

Written evidence submitted by Al Coates (GRC0011)

I'm an adoptive parent who adopted six children between 1999 and 2013, I qualified as a social worker in 2013 and practice in Fostering as well Adoption and independently working to support families and train parents and professionals in childhood challenging violent and aggressive behaviour as well as the impact of early adversity on children. I've worked with the Department for Education since 2015 as part of their adoption expert advisory group and their adoption reference group. I publish on a blog alcoates.co.uk as well I am the founder of the [Adoption & Fostering Podcast](#) and those two have approximately 13,000 views/downloads a month. In relation to this subject I requested responses through the above's Twitter and Facebook pages as well as through Instagram and Facebook groups.

Frankly, it opened up a broad range of issues for people and I'd note that there is no one answer that reflects the different stages that the respondents were at, either preplacement, early into placement or coming to the end of their planned adoption leave. It's acknowledged that this has been an unprecedented and uniquely stressful time for all parents, however those

Several families described the positive nature of the enforced lockdown. The children and parents have spent a lot of time together and consequently had the opportunity to develop relationships, routines, familiarity and it's promoted attachment and bonding. It's normally a stressful time as new families adjust to the change and this has been magnified for some adopters. One person signed off after describing the challenges faced by the vulnerable children in the home having her youngest child move into her home two weeks prior to lockdown:

'I have three children camping around my bed, it's the only way they feel safe at the moment'

Families are normally advised to have a period of isolation from others to promote the new relationships and routines, however many describe this as being stressful as their normal supports, ie relationships and normal interactions, are reduced. The lockdown has also removed these supports at a time of stress as they incorporate a child into their lives and adjust to being, often new, parents. Additionally, social care has not been able offer the usual level of support or attend homes compounding the levels of isolation.

Other issues relate to how during adoption leave parents begin to develop their support networks for when normal life resumes or adoption leave comes to an end. All adopted children have experienced a level of adversity, loss and challenge that is peculiar to them. Adoptive parents' support networks are often more specific than for parents of similar aged children and adopters describe challenges building them in normal circumstances. Lockdown has consequently meant that opportunities to develop those networks and that includes with immediate family members, friends and peers has been limited at best and in some cases removed entirely. This exacerbates worries for some as they anticipated utilising those networks for childcare once the adoption leave ends and they return to work. A noted anxiety being that adopted children's vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the lack of relationship with new childcare givers that they have limited or no relationship with. Some that spoke to me expanded on this issue as well as their need to return to work imminently due to the end of their Adoption Leave and have had no opportunity to have a paced and measured introduction to nursery or childcare providers.

Overarching this was the issue of adopters who are self employed, currently they are not entitled to any statutory adoption leave though I appreciate that this is not an issue for the committee. Other issues noted were some families that had no option other than to return to work as they could not

afford to extend their adoption leave beyond lockdown and were facing difficulties of transition with no opportunity to alleviate them.

Generally and not unsurprisingly, all who got in touch agreed with me believed that any extension of Adoption Leave would be positive and negate some of the challenges outlined below. Adopters agreed that bringing vulnerable children into their homes and lives was a uniquely sensitive and critical time for them and the lockdown has exacerbated the challenges in accessing support, building networks of support and facilitating transitions to normal life following introductions and the end of leave.

I hope that this brief summary is of use to you and certainly those contacted were keen to stress the difficulties that they are experiencing. I'm sure that they would appreciate any help that is possible and I'd be more than happy to share this evidence and their perspectives to the committee via video call if that's planned.

May 2020