

**ADOPT
A BETTER
WAY:
NOT JUST
FOR THE
CHILDREN'S
SAKE**



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A BETTER
WAY**

FOREWORD BY FRANCESCA POLINI CHAIR, ADOPT A BETTER WAY

In 2012 we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of children entering the care system. In January alone 1,000 children were added to the list. Currently the number in the UK stands at around 67,000. That is 0.5% of our children. Whilst they are being removed from families who may be neglecting them or worse, their prospects going forward are bleak.

Adopt a Better Way campaigns for changes to the adoption system. We want people to see adoption for what it is: an equally valid, equally valued way of creating a family. It is a long, slow game. However, we are very proud of our achievements to date. Our media exposure and sustained pressure has placed the issue high on the government's agenda. From small beginnings, we have made serious inroads into the corridors of power and have played a key role in ensuring a 6% increase in adoptions in the past year.

This alone means hundreds of children who would otherwise have languished in care, are now with their new 'forever families'.

But it is nowhere near enough. The system of adoption and care in this country is in crisis and needs dramatic action.

We have prospective parents for children, but too often they are not getting past the multiple barriers to adoption. While it is crucial to have checks in the system, we are actually talking about race, religion, class and even living on the wrong street being used as excuses for kids and parents not being able to form a permanent family.

The latest Department for Education statistics for England revealed that the number of children waiting to be adopted has increased by around 15% since last year. When this statistic is combined with an increasing number of prospective parents, the travesty of the dwindling number of adoptions

becomes starkly apparent. Of the children in care available for adoption, only 2% in the year to March 2011 in England were under one, and the number of babies adopted declined in a year that saw the lowest number of adoptions in ten.

Why does this matter? Currently, the vast majority of children removed by their birth families were neglected, abused or both. When they enter the care system they are passed around from home to home amassing physical, mental and emotional problems. In effect they are being made to pay again by the care system for being unwanted. Not surprisingly this increases the chances of adoption breakdowns from 16% for children placed at age five, to 60% at nine and over – that's six out of ten children adopted going to be returned to care.

The impact on the children is huge, but we should also consider the impact on, and cost to, society as a whole. Children coming through care are 60 times more likely to join the ranks of the homeless and 50 times more likely to end up in prison; these are just two of the numerous brutal facts that point to a system that is destroying lives and is everyone's problem, not just theirs.

In addition the longer children are in the care system, the less chance they have of being adopted. When they are, the adoption is more likely to break down.

They are assigned to a permanent life in care along with all of the implications this brings. Effectively the system is creating a 'sell-by-date' for children.

Meanwhile for the others, care becomes a way of life, a de facto solution. As the initial findings of this study highlight this has far reaching consequences for the children. The life choices for too many of them become those of crime, homelessness and prostitution. This is not what we want for them; or our society.

Adoption is often the only way to ensure those children get the love, care and stability that only a permanent loving family can offer.

This National Adoption Week we are calling for the government to:

1. Guarantee that there are enough prospective adopters by breaking down walls between local authorities.

This would make it such that prospective parents in one borough can be matched with children waiting in another. We need to change the situation, so that authorities with a surplus of children to adopt can be easily aligned with authorities with more prospective parents. These families are literally just waiting to come together.

2. Ensure that Section 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights is applied in such a way that it is consistent with the fundamental principle of UK children's legislation – that the best interests of the child must be regarded as paramount.

At present, interpretations of the Convention have created conflict with this principle, and as a result there have been delays and rulings which have failed to prioritise children's welfare. This must stop and the family courts must ensure that the children come first.

Both of these action points could be brought into force relatively quickly and without primary legislation. Failure to do so fails our children.

They are however not sufficient to make the fundamental changes in a system that is not just overly bureaucratic, but is also lacking accountability and a unity of purpose to put the interest of the child at the heart of its decision making processes.

Minor changes and improvements, are of course necessary and will make a difference, however they do not get to the root of the problem – the fundamental basis of our broken adoption system needs to be challenged.

The government cannot avoid taking responsibility by placing the entire responsibility onto cash-strapped and under resourced local councils and social workers any longer. This situation is crying out for vision and leadership.

We continue to call for a government-led, regulating role that has the authority to produce and enforce legislation and monitor its application. Bringing together the social work and justice systems, it would build on the best of current practice with evidence based reforms, and create a rational control structure to ensure that current and future policies are enacted and their success measured.

We cannot waste any more time purely paying lip service to adoption. In doing so we are wasting lives, destroyed before they have a chance to begin.



Francesca Polini
Chair, Adopt a Better Way

To join in go to www.adoptabetterway.org

CARE IN CRISIS

There were over 89,000 looked-after children in the UK in 2011.^[1] Most of them (73%) were in foster care whilst 10% were in children's homes.^[2] The rest were cared for in a number of different settings including residential schools and placement with foster parents. A report by the Fostering Network for the same period showed a shortfall of almost 9,000 foster families.

Between 2004 And 2008 the number of children in foster care across the UK grew slowly but steadily from 49,265 to 51,408. This represents an average annual rate of increase of 1.1%. In the year 2009, that number rose by 2.5% and the proportion placed with their new parents fell by 8.5% so that 4.4% more children were looked after away from home. The annual rate of increase in the number of children in foster care jumped to 5.2% in 2009.^[3]

65,520 children were in care by the 31st of March 2011, an increase of 2% on 2010 and the highest number since 1987.^[4]

The one route out of care – adoption – has become increasingly problematic. Potential parents are often discouraged from taking applications further. Those who persist face a long wait – as does the child in care. It takes an average of 2.7 years for a child to be placed with a family after they have become adoptable.^[5] For ethnic-minority children it can take up to three times longer. Even a baby who enters the system, will have become a toddler before they are adopted.

The number of adoptions has continued to fall, with 3,050 adopted during year ending March 2011, 5% fewer than in 2010. The number of children placed for adoption has also continued to fall, to 2,450, a reduction of 2% on 2010 and a reduction of 10% on 2007.

Only 60 children under the age of one were adopted in the year ending March 2011, compared to 70 children in 2010 and 150 in 2007.^[6]

Most children are in care due to abuse or neglect (62%), family dysfunction (10%), absent parents (8%), and socially unacceptable behaviour (3%).^[7] Children

in the care of local authorities are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. The difficulties they face are multifaceted and often present right through adulthood.

MENTAL HEALTH, DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Going in and out of care and changing placements increases the likelihood of mental disorders.^[8] Children in care are 88 times more likely to suffer from mental health problems than the general population. 45% of children in care are assessed as having a mental health disorder.^[9]

37% of 5 to 17 year olds in care were judged to have 'conduct disorders' by a 2002 survey. 12% had emotional disorders and 7% were diagnosed with hyperkinetic disorders. That is far more than for the general population and is probably linked to pre-care experiences of abuse and neglect. If a child is continually moved around in care because of their 'difficult' behaviour, it increases their insecurity and lack of self-worth, which may reinforce the path to crime.^[10]

Almost a third of young people will misuse drugs and alcohol, within a year of leaving care.

Drug use can be both a symptom and a cause of social exclusion and has far reaching effects, especially for vulnerable groups such as care leavers who often struggle with depression, health issues, crime and homelessness.^[11]

PROSTITUTION

Time in the system effectively becomes a factor in how young people are "trapped" into prostitution and serious drug addiction.

The lack of any effective parenting or monitoring of already vulnerable children means that they are prime targets for men wanting to groom girls into sex work.

Those who had experience of state involvement in their upbringing had, on average, started selling their bodies at 17 – three years younger than those who had not been in care. Prostitutes with looked-after/in care backgrounds

start using hard drugs two years earlier than their counterparts – at just over fifteen years of age.^[12]

Although there is no single pattern about young adults becoming prostitutes, researches have shown that children living away from home, in particular those living in residential care settings, may be targeted by adults seeking to coerce them into prostitution. From research we know that children looked-after and/or in care, who run away, are particularly at risk of sexual exploitation.^[13]

In July 2012, nine men were found guilty for their part in a child sex ring which abused young care home resident schoolgirls, who were given drink and drugs.^[14]

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Of the children in care, 27% have statements of special educational need compared with 3% of the general child population.^[15] They are also 10 times more likely to be excluded from school. In 2011 only 13.2% of cared for children got 5 GCSEs at A*-C grades including English and mathematics, compared to 57.9% of other school children.^[16]

Moreover, they are 10 times more likely to attend a special school, 4 times less likely to go on to further education; 12 times more likely to leave school with no qualifications and 4 times more likely to be unemployed between the ages of 16 and 24.^[17]

Many people leaving the care system do not have access to work and career networks. This results in a lack of relevant work experience or knowledge about the world of work. This, coupled with low skills, poor education, health issues and little knowledge of employability skills, means that compared to 86% of all 19 year olds, fewer than 40% of children in care in London are in education or employment at 19.^[18]

CRIME

Children who have been in care are 50 times more likely to be sent to prison ^[19] and account for 49% of the 11,672 under 21 year olds in contact with the criminal justice system.

Children aged 10-17 who have spent 12 months or more in care were more than twice as likely as other children of that age to be convicted or to be warned or reprimanded. 27% of the adult prison population and half of all those in custody under 25 were in the care system.^[20]

SINGLE MOTHERS

There are now about two million single parent families in Britain, 2012. The vast majority are headed by a mother, hence millions of children are being raised in households where there is no father. The incidence of young women in care becoming young mothers is far higher compared with their non looked-after peers.

Figures show that 20% of women who leave care between the ages of 16 and 19 become mothers within a year, compared with just 5% of the total population at that age. Almost 50% of the young women leaving care were mothers within 18-24 months.^[21] Young men in care are also more likely to become young fathers.^[22]

Young people who have been in care are 2.5 times more likely to become teenage parents than the general population, and their children are then more than twice as likely to go into care themselves.^[23] Thus the situation is perpetuated.

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is endemic amongst care leavers; 40% of care leavers experience homelessness within the first six months of leaving local authority care.^[24] Around a third of people living on the streets have a background in care.^[25] Compared to the general population care leavers are 60 times more likely to join the ranks of the young homeless.^[26]

Homelessness, or instability in housing, can have catastrophic effects on other parts of a young person's life and achievements. For many, the sudden loneliness is difficult to cope with.

Having spent years living with others in care, they may feel as though they have moved to a life of isolation and limited support. After the age of 18, unless a care

leaver has children themselves, they are not considered 'vulnerable' enough for priority housing.^[27]

A broken system leads to a broken society: The societal and financial costs of not fixing the adoption system.

Many of the health and social care professionals have used different terminologies; data collection systems have been poor. As a consequence, correctly establishing even the initial findings of this study, to get a clear picture of the issues surrounding adoption, has been a complex business.

There are complex reasons why children enter the care system, and multiple possible solutions from that point onwards. It is clear however, that young people leaving out-of-home care are over-represented in the areas of unemployment, homelessness, teenage parents, disability, lack of formal qualifications and in the prison population.

As well as the cost to the children themselves, this crisis has high social and economic costs. Foster care alone costs the current government close to £2 billion. This does not include extra educational provision, state benefits, health and other related costs. There are 343 solo care homes across England, many charging councils almost ten times more than the annual fees at Eton.

A National Audit Office report in 2005 estimated that the nation spends around £1 billion a year to prevent, and deal with, homelessness.^[28] This includes central and local government spending on administration; accommodation and support to homeless people, but excludes indirect costs to government (e.g. arising from health or benefits).

The estimated total cost of youth crime for Great Britain was in excess of £1 billion in 2004, and the average annual overall cost of a prison place in England and Wales for financial year 2010-11 was £39,573. This includes prison related costs met by the National Offender Management Service, but excludes expenditure met by other government departments such as health and education.^[29]

The harmful consequences of imprisonment result in at

least £40,000 of further indirect costs to the state. These include continuing crime and higher unemployment after release.^[30] Improving the education, employment and training of care leavers to the level of their peers, could save an estimated £300 million over three years.

The scarring effects of youth unemployment at its current levels will ratchet up further future costs of £2.9 billion per year for the exchequer (equivalent to the entire annual budget for Jobcentre Plus) and £6.3 billion per year for the economy in lost output.^[31] Single mothers with two children cost the government between £71,000 and £154,000 per year.^[32] The total cost of mental ill health in England was £105.2 billion, including £21.3 billion in health and social care costs, £30.3 billion in lost economic output and £53.6 billion in human suffering.^[33]

This is just the cost to society of some of the issues incurred by so many children not growing up in a permanent home. Ultimately the figure is likely to run into billions. The disruption to society and to families, the discontent in communities, the effect on the future, not just of the children but everyone else, is immeasurable.

TIME TO GIVE THE CHILDREN A VOICE

These findings are preliminary but, we believe, strong enough to indicate a crisis in the care system, and to make a case for improving the adoption process.

It is evident by the data in this study that we do need to tackle the problem at its core. By providing support for children early on, and giving them the opportunity to be part of a new family environment, they are less likely to be stuck in the current vicious cycle of care and subsequently to worsen their mental health, and join the ranks of homeless, crime, prostitution etc.

A dramatic decrease in the numbers of children in care would in turn make care much more manageable. Cash strapped councils could invest their funds to ensure that children, foster families and biological families receive the much needed psychological, health and other kind of support before, during and after care. We know adoption is not a panacea; neither should it be the only answer for

all children who have ended up in care. Fostering, kinship and other solutions are sometimes the best approach for children who cannot return to their biological families.

However we also know that due to unnecessary delays, literally thousands of children identified for adoption each year are denied the chance of a loving home at an age where they would be able to integrate more easily into a permanent family and later on into society.

There were 3,050 looked-after children adopted during the year ending 31 March 2011. This represents a 5% decrease from the previous year's figure of 3,200 and a 8% decrease from the 2007 figure of 3,330.^[34]

The number of looked-after children placed for adoption decreased from 2,690 to 2,500 between 2009 and 2010 and has continued to fall in 2011. It is therefore likely that the number of looked-after children adopted will continue to decrease in 2012.^[35]

The majority of adopted children are aged between 1 and 4 years at adoption; of all looked-after children adopted, 71% are in this age group with the average age at adoption being 3 years and 10 months. There were 820 adoptions of children aged 5 and over, a decrease from 2010 when 880 looked-after children in this age group were adopted.^[36]

This is not about making adoption easier or faster for everyone. It is about removing the obstacles and blockages in the system, so that those who want to adopt and those who have been identified as available for adoption, can be brought together more quickly and without unnecessary delays. Doing this would greatly reduce the chances of fragile, vulnerable children becoming even more damaged and therefore 'undesirable'.

Our findings indicate that the sooner children are adopted the less problematic it is for everyone concerned. Positive early placements would bring significant financial and societal benefits in terms of reducing the burden that will be reduced on local authorities, the government and ultimately society as a whole. But first we need to lift what burdens we can, from children.

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Oona King
Baroness King of Bow

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