



All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence: Minutes from Online Roundtable on the National Adoption Strategy

Monday 28 February 2022, 4-5.30pm, via Zoom

Attendees:

APPGAP: Rachael Maskell MP (*Chair*), Tim Loughton MP, Bill Esterson MP, Edward Timpson MP, Lord Russell, and Peter Gibson MP (*Officers*)

Other confirmed Parliamentarians: Munira Wilson MP, Caroline Ansell MP, Baroness Watkins, Lord Watson, Gagan Mohindra MP, Lord Triesman, Bambos Charalambous MP, and Lord Taylor.

Panel: Sarah Johal, National Adoption Strategic Lead
Gail Spray, Head of Service, Adoption Counts Regional Adoption Agency
Alison Lewis, Service Director, Adoption West Regional Adoption Agency
Krish Kandiah, Chair of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board

Introduction from Chair, Rachael Maskell MP for York Central

- Last year we embarked on an inquiry on 'strengthening families', and we're really pleased with the participation we've had with that.
 - Over 800 adopted children, adopters and professionals participated and informed findings. A comprehensive piece of work and a blueprint of the work we want to do from here.
- We're not just looking at finding a family, but at building a family for the future.
- Looking at challenges is really important. We see the government recognising that every child should have the best start, and be given the chance to reach their full potential.

Will Quince, Minister for Children and Families

- My role is very unique because it is a cross-government role:
 - Advocating for children and young people
 - Ensuring that wherever possible, we are working to improve the life-chances of children, regardless of the challenges they might face.
- Whilst about 2800 children were adopted last year, there are still over 2000 children waiting for a permanent home. Around half of these children have been waiting for over 18 months – this should worry us even more.
- Strengthening Families is at the very heart of levelling up, the postcode lottery must end.
- Although we are making great progress with things like the Adoption Support Fund (which has been extended to 2025), the shorter approval process, the better and faster matching; there is much more to do.
- I want to see a culture of continuous improvement. Listening to children and families. I want to see systems that are designed around the needs of children. It is about finding families for children not children for families. That starts with listening to you and organisations like yours.

Claire Hailwood, Adoptive Parent

- The reality is that lots of adoptive families are struggling to get the support they need. There is the perception that once a child is placed with a family, the Government can wash their hands of the child, but the reality couldn't be further from the truth.
- All adopted children have experienced trauma and therefore need support at different points in their lives across their lifetimes. It is equally important that the right support and great support continues to be available throughout different points of their life.
- We are experienced adoptive parents, but it has still been incredibly difficult for us as a family. We only received help when we were at crisis point, and that help was limited and inconsistent which created a barrier.
- Advocating for my children is like fighting for support, but if this strategy were implemented it might not feel like that.

Will Quince, Minister

- We need to design a system that works for everyone.
- My hope is that the National Adoption Scheme and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Review will sort some of the problems.
- We must ensure that every teacher is a teacher of SEND
- Have to be alive to the fact that adoptive children are more likely to experience trauma
- We must work really closely with aspects of the Care Review to ensure this is possible.

Sarah Johal

- Adoption support starts at the beginning of the adoption process
- We need to normalise adoption support
- Important to have a clear understanding of the child's needs
- Centre of excellence around the support: Government is keen for us to establish this

Krish Kandiah

- Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership board have a task group looking into Adoption Support, previously chaired by Sue Armstrong-Brown from AUK (now Alison Woodhead, AUK)
- We think schools are a really important part of the support package, because when parents and schools work together, they can provide wrap-around support
- Trauma-informed schools are really important

Alison Lewis

- Postcode lottery is a big challenge
- We know that across the country, adoption support is fragmented in terms of how it is offered and the way it is offered
- We are encouraging each RAA to do an audit of their adoption support service so that we can map that across the country
- Would welcome the opportunity to strategically develop our services

Edward Timpson

- We must ensure national standards for adoption agencies
- Align infrastructure in schools
- Ensure better outcomes in the systems so that we are working at a high standard

Gail Spray

- We need to evidence progress that we are making so that we can show this across the region
- At the moment, there are very different measures relating to adoption support across the country
- The (support) audit means that we are acknowledging that there is difference, but starting early assessment and following a child throughout the journey is something we want to do universally

Rachael Maskell MP

- Our Inquiry found that education is one of the most challenging areas of life for adoptive families
- Do we agree that we need to ensure that our education settings have a trauma-informed approach right across the board?

Krish Kandiah

- As part of a pilot, 200 (Church of England) schools are on a learning journey to figure out what it means to be a trauma-informed school

Sarah Johal

- Doesn't stop at training, it is about embedding that approach into the school culture

Gail Spray

- Simplest changes make the biggest difference to children: we need to recognise that they are emotional beings and that small changes make a big difference
- Reducing anxiety management programmes have been a huge benefit to the way adopted children are seen

Placing children:

- **Krish Kandiah:**
 - We need to place the needs of the children centrally; the most important person in this system must be the child
 - We too often connect infertility with adoption
 - Black children wait the longest
 - If people know that support is there, they might be more willing to adopt children with more complex needs
- **Sarah Johal:**
 - Working with adoption agencies to look at regional activity
 - Adoption support package right at the start of the adoption is important
- **Alison Lewis:**
 - The issue of early permanence – could it be there for longer, and for older children?

Questions:

Lord Watson:

Pupil premium plus could be one of the ways to measure the effectiveness of the support children are getting in school. This information is not captured at present. How can we make sure that information is captured?

- **Sarah Johal:** pupil premium plus is an agreement between the adopted family and school.. We haven't got very far with how we can better understand what works for children. The question Lord Watson asks is very pertinent, and I don't have an answer. **Krish Kandiah:** We have an adopter reference group where we hear the views of adopters and adoptees. We find that schools can't currently

provide for the needs of adoptive children, so parents reluctantly home school, but because of this, parents are at a disadvantage, because they can't access pupil premium money.

- PPP funding is only for state schools not private schools
- Could the pupil premium be transferred to the individual child, as opposed to the wider school?
- **Alison Woodhead:** AUK has recently done some research talking to adopters who are also educational professionals.
- Despite best intentions, and government investment, the systems are not working because they were designed for children in care not adopted, and so accountability mechanisms are connected to that.
- When talking about children who are adopted, it is much more difficult to hold schools to account. That is the issue with pupil premium plus. There are structural reasons why this isn't working properly.
- Call for the DfE to do research: these mechanisms are sticking plasters, and will not work unless every teacher understands trauma