



All Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence: Session Minutes

Tuesday, 28th March 17.00 – 18.30PM
Room N, Portcullis House

In attendance:

Rachael Maskell MP (Chair)
Sarah Green MP (Vice Chair)
Lord Russell of Liverpool
Edward Timpson MP
Kevin Hollinrake, Minister for Enterprise, Markets and Small Business
Emily Frith (CEO, Adoption UK)
Sarah Johal (National Adoption Strategic Lead, RAA Leaders)
Mark Owers (Chair, The National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group)
Not a Fictional Mum (Adoptive parent)
Gaby (Adoptive parent)
Sam Lomas (Secretariat)
Lucy Colman (Secretariat)
Katharine Salcombe (Secretariat)
Liz Saville Roberts MP

Apologies:

Tim Loughton MP (Vice Chair)
Peter Gibson MP

Introduction from Chair Rachael Maskell MP

- Welcoming remarks / introductions

Self-employed adopter experience

- NFM and Gabby shared their experience of being adoptive parents and the impact of a lack of equivalent to maternity pay.

Recap on main findings of APPG Self Employed adopter survey

- Katharine (AUK) reminded the APPGAP of the journey to this point and shared the main findings of the self-employed adopter survey.
- There were three key findings: (1) 60% of self-employed adopters reported a lack of an equivalent to statutory maternity allowance had affected the amount of time they had taken off work during the first months of their child's placement. (2) 90% of adopters said their social worker had failed to advise them to apply directly to the local

authority for a discretionary payment. (3) 63% of prospective adopters who had not yet commenced the assessment process said a lack of statutory support played a major role in their decision to delay starting the assessment process to adopt.

Kevin Hollinrake, MP, Minister for Enterprise, Markets and Small Business remarks

- Minister Hollinrake expressed his understanding of the trauma involved with adopted children as well as his understanding of the challenges of being self-employed.
- Minister Hollinrake does not believe this issue to be a loophole in legislation and expressed that money is provided to local authorities who are responsible for discretionary payments.
- Minister Hollinrake has requested a meeting with DWP and DfE and Treasury to work as a quad of Ministers to see how support can be better provided for self-employed adopters.

Comments and questions

- Rachael Maskell welcomed comments and questions from the room.
- Edward Timpson encouraged two actions. (1) Discretionary payments. Where there are local authorities who are making it known, it is much more likely to happen. In the short term can the Minister write to Local Authorities and tell them this is something they should be doing. (2) In the medium to long-term, the Government's commitment through the Care Review to provide support for Kinship Care is an opportunity to widen support out self-employed adopted parents.
- Liz Saville Roberts MP shared the story of a self-employed constituent who is detrimentally affected by current policy.
- Lord Russell expressed that the child must come first but at the moment the child is not at the centre of it.
- Katharine (AUK) explained that the small number of social workers who did suggest to self-employed adopters that they could apply for discretionary payments do so knowing that the adopters have a case for it and are likely to be successful. So, it's not a question of LAs not knowing about this provision but whether they perceive the prospective carer to be successful in their application for financial support.
- Minister Hollinrake asked NFM and Gabby about their experience. NFM would not be confident of receiving discretionary pay. Gabby was not made aware of the discretionary payments.
- Rachell Maskell MP highlighted the cost to the state when a child remains in the care system, who could have been adopted by a self-employed adopter but was prevented from adoption due to current policy.

- Katharine (AUK) explained that typical cost to the state for a child remaining in the care system until the age of 18 is 1.4 million per child.
- Lord Russell asked whether Minister Hollinrake knows what the policy is in his own constituency.
- Minister Hollinrake said he was not aware but what write to find out the policy and encouraged parliamentary colleagues to do the same.
- Sarah Johal Highlighted that discretionary payments are means tested. Sarah is aware that current policy is a barrier to second time adopters, and a particularly pressing issue for adopters considering adopting a younger brother or sister. Sarah also highlighted a lack of awareness among agencies and social workers.
- Minister Hollinrake asked whether anyone has quantified the cost annually of introducing statutory pay for self-employed adopters?
- Katharine (AUK) explained that after calculations it's estimated it would cost the treasury £1.8million annually.
- Minister Hollinrake recognised that this is a false economy. Minister Hollinrake agreed to write to LAs to ensure best practice. Minister Hollinrake referred again to the meeting with DWP, DfE and Treasury and would inform the APPGAP of the outcome of that meeting.

APPGAP stock take

Changing adoption landscape (Emily Frith)

- Nearly 100 years on from passing adoption act in 1926. Today adoption is seen as a last resort but is vital for many children who a provided a permanent family and a loving, stable and safe home. Evidence shows that adopted children have enhanced outcomes in health, education and future employment when compared to other care placements.
- We estimate there are 55,000 adoptive families in the UK. The profile of adopters is changing. Whilst most adopters used to choose adoption because they were unable to have children, we are now seeing more families who are taking on adoption as a first choose for growing their family as well as more single adopters and more LGBTQ+ adopters.
- Access to support is the biggest issue that comes up for us at Adoption UK. Most children who are placed for adoption will have had significant trauma with experience of loss, neglect, and abuse in their early years. There is still a myth that adoption is a happy ending. Adoption doesn't end trauma. Supported is needed throughout an adopted persons life.
- There has been good progress in recent years to improve the system; therapeutic support offered through the Adoption Support Fund and targeted support in school with designated teachers and the pupil premium plus. However, we are now in the 5th year

of our adoption barometer survey which shows gaps in support continue with three quarters of families report facing a continual struggle for support.

- One issue that has come up a lot and has been focused on recently is contact with birth families. This is so important and as more adoptive people have their voices heard, understanding identity and where you come from is really crucial. We found that 65% of adoptees felt that direct contact with birth families should be the norm and called for more support for maintaining contact. AUK would like to see the creation of a national support service for contact.
- Another issue that has come up is that adoption is lifelong, but there is a growing recognition that a lot of support ends at 18. Many people who are adopted face significant barriers when trying to access personal records, including delays or missing or inaccurate records. Three quarters of adoptees said they didn't have the information they needed and only 80% had a summary of their birth family and medical history.
- Whilst limited therapeutic support is available whilst a child is under 18, this stops at adulthood. Yet the effects of trauma don't stop. Three quarters of adult adoptees told us they didn't know where to access adoption specific counselling and mental health services.
- In summary, adoption is ever changing. Adoption is becoming more open and more centred on the needs of the adopted child. We believe adoption is and should remain a vital part of the care system where a child cannot live with their birth family. For adoption to lead to the best outcomes, adopted people need the right support in childhood and throughout their lives.

Priorities for Adoption (Sarah Johal)

- The Government launched the national adoption strategy in 2021. As regional adoption agency leaders we have been working to implement that strategy as well as some of our own key priorities.
- A challenge is around open adoption and maintenance of family relationships for children and connections. We have launched a pilot called the letterswap pilot which is trying to bring the traditional letterbox exchange system into the 21st century and modernise it through using a digital platform. We are piloting letter swap across five regional adoption agencies, and we have the University of East Anglia involved providing an academic overview. An issue that is coming up is around the support that is required for birth families.
- We have had some funding from the Government around early permanence. We have launched some national practice standards for early permanence, and we are hoping to see a more consistent approach to early permanence across the country.
- We are interested in quality of practice. Across regional adoption agencies you can see the difference in practice across different LAs. We are working with our colleagues in LAs to look at what the key priorities we need to work with them on are.

- The Government has provided us with funding for developing centres of excellence for adoption support, which is essentially looking at a multi-disciplinary approach across health, social care and education to better provide support for adopted children.
- We are looking at pan-regional approaches to commissioning adoption support services, as well as thinking about whether there is benefit in doing national commissioning of services. We are proposing a programme of work over the next two years to explore these two issues in-particular.
- We have been looking at is matching children with adopters. We are seeing the statistics start to change. We are matching children more quickly, particularly those children who are over the age of 5; siblings; children from black and minority ethnic groups. We've got a long way to go to get this right, but we are growing in our understanding of the issues facing those children. We have 11 pilots going on across the country to fund projects looking specifically at some of those different groups. Children with disability is a particular issue of concern.
- The voice and influence of children and young people. For many years we haven't listened very well to the voices of children and young people. We have appointed a voice and influence lead to work with the 32 regional adoption agencies to look at how we can better ensure that children and young people are at the centre of this strategy and that they influence the development and delivery of services moving forward.

Priorities for adopter recruitment (Mark Owers)

- We have a three-year strategy with four core elements.
 - o (1) reduce the delay for children waiting for adoption.
 - Identify and address points of delay.
 - Increase early permanence placements.
 - o (2) increase diversity of adopters.
 - A particular focus on BAME and LGBTQ+ prospective adopters.
 - Work is being done around faith literacy training and around a quarter of all adopters are from the LGBTQ+ community but this could increase.
 - o (3) improve the adopter experience
 - Service standards
 - Improving relationships
 - Workforce development
 - Continuous improvement
 - o (4) greater awareness of adoption
 - Campaigns
 - National adoption week
 - Adoption champions

AOB

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