

## **Executive Summary**

Adoption has changed drastically in recent decades, with the large majority of children adopted from the care system having experienced abuse and neglect while with their birth family. The result of this early trauma is additional and complex needs and challenging behaviour.

These challenges have been ramped up during lockdown with many adopters telling us their children are experiencing increased anxieties and displaying more challenging and violent behaviour than usual.

The early days can be extremely challenging for newly-placed families at the best of times, with many reporting feelings of stress, anxiety and post-adoption depression. In some cases, parents have used up a considerable amount of their allotted leave entitlement during introductions, before their child has even come to live with them.

For the purposes of this investigation, Adoption UK spoke to parents who are on, or have been on, adoption leave during the covid-19 lockdown. They reported issues relating to the loss of their support network and a lack of socialisation for their child as well as concerns around transition planning for those with children due to start school in September.

In addition to these challenges, there are some enduring inequalities in entitlements for adoptive parents and special guardians, compared with birth parents, which need to be addressed.

This submission includes a range of policy recommendations aimed at improving support for newly-placed adoptive families both during the immediate covid-19 crisis and when we return to 'normal'.

## **Who we are and why we are responding**

Adoption UK is the leading charity providing support, awareness and understanding for those parenting or supporting children who cannot live with their birth parents. Our 4,000 members provide us with a strong, supportive community and the largest voice of adopters in the UK.

Adoption UK was eager to contribute to this inquiry because we have been committed to ensuring adoptive families are properly supported during the covid-19 lockdown. We have been gathering the views of adopters through the covid-19 lockdown period in order to better inform how we – and statutory services – can better support these families.

And finally, we have been calling for reform of parental leave entitlements for adoptive parents and special guardians for several years. This investigation represents an important opportunity for us to work with decision-makers to achieve much needed change in a previously neglected policy area.

## **Modern-day adoption**

Adoption has changed greatly in recent decades with the overwhelming majority of adopted children being removed from their birth parents and adopted from the care system. Nearly three-quarters of adopted children in England are removed as a result of abuse and/or neglect, with other common reasons for removal including family dysfunction and absent parenting (Department for Education, 2018).

There is growing evidence around connection between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and mental health issues and psychopathology. There is also a correlation between ACEs and poor physical health, drug addiction, criminality and violence (Bellis et al. 2014). A 2016 study of adoptive

families in Wales found that adopted children were five times more likely to have experienced ACEs than the general population (Anthony et al., 2016).

Children who were adopted aged four or older had, on average, an even higher of exposure to all ACEs (Anthony et al., 2016). This is significant when we consider that the average age at which children are adopted in England is approximately three and a half years-old, with around 20 per cent adopted over the age of five (Department for Education, 2018).

In addition to the early trauma and adversity these children will have experienced while with their birth families, they will generally have experienced high levels of instability and multiple moves within the care system before joining their adoptive family. Children who experience multiple moves in care are at much greater risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties, homelessness, unemployment, and addiction (Rubin et al., 2004; ADCS, 2013).

Adopted children are also more likely to be exposed to drugs and alcohol while in the womb. A study from Bristol University suggests prevalence among the general population could be as high as 17%. Whereas among the care experienced population, conservative estimates place it at one-third while other studies have predicted it could be as high as 75% (Adoption UK, 2018). Selwyn et al. (2014) identified a link between unstable adoptive placements and alcohol and/or drug abuse from the birth mother during the pregnancy.

Adoption UK's own research has revealed the poorer life outcomes of adopted children and young people compared with the general population. For example, adopted children are more likely to be excluded from school, leave without any qualifications or be not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Adoption UK, 2019). This evidence means there should be a presumption that adoptive families will have additional support needs.

### **The impact of covid-19 on adoptive families**

Adoption UK began hearing from our members about the challenges they were facing from the early days of the lockdown period via our community support network, helpline and digital platforms (online forums and social media channels). We subsequently decided to conduct a UK-wide survey of adoptive parents to better understand the challenges they were facing. The survey was open from 14 – 21 April, receiving 674 responses in total.

More than half of those who responded to our survey (52%) said their child was suffering from increased emotional distress and anxiety during the lockdown, with 42% telling us their child's sleep pattern has been disrupted. In some cases, fear relating to the spread of the virus and the health and safety of parents and family members is triggering feelings of loss and instability in adopted children and adolescents.

These issues, combined with the fundamentally restrictive nature of the lockdown, are leading to an escalation in frequency and intensity in CPV and challenging behaviour within adoptive families. More than half (52%) of those responding to our survey reported an increase in challenging behaviour from their child(ren) and nearly a third (31%) are experiencing more violent and aggressive behaviour than usual.

There is serious concern that the additional pressure families are now under could lead to many more joining the hundreds each year who experience a family breakdown or disruption, with children leaving the family home prematurely and returning to the care system. And even where this outcome can be avoided, families will have longer-term support needs once the lockdown is over as

they seek to rebuild and restore strained relationships and address the negative impact on their mental health.

It is also important to acknowledge that some families have benefitted from having more time together as a result of the lockdown, with more than half saying the time spent together is improving their relationship with their child(ren). Some respondents reported that they were having more conversations with their child about their past experiences and their adoption. The benefits for having additional time together should serve as an important lesson in developing parental leave policies and future adoption planning.

### **Newly-placed families and the early days**

In July 2019, Adoption UK published its *Adoption Barometer* report – a comprehensive stock-take of modern-day adoption in the UK. The report's findings came from the largest ever survey of adoptive parents, with 3,500 responses, and focused on the experience of families in the calendar year 2018. Of those 3,500 respondents, 370 were newly-placed adopters, meaning their child(ren) came to live with them in 2018.

Worryingly, more than half of all newly-placed adopters wondered in the early months whether they had done the right thing and whether they would be able to cope. 54% experienced stress, anxiety and/or symptoms of post-adoption depression.

*“I did feel exhausted after the introductions and bringing my son home and I wasn't prepared for the emotions I felt at this time. It was only after searching on Google that I found out that you can experience postadoption depression. It would be good to make people more aware of this at preparation meetings.”*

Respondents found that the advice to keep wider family members away during the first few weeks was counter-productive, leaving them feeling unsupported as new parents. This was sometimes compounded by short parental leave from work being mostly taken up by introductions, leaving one parent alone soon after the child moved in.

Another common theme was the perceived lack of support available to adoptive parents to help them understand and cope with their own emotions. Respondents reported feeling worried about the 'love' they did or did not feel for their newly-placed child and concern that, if they reported their worries to their social workers, it would give the impression that they were not coping. In the most extreme cases, the lack of preparedness of both the adopter and child coupled with the lack of support resulted in placement breakdown before the adoption order.

*“I felt very unsure initially about whether our son was the right match for us and at times was scared about whether we had made the right decision. However, these feelings changed as we all settled as a family and I began to bond with my son.”*

These findings led Adoption UK to recommend the introduction of an enhanced parental leave package for adoptive families and a review of advice given to new adopters to keep friends and family at a distance during early placement (Adoption UK, 2019).

Newly-placed adopters often spoke of the need for wider support during the early months of placement, as well as that offered by social workers. Several described the importance of meeting with other new adopters as the shared experience was so valuable and one respondent suggested that being matched with an adoptive parent mentor prior to placement “would have helped greatly”. Adoption UK subsequently recommended that local authorities and regional adoption

agencies take a more active role in ensuring that newly-placed adopters can meet other local adopters as a universal support measure (Adoption UK, 2019).

### **Experiences of adoption leave during the covid-19 lockdown**

Adoption UK has sought the views of parents who are currently on, or have been on, adoption leave during the covid-19 lockdown to support the Petitions Committee's investigation. The excellent response rate we had to from adopters to our call for evidence at such short notice is reflective of the importance of this issue.

The most common issue raised by adoptive parents was the complete loss of their support network at a time when they potentially need it most. As mentioned above, our previous research has already revealed that those who followed the advice generally given to new adoptive parents – to keep close family and friends away in the early days – struggled greatly.

*“We make an effort to WhatsApp and Skype close friends and family on a regular basis but it's just not the same as seeing them in person and getting that face-to-face support.”*

During the lockdown, this has been the reality for all newly placed adopters, with only virtual contact with their support network the only option. In many instances, this has meant children have not had the opportunity to spend time and build relationships with those who will be taking on some of the childcare responsibilities once the adoption leave is finished and parents return to work.

*“I will rely on support from our extended family with childcare when I return to work, but our daughter will have to build an attachment again before this can happen. Extended adoption leave would enable our daughter to have the transition she needs for her development and best start in life. Lockdown adoption leave would enable our daughter to have the transition she needs for development and best start in life.”*

In some cases, there has been a deficit in professional support on offer too. For example, we know that in some cases local authorities will be forced to redeploy adoption support staff to frontline child protection roles through the lockdown period. Or that staff may be off work because they are sick or have suffered a bereavement.

To compound this situation, the government's recent emergency legislation has reduced the statutory duties placed on local authorities in relation to children's social care. In some instances, the changes are proportionate and rational given the unique circumstances we find ourselves in. However, Adoption UK's main concern is around the following regulatory change as set out in the [explanatory memorandum](#) (see 7.12):

*The amendments relax the requirement for adoption reviews (the reviewing of a child's plan for adoption if not placed or a review of placement once placed) for agencies where it is not reasonably practical to do so, unless the agency has concerns about the welfare of the child.*

This regulation conflates a child's plan for adoption before placement and post-placement and potentially absolves local authorities and adoption agencies of their corporate parenting responsibility in the first three months of an adoptive placement. In practice, this means newly-placed adoptive families could be left without vital support at a uniquely challenging time.

Some parents who adopted through voluntary adoption agencies, rather than through their local authority, reported that their social worker has been furloughed. Often, this is someone who has known the family for a long period of time and understands the journey they have been on in

becoming adoptive parents. Naturally, adopters will not feel as comfortable discussing challenges and doubts with someone who is effectively a stranger.

*“Our social worker who was doing some supportive work with us has been furloughed. We have been allocated a new, temporary one, but she doesn’t know us, our children or our history. On the one occasion she called us, she was very busy and not very supportive. Having a social worker who has spent two years getting to know us and the last seven months getting to know the girls removed has been a huge blow. I don’t want to talk to a temporary social worker, who doesn’t understand the rhythm of our life, about our challenges.”*

Another common concern for parents was the lack of socialisation their children have had through the lockdown period and how this will affect their long-term development. While parents may still be able to access support from family and friends digitally, there is no alternative to socialisation and interaction with peers where young children are concerned. This is particularly important given the difficulties many adopted children have with forming relationships and unstable attachments due to their early experiences.

*“When I go back to work, at a residential children’s home, my husband and I will both be working due to being key workers. We will rely on a mixture of nursery and family support to care for our son. We are extremely concerned about how this will affect him psychologically due to the disruptions he has experienced in his life so far. We are also concerned about the possible implications of this on his development as he grows older.”*

*“I worry her development will take a knock due to the fact she has no interaction with other children. It looks like the next time she sees children will be when she is in creche for full days while I work. Already I can see she is a lot more wary of people if we are to leave the house for a walk and worry how she will cope being around others in a full-on environment without a parent being present with no gradual introductions.”*

*“Social restrictions have meant that the baby groups we go to have been cancelled, preventing both myself and our little girl from socialising with other parents and children. This socialisation is usually a great source of support for parents and is vital for children to begin to develop early social skills.”*

As mentioned above, the average age of adoption in England is approximately three and a half. Therefore, many new adoptive parents must move quickly from settling their child into their new home to preparing them for starting school. Transition planning is essential, and adopters will often work closely with school to ensure the child’s transition into school is smooth and gradual.

Adoption UK research (2017) revealed adopted children in Key Stage 1 are 16 times more likely to receive a fixed period exclusion than their classmates. This highlights the difficulties adopted children have in transitioning to school life generally and led Adoption UK to recommend that education authorities explore flexibility around school starting age and the possible benefits of flexi-schooling during the early school years. The covid-19 crisis has accelerated the need to explore these options.

For those newly-placed adopters whose children are due to start school in September, there has been no opportunity to engage in proper transition planning as a result of the lockdown. These parents were particularly concerned about how their child would cope in school without this specific preparation, as well as the general lack of socialisation in lockdown.

Many parents said that while they formed a strong bond with their child during lockdown, the experience has been extremely draining. This was particularly true for single adopters or those who

had adopted a sibling group or children with extremely complex needs. Without access to their usual support networks and with nurseries, schools and other planned activities closed during lockdown, there is no respite available for these new adopters who are often parenting highly traumatised children who will be experiencing heightened anxiety themselves.

*“Our oldest daughter is four and has suffered a lot of trauma in her life. Her behaviour is often quite physically challenging and mentally draining. She had started nursery one-day-week but after three weeks the nursery closed completely. I had the choice for her to attend another nursery but that would have been yet another new environment for her, when she was only just getting to know the previous one. Lockdown and the nursery closing have had huge repercussions for her physically challenging behaviour as she has struggled to come to terms with a new routine.”*

*“My husband is self-employed and cannot work from home so ‘should’ be at work, but I cannot manage the two girls without support at present, so he is working half days. I am certain that if he worked full time – which is what financially we really need him to do as we are coming to the unpaid part of my leave – our family would breakdown as there is no respite for me.”*

*“The biggest challenge for me has been the feeling that our little girl has not had the ‘best’ of me during this time: with her older brother to care for due to school restrictions and his additional needs, my time has been split and quite often his needs have had to come before hers. This has brought a sense of guilt with it, and a sense of helplessness as well.”*

Other adopters are coping with the unexpected challenge of home educating an older child due to the school closures, whilst on adoption leave with a younger child. Unsurprisingly, many parents feel unable to fully meet the needs of their newly-adopted child.

*“having our older son at home has meant I have had to care for both children 24/7, so at times it has been difficult to fully and efficiently provide for our little girl’s needs in terms of play, exercise and socialisation. This is time that we can’t get back, and with me due to go back to work next month it is a concern that our little girl may not have developed socially as much as she could have otherwise.”*

Those newly-placed adoptive parents who responded to our call for evidence unanimously support the proposal for a three-month extension to adoption leave, with pay, in light of covid-19 and the lockdown.

*“This would be hugely beneficial. It would give us the opportunity to join toddler groups that the youngest as missed out on, for the children to rebuild relationships and start trusting those people they had just started to believe would be around but have now disappeared. It would also help us support our oldest in her transition into school as well as provide me with some respite.”*

*“We are desperately hoping that the government realise the impacts of lockdown on adopters and extend adoption leave by an additional 3 months to provide time for these children to build relationships with people outside of their households.”*

*“I truly believe that extra time to support these children to learn to function appropriately in society – skills they simply cannot learn during lockdown and had only just begun to explore prior to lockdown – would save the public purse in the future.”*

## Inequality in entitlements

There are various inequalities in parental leave entitlements between birth parents, on the one hand, and adopters and special guardians on the other. Firstly, self-employed adoptive parents are not entitled to an equivalent to the maternity allowance which self-employed birth mothers can access.

The [Statutory Guidance on Adoption: For local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies](#) published by the Department for Education in July 2013 states:

*"The local authority should consider making a payment of financial support equivalent to the Maternity Allowance to adoptive parents who are ineligible to receive SAP because of low earnings, length of service or self-employment, but otherwise satisfy the relevant criteria for Maternity Allowance."*

In other words, adoptive parents are encouraged to request an allowance from their local authority but there is no statutory right to this provision or guarantee of similar support.

In 2015, Adoption UK's former chief executive Hugh Thornbery was interviewed about this issue [on You & Yours](#) and said: "it's a real anomaly and self-employed adopters seem to have slipped through the net. It's an inequity which needs to be addressed".

In 2016, David Cameron commissioned [Julie Deane OBE to conduct a review of self-employment](#). She highlighted the fact self-employed adopters are disadvantaged as they do not receive the statutory entitlement or universal benefit. In the four years since this review, no action has been taken to address this disadvantage.

In response to a parliamentary question from Liberal Democrat MP, Layla Moran on this issue (February 2018), the BEIS minister Andrew Griffiths MP said:

*"while we agree with the principle of equalising benefits for the self-employed it is right to only consider making changes to this area once we have carefully considered this in the wider context of tax, benefits and rights over the longer term."*

The response appears to conflate the issue of equalising entitlements between employed and self-employed, with that of equalising entitlements between self-employed birth parents and self-employed birth parents. In reality, the extension of this entitlement is highly unlikely to have far-reaching effects for tax, benefits and labour markets in the short, medium or long-term but it would provide essential financial support for self-employed adopters.

The most recent attempt to address this inequality came in the shape of an [April 2018 petition](#) which received more than 800 signatures. Adoptive parents and prospective adopters regularly contact Adoption UK about this inequality and their inability to access financial help via their local authority or regional adoption agency.

A second equality issue is that where employers offer enhanced parental leave packages which go beyond statutory obligations, there is no requirement for them to provide an equally enhanced leave package for adoptive parents. As with the self-employed issue, this appears completely arbitrary.

The third inequality issue concerns the entitlements of special guardians to any form of parental leave and pay. This group currently has no entitlements to leave or pay despite the fact many other

entitlements available to adoptive families are also available to special guardianship families in recognition of the similar challenges their families face.

Numerous surveys of special guardians have found that [approximately half of kinship carers have to give up work to care for their child\(ren\)](#), because unlike adopters and birth parents, they are not entitled to paid leave for the child to settle in. Adoption UK is there calling for all current and recommended parental leave and pay entitlements for adoptive parents to be extended to special guardians.

### **Adopter recruitment and the government's adoption strategy**

In October 2019, the [Department for Education launched a new adopter recruitment drive](#) in response to adoptions falling by a third in just four years. Following an initial £645,000 investment, the [DfE injected a further £1m into the scheme in December 2019](#).\*

In January this year, then children's minister [Michelle Donelan wrote to all Directors of Children's Services](#) expressing concern about falling numbers of adoptions and confirming that adoption will be a priority for the new government. In her letter, she states: "we are determined to see adoption pursued whenever it is in a child's best interests and to develop a fully regionalised system where all children are matched with adoptive parents without undue delay".

If this government is, firstly, committed to prioritising adoption and, secondly, determined to address the adopter shortfall, then it must be prepared to deliver sufficient support for those coming forward to adopt. This entails guarantees of support underpinned by statutory obligations and backed by resources for effective implementation.

There are many areas where more can be done to ensure adoptive families are properly supported but an obvious starting point is adequate parental leave packages, for both employed and self-employed adopters. An adequate package must, at the very least, take account of the introductions that take place before a child comes to live with their adoptive family.

\*The recruitment drive has, understandably, been delayed as a result of the covid-19 emergency.

### **Recommendations**

- Extend adoption leave by three months, with pay, in light of covid-19
- Introduce enhanced shared parental leave for adoptive parents, to include time off for the introductions period in addition to existing leave entitlements, on a permanent basis
- Parental leave entitlements for self-employed birth parents to be extended to self-employed adoptive parents
- Statutory obligation on employers to extend enhanced parental leave packages for birth parents to adoptive parents
- Current and recommended parental leave entitlements for adoptive parents to be extended to special guardians
- A review of the advice given to new adopters to keep friends and family at a distance during early placement. Instead, improved guidance to be provided for adoptive family's support networks so that they can support early placement without disrupting attachment and settling in
- Local authorities to take a more active role in ensuring that newly-placed adopters can meet other local adopters as a universal support measure

- Immediate reinstatement of the duty on adoption agencies to review an adoptive placement within three months of placement
- Assess primary admissions procedures to explore flexibility around school starting age and the possible benefits of flexi-schooling during the early school years
- Department for Education to renew government's commitment to adoption strategy for the lifetime of this parliament
- Ensure future adopter recruitment drives are accompanied by robust post-adoption support plans for those coming forward to adopt

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