns about the Government's response

We are disappointed by the Government's response to the Report, and particularly the recommendations relating to adoption leave, which it defines as Recommendations 14 and 15.

Recommendation 14: The Government's response to Recommendation 14 (that the Government should extend adoption leave and pay for adoptive parents who have been affected by the pandemic for three months) suggests that the entitlement to parental leave on the same terms as other parents is sufficiently generous for adoptive parents, that adoptive parents can access annual leave and unpaid

parental leave to extend their time away from work, and that the current provision "allows enough time for the new parent to bond with their child". This response:

- a. fails to engage with the evidence outlined in the Report of the impact of Covid-19 on the experiences of adoptive parents and their children,
- b. demonstrates a lack of recognition of the impact which increasing job uncertainty may have on the willingness of adoptive parents to extend their leave through annual leave or unpaid parental leave,
- c. fails to provide any evidence to underpin the assessment that the current system allows enough time for the new adoptive parents to bond with their children, either during lockdown or not,
- d. fails to segment adoptive families according to their different experiences and the different needs of their children, and
- e. fails to evaluate the risk of adoption breakdown resulting from the increased pressures placed on adoptive parents and adopted children during the pandemic and the relative costs of extending adoption leave and the cost to the public purse resulting from adoption breakdowns.

We recommend that the Government is asked to respond to these concerns regarding its response during any future parliamentary debate.

Recommendation 15: The Government's response to Recommendation 15 (that the Government should consider equalising the benefits for self-employed adoptive parents to those of other self-employed parents) suggests that self-employed adoptive parents do not require an "Adoption Allowance" because they have more "flexibility and autonomy over the work that they do and when they do it or over the time they take off work" and that, where necessary, self-employed adopters can access financial support from their Local Authority. This response:

- a. betrays a lack of understanding of the assessment and approval process which prospective adopters undergo, and the frequent requirement imposed by local authorities for adopters to commit to extended periods of adoption leave, irrespective of their employment status;
- b. fails to provide any evidence that self-employed adopters are indeed able to work flexibly during the early months of an adoptive placement while also trying to establish routines and bonds with their children; and
- c. fails to provide any evidence that self-employed adopters are consistently able to access required financial support from their Local Authority in lieu of an Adoption Allowance.

We recommend that the Government is asked to respond to these concerns regarding its response during any future parliamentary debate.

Further information

For more information, please contact:

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