

The Adoption Barometer

A stocktake of adoption in the UK

June 2021



AdoptionUK
Together we're family

Contents

Foreword	03
Introduction	04
A note about language	06
Summary of key findings and recommendations	07
About the data	17
Detailed analysis	19
Approvals and matching	20
Newly placed adoptive families	29
Established adoptive families	39
Families with older adopted children	59
In focus: transitions to adulthood	67
Nation by nation	85
England	86
Northern Ireland	92
Scotland	95
Wales	98
References	101



Foreword



As an adoptee just coming into adulthood, I really recognise the importance of *The Adoption Barometer* in giving adoptive families a voice, and the change it encourages. This year's report comes at a time where, due to the upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic, it's more important than ever that adoptive families and their needs are listened to and acted upon.

Reading this year's Barometer, I relate to the wonderful moments and the hardships of life as an adoptive family, and the life-changing power of adoption. It's evident that although support for adoptees and their families has improved significantly over the last decade, so much more still needs to be done, from the early stages and into teen and adult years, when support is often dropped.

It's clear that two significant areas for improvement are access to mental health services, particularly in the transition from adolescent to adult services, and support in education. Many teachers are receptive to adoptive families, but often aren't sufficiently trauma informed to give that essential everyday support at school, so it's important that all teachers are made aware of the additional difficulties trauma and adoption bring. It's an ongoing struggle for adoptive families to find accommodation in our education system for the very different social, emotional and educational needs of adoptees. Trauma is life-lasting and adopted people often need accessible support well into adulthood. Like other adoptees, I'm still processing my history and will be for many years. With access to the right support at the right time, the need for intervention would be less later on, so improving young people's potential in the future.

It's crucial that adoptive parents receive accurate knowledge and active support throughout their adoption journey. We should ensure that adoption support plans are shared and implemented, and that they not only address the impact of the past and needs of the present, but the needs of the future too. Those who aren't 'new' adopters must have a guarantee of support as, for many, the present level offered isn't enough. This support is necessary for adoptive placements to thrive in the long term.

In a time where the focus is on 'going back' to pre-pandemic ways, we must ensure that for the adoption community, our focus is on going forwards in terms of giving adopters the support they need. Despite the struggles adoptive families have faced this year, with 75% of families saying they'd recommend adoption, with the right support, there is great hope for both adoptees and their families.

Lucy Reynolds

Contributor to *The Wild Track: adopting, mothering, belonging* by Margaret Reynolds, and volunteer with the charity Body and Soul

Introduction

The Adoption Barometer 2021 provides the most comprehensive assessment available of the experiences of prospective adopters and adoptive families during 2020 – a year in which the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the life of every person in the UK.

What emerges from the results of a survey of 2,452 adopters and prospective adopters, and 159 adopted young people and adults, is the extraordinary flexibility, resilience, and determination of all those involved in adoption.

However, there is no doubt that the challenges families reported in previous *Adoption Barometer* reports were still there in 2020 and have been exacerbated by the impact of restrictions in place due to Covid-19. Education, adoption support, and helping children who display trauma-fuelled aggression and violence continue to be priorities for adoptive parents.

Yet there is hope. Where national policies have been revised to address the concerns of adopted people and their families, their experiences have improved. In 2019, the Welsh government announced the provision of £2.3m for adoption services in Wales. In 2020, adopter experiences in Wales have improved at both approvals and matching stage, and also among families with older adopted children.

In view of the importance of policy in driving change, the *Adoption Barometer* gives a score of 'poor', 'fair' or 'good' to each nation's policy in key areas. These scores are based on Adoption UK's own assessment criteria derived from years of experience and research about what works best for adoptive families. Alongside policy scores, we also provide scores for the experiences of adoptive families and prospective adopters based on survey results, so that we can see how policy is affecting practice, and its impact on the daily lives of adoptive families.

Previous *Adoption Barometer* reports have highlighted a lack of effective policy in place to support families with older adopted children, and resultant poor experiences for too many families and young people. This year, the 'In focus' section shines a spotlight on young people's transitions to adulthood, bringing together the perspectives of both adoptive parents and adopted young people and adults.

What comes through most clearly is the importance of stable family relationships, with adoptive parents who are well supported to help their children as they explore all aspects of adoption, their life journey, and their identity. The findings make a powerful case for flexible, expert, and timely support for the whole family, beginning at the moment the prospective adopter takes their first step to becoming a parent and continuing throughout the adopted person's childhood and into adulthood.

There is no doubt 2020 was an extraordinary year with extraordinary challenges. Discussions around trauma and mental health have been catapulted into the spotlight like never before. However, *The Adoption Barometer 2021* provides a timely reminder that early childhood trauma has lifelong impacts which adoptive families and adopted young people and adults will continue to grapple with long after the pandemic has faded into memory.

As the nation begins to move on from the upheaval of Covid-19, Adoption UK will continue to campaign for an equal chance for adoptive families. We are calling for a number of policy and practice changes across the UK, which are set out in each section of the report.

Summary of recommendations

1. Create and implement quality standards for the journey of prospective adopters through preparation, approvals and matching.
2. Introduce ringfenced, multi-year government funding for adoption support.
3. Produce support plans for every child to be placed for adoption, agreed with adopters before placement, anticipating future as well as current support needs and annually reviewed.
4. All adoption agencies to have a duty to secure and deliver the support identified in a child's support plan.
5. Train all education and health professionals in early childhood trauma and associated conditions, including fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and attachment disorder.
6. Provide targeted support to adopted young people who are approaching adulthood, by improving the transition from child to adult services and extending adoption support to at least age 26.

A note about language

The language used to describe the people and processes involved in adoption is constantly under scrutiny. There is a valuable, ongoing conversation around the need to ensure that our language does not harm, dehumanise or denigrate anyone.

As the *Adoption Barometer* aims to evaluate existing government policy and assess how effectively it is being put into practice, we have chosen, where necessary, to use the terms that appear in government documentation. We recognise that some of these terms may be considered problematic and that there are national differences. Our intention is simply to ensure clarity for the reader.

The following terms will be used throughout the report:

Adopted person: as a result of consultations with adopted young people and adults, we have chosen to use the term 'adopted person' in preference to 'adoptee'.

Care experienced: this term describes a child or young person who is looked after, or has previously been looked after, whether they have returned to family, left care as a result of a legal permanence order (including adoption) or 'aged out' of care as a 'care leaver'.

Child leaving the family home prematurely: sometimes referred to as 'disruption', 'family breakdown' or 'adoption breakdown', this phrase aims to describe the situation that occurs when a child leaves their adoptive or permanent home prematurely, including those who then become looked after under any legal order.

Contact: this refers to the formal or informal arrangements made for adopted and previously looked after children to communicate, meet, or spend time with members of their birth family.

Early permanence: an umbrella term to describe pathways (including concurrency and fostering for adoption) designed to minimise the number of moves through the care system that a child will experience before permanence.

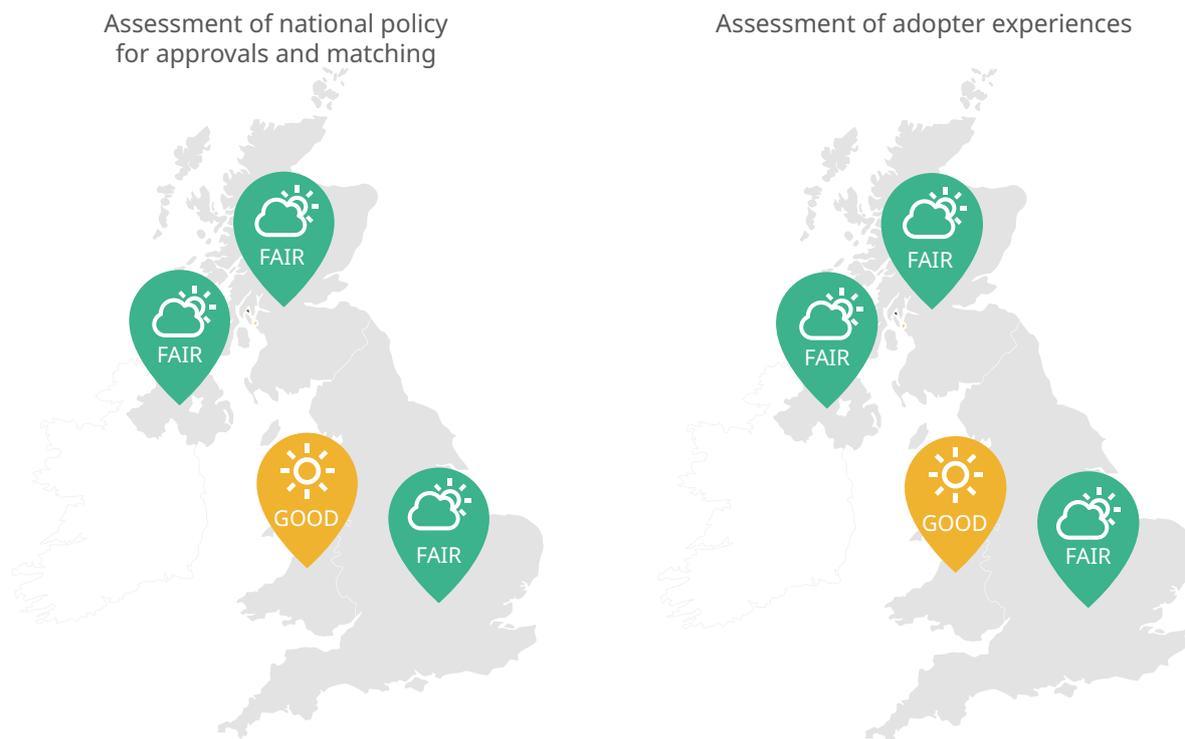
Looked after child: this term describes a child or young person that is currently in the care of the local authority.

Previously looked after child: a child or young person who has left local authority care as a result of adoption or other legal permanence order.

Summary of key findings and recommendations



Approvals and matching process



Scores for adopter experiences during approvals and matching in 2020 remain the same as for 2019 in England and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, the score has improved from 'poor' to 'fair' due to more positive evaluations of preparation and training, and higher confidence in the availability of adoption support. In Wales the score has improved from 'fair' to 'good' due to increased confidence in the availability of adoption support.

Key statistics

- 50% said that the quality of the initial information event influenced their choice of adoption agency
- 89% agreed that the training they attended was informative and useful
- 49% felt there had been times when the process seemed so difficult, they wondered if they could continue
- Respondents in 2020 were more likely to complete their approvals process within 12 months than those in 2019
- 55% felt that Covid-19 restrictions had made their process more difficult than it would otherwise have been

The majority of prospective adopters continue to be positive about the training and preparation they receive, as well as the level of understanding and support from their social workers. There is some evidence of an increasing willingness to consider adopting sibling groups, and to pursue early permanence routes, although there has been no evidence of an increase in willingness to consider a wider age range of children.

More than half felt that Covid-19 restrictions had made their process more difficult than it otherwise would have been but, despite this, a greater proportion completed their process within 12 months than in any previous Barometer report, highlighting the efforts of agencies and individuals across the UK to adapt rapidly to the shifting uncertainties created by a global pandemic.

Recommendations

1. Set national timescales for preparation and approval

All UK nations to have recommended timescales for each stage of the approvals process, from initial contact with the agency up to approvals panel, and timescale targets for all agencies. All these timescales to be centrally monitored on an annual basis.

2. Treat prospective adopters as partners in the preparation and approval process

Recognise that the active and willing participation of prospective adopters is essential to the adoption system by prioritising a culture of respectful relationships, supported learning, and informed consent within all aspects of preparation, approval and matching. Agencies should aim to reduce the proportion of prospective adopters who find the process so difficult that they wonder whether they can continue from half to below 10%.

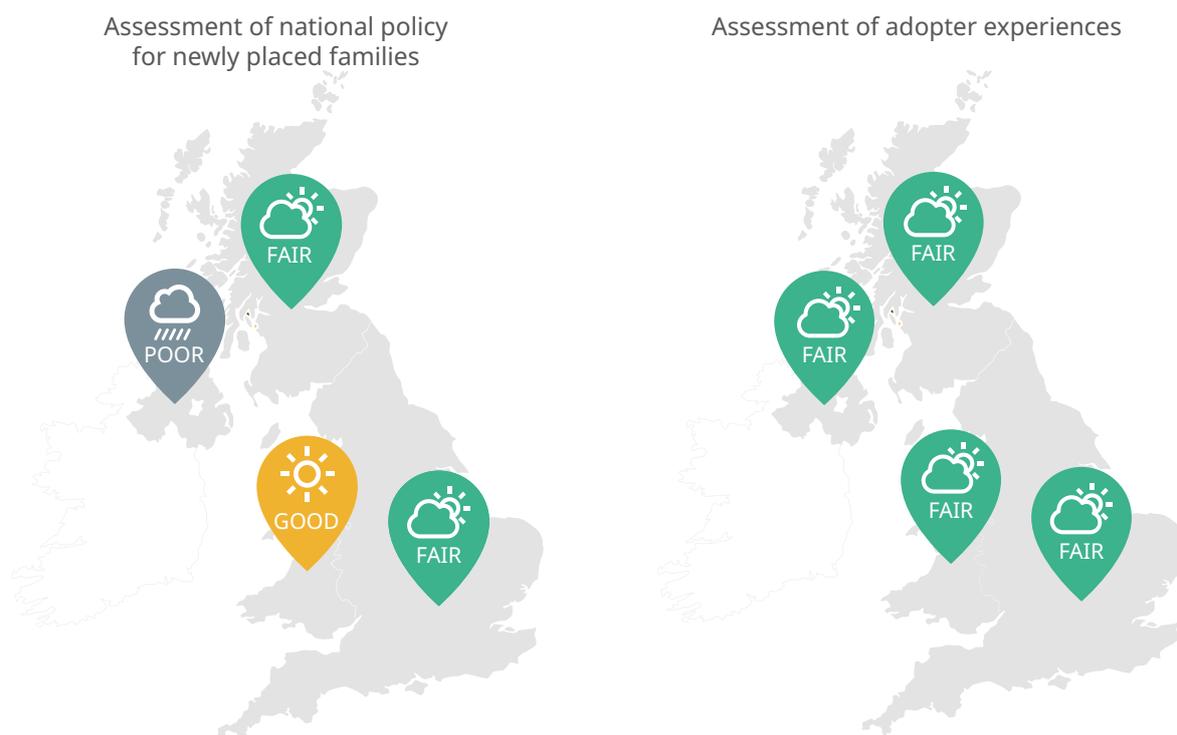
3. Tailor preparation courses to meet family's needs

Agencies to reflect the differing needs of prospective adopters in the preparation course, tailoring to accommodate the requirements of those with a disability, single adopters and the range of cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Tailored preparation to be provided for those planning to adopt a sibling group, adopting for a second time or pursuing foster for adoption and concurrent care.

4. Build life story training into preparation courses

Life story work training to be built into preparation courses to give parents additional tools to help their children recover.

Newly placed adoptive families



Scores for both policy and the experiences of newly placed adopters in 2020 remain the same as in 2019 across all nations.

Key statistics

- 85% felt that their introductions were well handled and ran smoothly
- 81% felt that their social workers were supportive during the early weeks and months
- 24% did not think they were given all the information they needed before their child/children moved into their family
- 71% said that they did not have a written adoption support plan in place
- 48% had not received their child's life story materials
- 97% had agreements for indirect contact with birth family members
- 77% were willing to consider future direct contact with birth family members

Newly placed adopters are those whose children were first placed with them during 2020. They were largely positive about the support they received during the early weeks and months, although the majority either did not have, or were not aware of written adoption support plans at the time of their child's placement.

Many were unhappy that the government's Covid-19 restrictions did not make the same allowances for newly formed adoptive families as were made for parents of newborns. They noted the lack of face-to-face support from social workers, and limited opportunities to receive support from family and friend networks.

The proportion receiving life story materials by the end of the year in which they had obtained an adoption order is low and has not improved over three years of *The Adoption Barometer*. Adopters in

Wales were significantly more likely to receive their life journey materials in a timely manner. However, adopters' opinions of the quality of these materials have improved, with 72% rating the life story book (or equivalent) as 'good' or 'adequate'.

Almost all new adopters had agreements for indirect contact with at least one member of their child's birth family, and the proportion who were willing to consider direct contact in the future has increased since last year.

Recommendations

1. Provide an assessment of need and support plan for every child

A full therapeutic assessment for every child with a permanence plan, to be carried out before placement. The assessment should inform a clear written support plan, anticipating future as well as current support needs, agreed with the adopters before placement, and linked to a commitment to provide the support that is needed.

2. Correct adoption leave inequality

Entitlements to statutory adoption leave and pay for self-employed adopters to be brought into line with maternity entitlements for the self-employed.

3. Give all new adopters access to peer support

Adoption agencies to ensure all their new adopters are given access to peer support from the early months of placement – for example through peer mentoring, buddying or community groups.

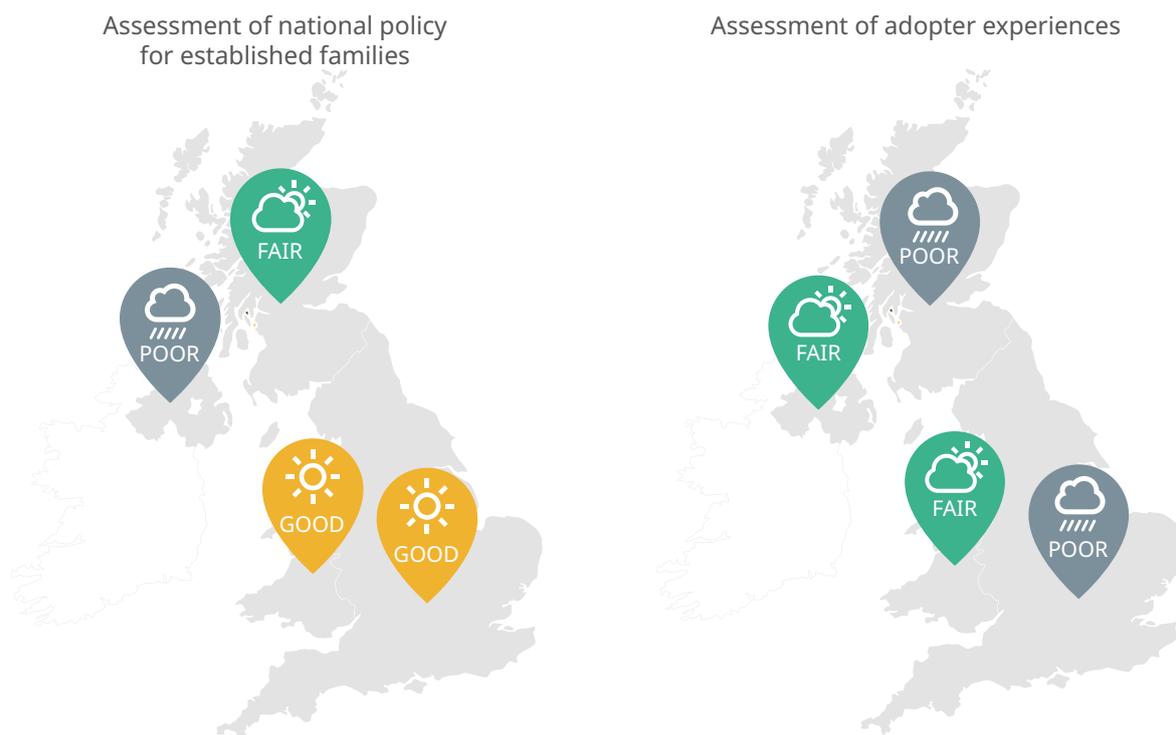
4. Strengthen life journey support

Governments to issue clear guidance to all agencies about the expected quality of life story materials. Life story materials to be provided to new adopters at the time of placement. Newly placed families to be offered life journey training to explore how to begin support their child's understanding and acceptance of their story.

5. Protect adoptive families by eliminating data breaches

All agencies to ensure the anonymity of adoptive families is protected, by reviewing measures to prevent data breaches and providing regular training for all professionals involved.

Established adoptive families



Scores for both policy and adopter experiences in 2020 remain the same as in 2019 across all nations, with the exception that the policy score for Scotland has increased from 'poor' to 'fair' due to a re-evaluation of Scotland's statutory guidance and legislation.

Key statistics

- 75% would encourage others to consider adoption
- 80% felt optimistic about their family's future
- 75% were experiencing challenges in 2020
- 61% requested adoption support from their agency during 2020
- 49% said that their family's need for support increased during the Covid-19 pandemic
- 81% of indirect contact agreements were still being maintained by adoptive parents
- 55% do not feel that their child's teachers had a good understanding of the needs of care-experienced children
- 77% agreed that school closures had a negative impact on their child's wellbeing

While adoptive families have undoubtedly faced additional challenges due to Covid-19, their underlying concerns remain consistent with previous Barometer findings, focusing on education, coping with violent and aggressive behaviour, and accessing timely and appropriate support. The proportion who feel they face a continual struggle to get the help and support they need has remained unchanged across three years of *The Adoption Barometer*.

Although there is evidence that agencies increased the virtual provision of universal services during the Covid-19 pandemic, most adopters were not able to access training or support groups through their agencies, with many unaware of the existence of such services. Those who did access universal support were positive about its quality and impact.

More than one third of those who contacted their agency in significant or severe difficulties were only offered universal* services rather than tailored enhanced support services. However, those who did receive enhanced support services were more positive about its impact than last year.

Contact with birth families continues to be a significant factor in the lives of adoptive families. The majority of respondents were maintaining their indirect contact agreements, although that proportion fell among older children, but participation of birth family members is lower, suggesting that all involved need more support to make this service effective. Contact with birth siblings was the most enduring.

*Universal services are standard support services that should be made available to every adoptive family regardless of individual circumstance, such as advice and guidance, signposting, general training, and support groups.

Recommendations

1. Secure long-term funding for adoption support

A 10-year commitment to the Adoption Support Fund in England; multi-year ring-fenced funding to be introduced in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

2. Train education and health professionals in early childhood trauma and associated conditions

From initial teacher training and beyond, all education professionals should be trained and resourced (through targeted funding) to support the needs of care experienced children, including those adopted internationally. Training should include understanding of highly prevalent conditions such as FASD and attachment disorder.

3. Improve data on adopted children in school

All governments to collect and analyse data on attainment, special needs and exclusions for adopted children.

4. Improve support for birth family contact

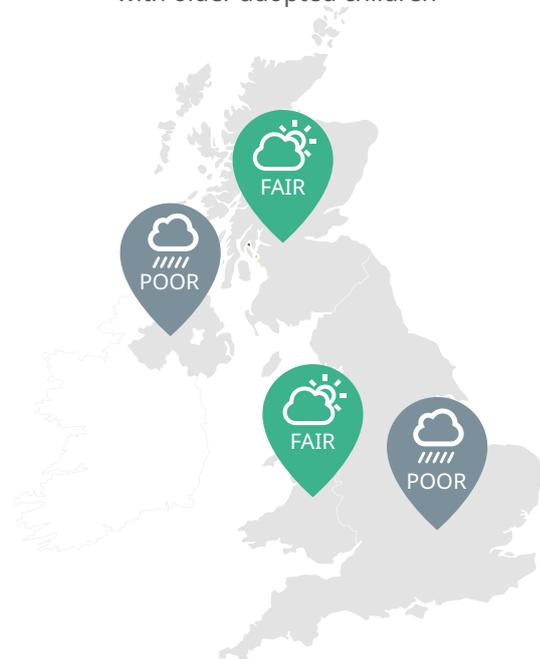
All adopters to be offered specific training and support relating to their child's contact arrangements. All contact plans to be reviewed regularly with the family and experienced staff at their agency to ensure that all participants – including birth family – are well supported.

5. Provide family support when children leave home prematurely

In circumstances where children leave home prematurely, adoptive families should be provided with support from social workers with knowledge of adoption and skill in re-unification. Support should include help to repair and rebuild relationships wherever possible.

Families with older adopted children

Assessment of national policy for families with older adopted children



Assessment of adopter experiences



Scores for policy in 2020 remain the same as in 2019 across all nations. The assessment of adopter experiences is unchanged from 2019 in England and Scotland but has fallen in Northern Ireland from 'fair' to 'poor' whereas in Wales it has risen from 'poor' to 'fair'.

Key statistics

- 59% of respondents with older children would encourage others to consider adoption
- 28% of 13-18-year-old children had direct contact with a birth family member outside of any formal agreement in 2020
- 60% of parents felt that, overall, direct contact had been positive for their child
- 39% of 13-18-year-olds experienced cyberbullying during 2020
- 28% of 16-25-year-olds were not in education, employment or training at the end of 2020
- 46% of 16-25-year-olds were involved with mental health services in 2020
- 73% of parents felt that their older adopted child would need significant ongoing support to live independently
- 53% of parents do not feel that their 16-25-year-old was getting the support they need

Families with older children were less likely to assess their family situation positively, and less likely to recommend adoption to others, compared to respondents with younger children.

There was a slight increase in the proportion of 13-18-year-olds experiencing birth family contact outside of a formal agreement in 2020, and in half of these cases the contact was initiated without the involvement of the adoptive parents. However, respondents felt more prepared for contact and were more positive about its impact than in previous years.

Reported involvement in high-risk activity was lower among 13-18-year-olds during 2020 than in 2019, perhaps in part due to Covid-19 restrictions limiting social lives – the majority were reported to have spent less time with their peers outside of school. However, there was a slight increase in 16-25-year-olds reported involvement in high-risk activities, and a higher rate of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and those accessing mental health services. Only half of parents of 16-25-year-olds felt optimistic about their child's future.

In focus: transitions to adulthood

The 'in focus' topic for 2021 addresses the specific challenges faced by adopted people and adoptive parents during the transition to adulthood between the ages of 16 and 25, which are complicated by significant gaps in the provision of support as highlighted in successive *The Adoption Barometer* reports and Adoption UK's *Better Futures* report published in 2020.

During childhood, and during the transition to adulthood, adopted young people and adults and adoptive parents were united in emphasising the importance of stable and supportive family relationships. Most adopted young people reported that they relied heavily on their adoptive parents for support during the transition to adulthood, but parents felt that they received less support as their children got older.

The difficulty in finding specialist services to support adoptive families, young people and adults was strongly expressed. The majority of adopted young people and adults had been unable to access services that understood their specific needs as an adopted person, and both adoptive parents and adopted people frequently reported self-funding support.

Where individuals and families were able to access support, cut-off points based on the age of the young person created a significant barrier. Transitions to adult services were often poorly managed, leaving young people without any help at all.

Key statistics

- Adoptive parents, adopted young people and adopted adults all agreed that stability of family and peer relationships was the most important supportive and protective factor during the transition to adulthood
- 71% of adopted respondents felt that they needed more support than their peers during the transition to adulthood
- 52% were either in contact with birth family members or actively searching between the ages of 16 and 25
- 54% visited a health professional because of concerns about mental health between the ages of 16 and 25
- Only 25% said that they had been able to find specialist support that understood their needs as an adopted young person
- 68% had funded their own counselling, therapy, self-help, or other support after turning 16
- 88% of adopted young people aged 16-25 regarded their adoptive parents as their main source of support

Recommendations

1. Extend adoption support services to at least age 26

Adoption support that is available to children and young people up to age 18 should be extended to at least age 26, to respond to the fact that many adopted people need specialist support into adulthood. This would bring support for previously looked after young people more into line with that for care leavers.

2. Improve the transition from child to adult services

To avoid young people falling off a 'cliff edge' during their transition to adulthood, governments should bring thresholds for adult services more into line with those for child and adolescent services.

3. Training and peer support for all adopters when their children reach age 13

All agencies to offer specific training for their adopters on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, made available from when their children reach age 13, and access to peer support. Training to include online safety, navigating contact, managing challenging behaviour and helping your school support your child.

4. Establish adoption youth advisory boards in each nation

To help ensure adopted young people and adults are getting the support they need, wherever feasible they should be involved in designing those services, via Youth Advisory Boards.

About the data

Survey for adoptive parents and prospective adopters

The data for *The Adoption Barometer* report was collected via a survey of adoptive parents and prospective adopters which was open from 11 January 2021 until 28 February 2021. In total, there were 2,452 valid responses.

The link to the online survey (hosted by Survey Monkey) was circulated by Adoption UK, both online and via direct mailing to members. It was also circulated by Adoption UK volunteers within support groups known to or organised by them. A number of local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies, virtual schools (in England) and other organisations connected with the sector also circulated the survey.

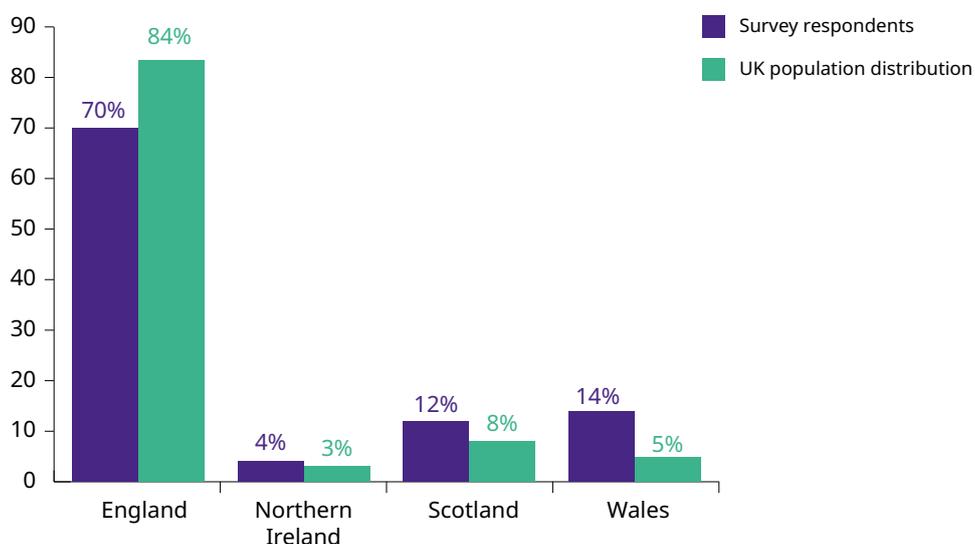
Survey for adopted young people and adults

In addition to the main survey, there was also an associated survey for adopted young people and adults aged 16 and older, focused on experiences of transitioning to adulthood. This survey was also open from 11 January 2021 until 28 February 2021 and was circulated via the same channels as the main survey, with additional support from individual adopted adults, and groups and organisations providing support to adopted young people and adults. In total, there were 159 respondents. The characteristics of this group of respondents is covered in more detail in the 'In focus' section of this report on p67.

About the adoptive parent and prospective adopter respondents

While most respondents were from England, there was a strong response from other nations, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all returning more respondents than would be expected for the proportion of the UK population living in those nations.

Location of survey respondents compared to UK population



Most survey respondents identified themselves as white British (95%) and adopting as part of a couple (85%). Four per cent identified themselves as either Asian/Asian British, black/black British, mixed, or other ethnicity, with the remainder preferring not to say.

Thirteen per cent of respondents identified themselves as LGBTQ+, which was an increase from 11% last year and 9% the year before that. This mirrors the rising proportion of new adoptions by LGBTQ+ adopters – in England, 17% of children adopted during the year ending 31 March 2020 were adopted by same sex couples, representing a significant increase from 12% in 2017/18.

Thirty-seven per cent considered themselves to have a religious faith, and 4% identified themselves as a disabled person. The survey had a good reach among non-members of Adoption UK as well as members, with 46% reporting that they were not members.

For each survey question, the data was recorded UK-wide and subsequently filtered for each nation. Where appropriate, data was also filtered using demographic or other indicators (e.g. relationship status at the time of adoption, adopters with older children, early permanence adopters) in order to identify trends and make relevant comparisons.

Detailed analysis





Approvals and matching

What does 'good' look like?

The approvals and matching process will take place according to nationally agreed timescales. At every stage, prospective adopters will be given a thorough understanding of the process and the timescales involved. Prospective adopters will find training days informative and useful and will be guided towards additional sources of information and support.

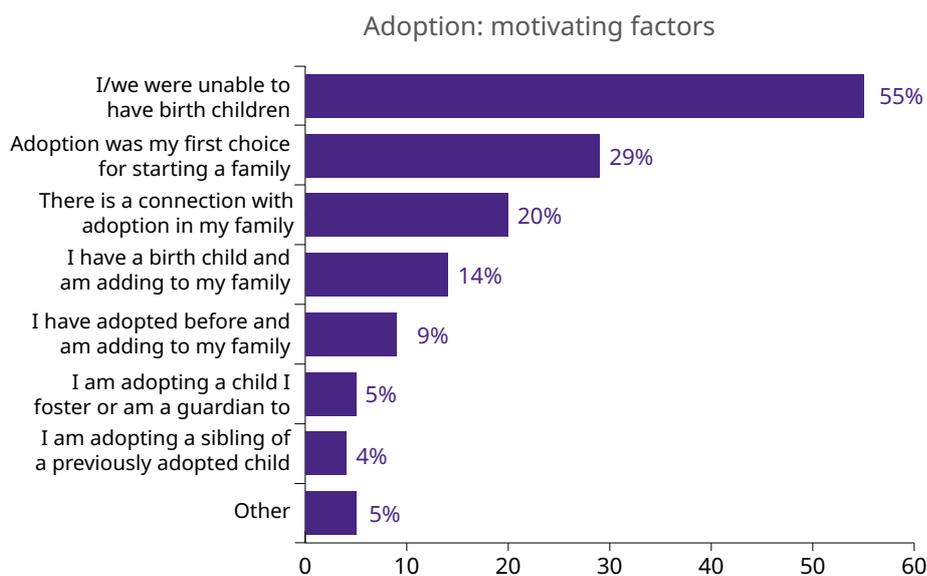
The process will keep to timescales and targets. During the matching process, prospective adopters will be introduced to a range of resources for exploring possible matches and, by the end of the process, they will feel reassured that they know where to go for support after placement.

	Score			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Assessment of current national policies				
There are nationally agreed timescales for each stage of the adoption approvals process	GOOD	POOR	FAIR	GOOD
There are nationally agreed standards for training and preparation for prospective adopters	FAIR	FAIR	FAIR	GOOD
There is a discrete pathway for early permanence, including early identification of potential adopters and suitable training and follow-up support	FAIR	FAIR	FAIR	FAIR
OVERALL	FAIR →	FAIR →	FAIR →	GOOD →

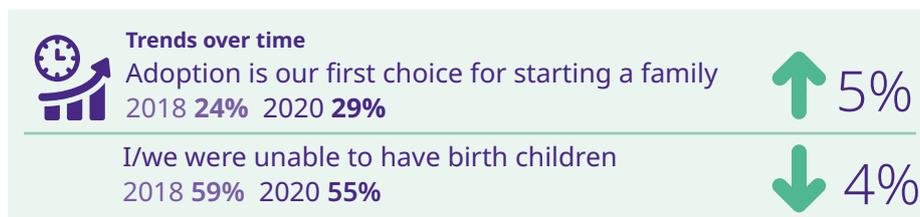
Assessment of adopter experiences, based on survey results	Score			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
The approvals process proceeds without undue delay caused by bureaucratic challenges, staffing or other difficulties within the adoption agency	FAIR	POOR	POOR	FAIR
Adopters find the approvals process positive and consider that it prepares them well for becoming adoptive parents	GOOD	FAIR	GOOD	GOOD
Once approved, adopters are confident that they know where to go for support after placement	FAIR	FAIR	FAIR	GOOD
OVERALL	FAIR →	FAIR →	FAIR →	GOOD ↑

About prospective adopters

Of the 651 respondents who were undergoing any part of an adoption assessment or approvals process during 2020, 95% were white, 14% were adopting as a single person and more than one in five identified as LGBTQ+.



29%
said that adoption was their first choice for starting a family



The majority of adopters were approved or seeking approval to adopt a single child of either sex, aged 0-3. There is some evidence that the proportion of prospective adopters who are willing to consider a wider range of children has increased in recent years. For instance, the proportion of adopters who are considering a single child, a sibling group of two, or a sibling group of three or more have all increased since 2018, suggesting that adopters are increasingly likely to consider a wider range of options. However, the proportion considering a sibling group of three or more remains low at 4%.

Recent years have seen an increasing interest in and promotion of forms of early permanence adoption. While 93% of respondents were being approved via a standard adoption route, there is evidence of a significant proportion pursuing more than one route, with 8% considering concurrency, and 27% considering foster for adoption.

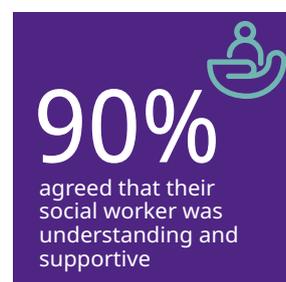


In Northern Ireland, as in previous years, the rates of early permanence are much higher than the rest of the UK, with 71% of respondents pursuing concurrency, and 46% considering foster for adoption.

Experiences of the approvals process

The majority of respondents were adopting via their local authority (LA) or a regional adoption agency (RAA), with one fifth adopting through a voluntary adoption agency (VAA). When asked which factors had influenced respondents' choice of agency, the most common response was the quality of the initial information event attended by the prospective adopters (50%), followed by the promptness of the agency's response to initial enquiries (35%).

Respondents were less influenced by agencies' inspection reports, with only 8% citing this as a factor, but were more likely to be influenced by an agency's reputation in supporting families with similar characteristics to their own or pursuing a similar adoption pathway to their own choice.



I was reassured that the agency had lots of experience with same-sex adopters.

Prospective adopter, Wales

Positive ethos about concurrency. Encouraging and professional on initial meeting.

Prospective adopter, Northern Ireland

Some respondents who chose their LA or RAA used the 'other' option to explain that they felt a commitment to using and supporting public services and this had influenced their decision. However, 23% of LA/RAA adopters chose their agency because they did not know that there were any other options.

Case study

My partner and I wanted to start a family through adoption, so we spoke to a friend who had adopted. She told us that she was very disappointed by the lack of support she received from the local authority she had adopted through after running into difficulties with her daughter. This was one of the main reasons why we decided not to adopt through a local authority.

We found St Francis Children's Society online, noticing there were photographs of diverse adoptive families on their homepage. We attended an information evening which told us what to expect, and they made it clear throughout that there's not just one way an adoptive family should look, which was reassuring.

As an LGBT couple we thought we might experience discrimination during the adoption process but when I shared these concerns, we were told this wouldn't be the case. We discovered the agency offers long-term support and training resources for adopted children, up to the age of 18, which we knew we wanted.

When the pandemic hit, we had a lot of time to talk things through. We decided to go ahead and put in our first forms of interest in May last year. We've since attended various training courses over Zoom, on topics including introductions, the adoption matching process, and contact with birth parents.

The agency has a life story work specialist, a Theraplay expert and a buddy system. We're buddies with a couple who have adopted and who live nearby. We message them when we're having a hard time family-finding and they provide support and advice. Our social worker is amazing, and has supported us at every step, and the agency also provided us with access to Link Maker's family finding service as well as to New Family Social, the LGBT+ adoption and fostering charity.

Prospective adopter, England

Perceptions of the approvals process were very positive, with 90% of respondents feeling that the information they were given about the process was thorough, and 89% agreeing that the training they attended was informative and useful.



Trends over time

I felt reassured about the quality and availability of post-adoption support  8%

2018 72% 2020 80%

Although 90% agreed that their social worker was understanding and supportive, 49% felt that there had been times when the process seemed so difficult that they wondered if they could continue. Even when prospective adopters are supported by excellent professionals, many find the process itself extremely demanding. While there is no doubt that the adopter approval process should be appropriately rigorous, this result highlights the need for excellent and consistent guidance and support throughout.

Prospective adopters in Wales gave the highest overall ratings for their approvals process, while those in Scotland were most likely to agree that their social worker understood and supported them. Prospective adopters in Northern Ireland were less likely to agree that they had all the information they needed about the process (75%) and less likely to feel reassured about post-adoption support (68%).

Matching

The proportion of prospective adopters who attended activity days (8%) or information exchange days (16%) was lower in 2020 than in 2019. It is likely that Covid-19 restrictions limited the opportunities for such events. Respondents were more likely in 2020 to explore profiles shown to them by their social worker (73%) or that they had seen online or in magazines (45%).

Among the 228 respondents who had a match approved during 2020, 50% had been introduced to their child or children's profile by a social worker, a further 13% had been approached by the child or children's social worker, and 19% had seen the child or children's profile online or in a magazine. Fewer than 1% were matched with children whose profiles they had seen at either an activity day or an exchange day.

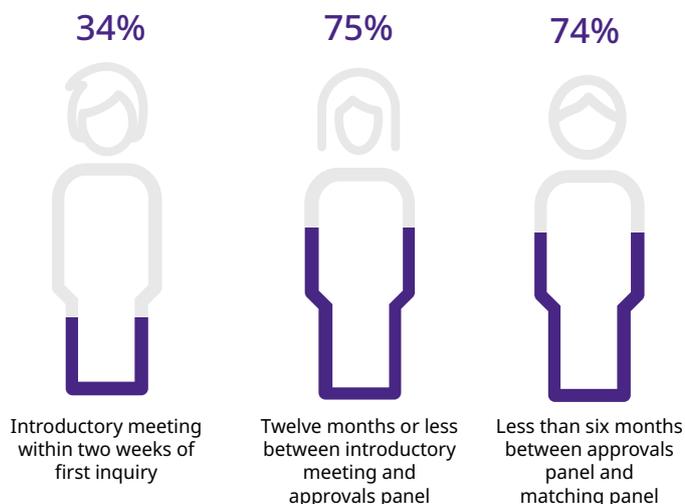
There is no evidence that Covid-19 restrictions introduced delays in the matching process for prospective adopters as a whole. In 2020, 74% waited less than six months between approvals panel and matching panel, compared to 68% in 2019.



Timescales

It may have been anticipated that Covid-19 restrictions would lead to a slower process for prospective adopters in 2020. However, a higher proportion of respondents reached approvals panel within 12 months and were matched within six months compared to 2019, while the proportion having their introductory meeting within two weeks of first inquiry remained the same. The proportion reaching approvals panel within 12 months has increased slightly each year since 2018.

Adopters in 2020 were more likely to complete the process within 12 months than in 2019



Despite this, only 39% of respondents reported that their process ran smoothly and with no delays, which is a decrease from 42% the previous year. UK-wide, just over one quarter cited administrative and bureaucratic delays, and one in five felt that Covid-19 restrictions had resulted in delays to the process.

The perception of delay was less strong among respondents from Scotland and Wales, where 48% and 50% respectively reported that their process ran smoothly. However, 42% of respondents from Scotland reported delays due to Covid-19 restrictions, as did 43% of respondents from Northern Ireland.

The *Adoption Barometer* looks at timescales from initial enquiry to approvals panel, rather than statutory timescales for specific parts of the process, such as the six-month timescale for stages one and two in the guidelines in both England and Wales. Even where national standards for timescales apply, the process is often experienced by prospective adopters as periods of intense activity during the periods covered by statutory timescales, interspersed with periods of waiting during the periods not covered by the timescales. These periods – for example, waiting to begin the first stage, waiting between the stages, waiting for approvals panel – can add weeks to the process.

While it is encouraging that the proportion of respondents completing within 12 months has increased since 2019, if prospective adopters have seen information suggesting the process should take six months, they are likely to feel that a process that takes twice as long has suffered from significant delay even if, strictly speaking, timescales have been met. Delays in responses to emails and phone calls, delays obtaining vital paperwork such as references, criminal records checks and medicals, or a period where their social worker is unavailable due to absence or staff turnover will all contribute to a perception of delay.

The impact of Covid-19

The World Health Organisation declared Covid-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. What followed was months of disruption and restrictions across the UK which, at the time of writing, are yet to come to an end.

Prospective adopters were plunged into a period of uncertainty as agencies scrambled to maintain and adapt services, including approvals processes, matching and preparing children and prospective adopters for placement.

It is to the credit of all involved that timescales appear not only to have been maintained but, in some stages of the process, have even improved during 2020. However, UK-wide, one in five respondents felt that Covid-19 restrictions had been a factor in delays they had experienced, and 55% of respondents felt that Covid-19 restrictions had made their approvals process more difficult than it would otherwise have been, perhaps due to the impact of completing large parts of the process online and the challenges faced by society more widely as a result of Covid-19.

It is not uncommon for adoption agencies to request that prospective adopters gain additional childcare experience, perhaps through volunteering with a local group or in a childcare setting. Twenty-four per cent of survey respondents were asked to gain additional experience, which many found difficult as Covid-19 restrictions meant the closure of most groups with volunteer opportunities, and severe restrictions on visiting those that were open.

Just under half of those who were asked to gain childcare experience found it impossible due to Covid-19 restrictions. Of these, the agency waived the requirement in 70% of cases, but the rest faced delays to their process as a result.

Case study

We were linked with our two children in late 2019 and first saw them at an activity day in early 2020. The plan was to have some 'bump-into' meetings with our children and their foster carers but then Covid-19 kicked in and everything was up in the air.

We had to have our matching panel interview via Zoom. It was horrendous. The panel members were not used to using this technology. The chair had a bad connection, so communication was incredibly poor. We were only half hearing their questions and we weren't even introduced to one panel member. It was a complete fiasco.

It felt like we were trapped in a weird dystopian interrogation. They said there was no emotional connection between us and the children as we'd not met one another – but we couldn't because of lockdown.

We were completely devastated when they recommended it should not be a match.

We wrote an in-depth letter to the decision-maker, explaining why the panel was wrong, which he agreed with, resulting in the panel's decision being overturned. There was also an inquiry into why the panel came to the decision they did.

We began our introductions in the summer of 2020. We had to get special permission, because of lockdown restrictions, to stay in a self-catering chalet near to our children's foster carers. Then our children, aged five and seven, moved in with us. They're both doing well and they're lovely kids, but the journey to get here was so much more difficult than it should have been.

Adoptive parent, England

Adopting as a single person

There were 90 prospective adopter respondents who began their approvals process as a single person. This group had a similar, or somewhat better experience of the adoption approvals process when compared to those adopting as part of a couple. They were as likely to consider that their training and preparation had been good, and considerably less likely to say that the process sometimes felt so challenging they wondered if they could continue (33%, compared to 51% of those adopting as part of a couple).

62% 
of single prospective adopters were willing to consider adopting a child aged four or older

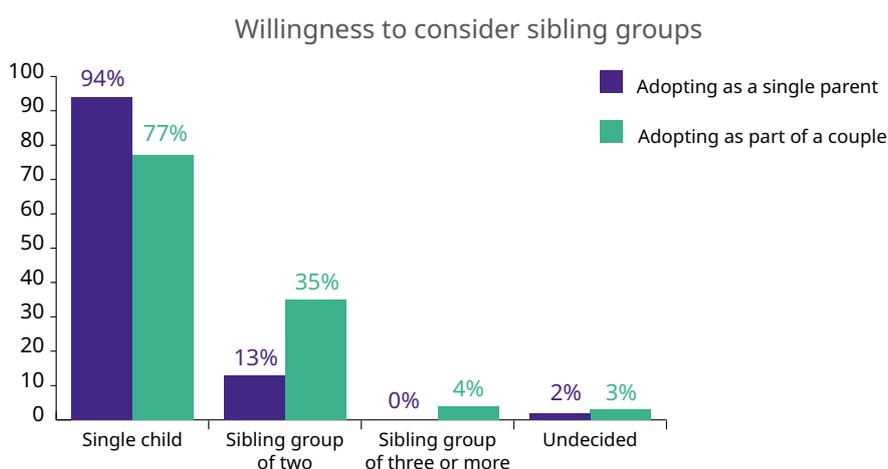
Timescales were also similar, with single prospective adopters experiencing, on average, a slightly shorter process. Seventy-eight per cent of single prospective adopters reached approvals panel within one year of their first inquiry.

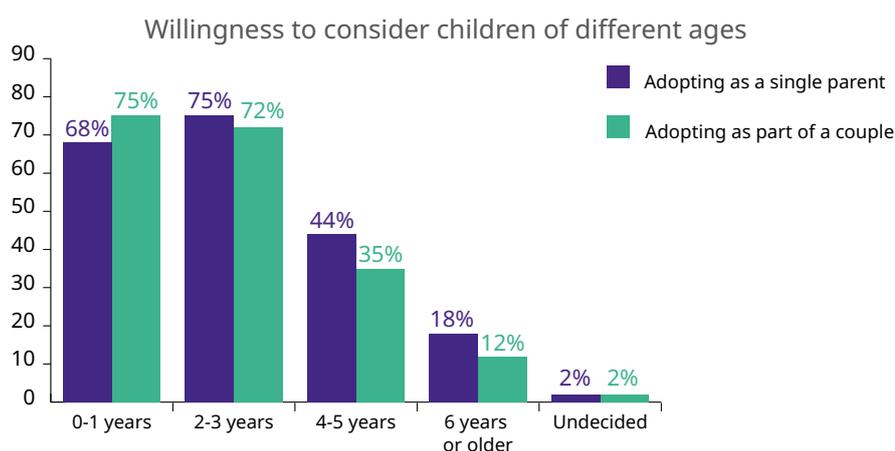
However, there were some differences in the motivations of single adopters and the choices they made as they went through the process.

When asked what motivated them to consider adoption, 54% of single prospective adopters said that adoption was their first choice for starting a family, compared to 25% of those adopting as a couple. They were also less likely to already have children, either by birth or through adoption.

Single adopters were much more likely to be adopting via a VAA (30%, compared to 18% of those adopting as a couple). Thirty-six per cent cited reassurances about post adoption support as a factor in choosing their agency, compared to 21% of those adopting as a couple, suggesting that those adopting as a single person are perhaps more likely to be considering their possible future support needs at the early stages of their adoption journey.

While single prospective adopters were less likely than couples to seek approval for sibling groups, they were more likely to seek approval for older children. Among established adopters (with children whose adoptions were finalised before 2020), 34% of children adopted by single adopters were aged five or older at the time of their adoption, compared to just 13% of those adopted by couples. The increased willingness of single prospective adopters to consider older children does therefore translate to a higher proportion who then go on to adopt older children.





At the matching stage, single prospective adopters were less likely to rely on profiles shown to them by their social workers, and more likely to attend activity days and information exchange days, and to look at profiles online or in magazines. Subsequently, only 33% of single adopters with a match approved had been matched with a child whose profile was introduced to them by their social worker (compared to 53% of those adopting as part of a couple).

Single adopters who had already been matched were considerably more likely to have been matched with a child of a different ethnic background to their own. One quarter of single adopters said that the child they were matched with was of a different ethnic background to their own, compared to 8% of those who were adopting as a couple.

Although single adopters gave an overwhelmingly positive assessment of their approvals process, the responses to the survey do suggest that those adopting as a single person have different motivations and priorities to those adopting as a couple, leading to different choices within the process and different outcomes at the end of it.

Single adopters may need additional support during the approvals journey to help them to consider fully whether adopting a sibling group may be right for them. A significant proportion of established adopters who adopted as a single person did have more than one adopted child at the time of completing the survey, suggesting that some who initially adopt one child do go on to adopt again. However, if agencies are seeking families for sibling groups, single adopters could be overlooked if their initial preference is for a single child. It is a delicate balance between supporting single adopters to explore the possibilities, while ensuring that their honest assessments of their own capacity, and the strength of their support networks are considered.

I was adamant that I only wanted a single child when I adopted my oldest. I just wasn't sure how I would manage more as a single parent. It seemed overwhelming. Four years later, I was ready to adopt again, having gained experience and feeling more certain that I could cope.

Single adoptive parent, England

Whether adopting a single child or a sibling group, it is likely that that the support and training needs of single adopters, both prior to adopting and beyond, may require a different emphasis to ensure that they are well-prepared to parent children who are older at adoption, and children whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds may be different from their own.

Case study

Having got to the point in my life where I'd still not found a partner but knew I wanted to be a parent, I started the adoption process as a single person in 2019. My son came home during the summer of 2020. It's been a whirlwind, but he has settled well. He has such a lovely nature.

I am white, while my son is mixed race. At approval panel I was asked how I could help him learn about his Afro Caribbean heritage. I don't live in the most diverse of areas, but my sister-in-law has children who are mixed race, so diversity is part of our family. I plan to take him to festivals like Notting Hill Carnival, and visit Antigua when he is older. I'll also look after his hair and skin, making sure I get the right moisturiser cream and sun lotion.

The thing that did come as a shock was the number of times I've been asked personal questions about my son by people we hardly know. They ask what race he is, or whether I adopted him from overseas. I seem to get more questions about his race than anything else.

Adoptive parent, England

Recommendations

1. Set national timescales for preparation and approval

All UK nations to have recommended timescales for each stage of the approvals process, from initial contact with the agency up to approvals panel, and timescale targets for all agencies. All these timescales to be centrally monitored on an annual basis.

2. Treat prospective adopters as partners in the preparation and approval process

Recognise that the active and willing participation of prospective adopters is essential to the adoption system by prioritising a culture of respectful relationships, supported learning, and informed consent within all aspects of preparation, approval and matching. Agencies should aim to reduce the proportion of prospective adopters who find the process so difficult that they wonder whether they can continue from half to below 10%.

3. Tailor preparation courses to meet families' needs

Agencies to reflect the differing needs of prospective adopters in the preparation course, tailoring to accommodate the requirements of those with a disability, single adopters and the range of cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Tailored preparation to be provided for those planning to adopt a sibling group, adopting for a second time or pursuing foster for adoption and concurrent care.

4. Build life story training into preparation courses

Life story work training to be built into preparation courses to give parents additional tools to help their children recover.



Newly placed adoptive families

What does 'good' look like?

Newly placed adopters will receive comprehensive information about their adopted child or children, and have the opportunity to meet foster carers, birth family members, and others who have played a significant role in their child or children's earlier life. Arrangements for continuing contact with birth family members will be formalised, coherent and flexible to the needs of those involved.

Introductions will run smoothly and be well-handled by professionals. After placement, social worker support will be sensitive to the needs of the whole family, with awareness of the difficulties that may be experienced. The presumption will be that every family needs support, and this support will be available from the first days of placement, and not fall away once the adoption order is granted.

Robust written post-adoption support plans will be in place, with regular reviews built in, and a commitment to fulfil identified support needs. Materials to support the adopted child's understanding of life story (e.g. life story book, later life letter) will be of excellent quality and produced within timescales.

Assessment of current national policies	Score			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
The quality of life story (life journey) materials and the timescales for their delivery are established by national standards	FAIR	POOR	POOR	GOOD
Every child being placed for adoption receives a multi-disciplinary assessment of support needs prior to placement which is shared with adopters and informs robust written post-adoption support plans	FAIR	POOR	FAIR	GOOD
OVERALL	FAIR →	POOR →	FAIR →	GOOD →

Assessment of adopter experiences, based on survey results	Score			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Newly placed adopters feel confident that both they and their children have been well-prepared for the start of their new family	GOOD	FAIR	FAIR	GOOD
Newly placed adopters have a written adoption support plan and are satisfied with the support they have received from professional services during the early weeks and months of placement	FAIR	POOR	FAIR	FAIR
Life story (life journey) materials are of a high quality and received by, or soon after, the completion of the legal process	FAIR	FAIR	POOR	FAIR
OVERALL	FAIR →	FAIR →	FAIR →	FAIR →

About newly placed adoptive families

Two hundred and eighty-six respondents had a child or children move into their family during 2020. Of these, three quarters were traditional adoption placements, and the remaining quarter were early permanence placements (an increase from 22% last year).

Most children were placed from within the UK country where the prospective adopters were living, with 5% moving from one UK country to another, and fewer than 1% being adopted internationally.

The start of a new family

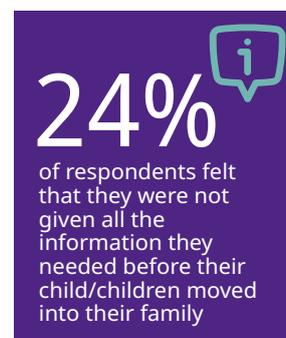
Unless prospective adopters are adopting a child already known to them (e.g. adopting as the child's foster carer or guardian), most will experience a period of 'introductions', where the prospective adopters and children are gradually introduced to each other over a period of several days. This can be an exhausting and emotionally challenging time for all involved.

Ninety per cent of newly placed respondents experienced this introductions period, in most cases lasting two weeks or less. It is encouraging that 85% of respondents felt that their introductions were well-handled and ran smoothly, and that their child or children had been well-prepared for the move to their new home.

Respondents were largely positive about the support they were given during the early weeks, with 81% agreeing that social workers were supportive, and 90% sure that they knew where to go for help and support if they experienced difficulties.

However, although 85% agreed that their child or children had been well-prepared for the transition to their new home, almost one quarter of respondents did not feel as though they were given all the information they needed about their child/children before they moved in.

While it can sometimes be difficult for professionals to gather a complete picture about an individual child due to unknown factors in the child's history, it is vital to the success of any adoptive family that everything that is known is shared. Failure to do so can leave adoptive parents unprepared for challenges that may lay ahead.



Placement came close to breaking down because of unexpected issues which [were] not divulged. I am still on anti-depressants eight months in.

Newly placed adopter, England

The implications of some of the information in the CPR [child's permanence report] did not become apparent until a little while into placement. We then asked the social worker to be frank about the details with us and they shared information we hadn't yet had.

Newly placed adopter, England

The impact of Covid-19

Eighty-one per cent of respondents' introductions took place during a period of Covid-19 restrictions. Of these, 17% experienced a delay to starting introductions, while for 2%, introductions were brought forward. Nearly one in five reported that their introductions period was shortened, and 31% said that their introductions included a virtual element. In some cases, the introductions were carried out entirely virtually.

We had to travel a long way each day ... Cafes were shut which meant we had to use petrol service stations and eat in the car. It made it more stressful.

Newly placed adopter, England

Due to lockdown our introductions were delayed and subsequently took place via wholly virtual means.

Newly placed adopter, England

Seventy-seven per cent agreed that the Covid-19 restrictions made it more difficult to access support during the early weeks and months after their child or children moved into their home. Respondents reported having few or no face-to-face visits from social workers and relying on telephone or virtual meetings. They were less likely than in previous years to feel glad to say goodbye to social workers once the adoption order was obtained (69% compared to 74% in 2018) and more likely to feel as though they had fallen off a cliff in terms of support (57% compared to 50% in 2018).

As exceptions to social distancing rules for families with newborn babies did not apply to new adoptive families, many faced not only being separated from vital support networks, but also managing the challenge of building relationships with wider family members via digital means. For children who were placed before lockdown, tentative new relationships with wider family members were abruptly disrupted.

We have felt abandoned and forgotten by the government's failure to acknowledge new adoptive parents as new parents. The children suffered as they were just starting to form attachments with grandparents. After losing all the other relationships in their lives, this relationship was paramount to protect and nurture.

Newly placed adopter, England

Having no support from family and friends due to Covid-19 and high-risk family members made it so much harder.

Newly placed adopter, Northern Ireland

Families also faced the first months of their new lives together without the community support that might be offered through parent and child groups and other activities.

Due to significant local restrictions, my nearly three-year-old has not been able to make friends locally and neither have my husband or I as new parents. We found a lot of support and understanding for new mothers of babies but significantly less for adoptive families.

Newly placed adopter, England

However, despite the challenges faced by many, some found that the enforced changes to 'normal' life brought benefits.

Lockdown has been a positive experience as far as our adoption is concerned. The bond we have with our son is strong and very deep and we feel this has been accelerated by being at home for much longer than we could have planned due to lockdown/furlough.

Newly placed adopter, Scotland

Early support and help

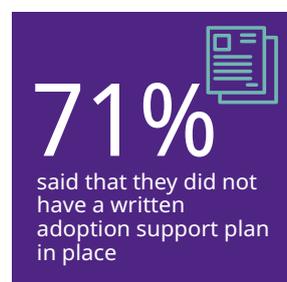
Any transition through the care system can be disorientating and traumatising for a child, and the transition from foster care to a new adoptive family is no exception, however well managed. A common concern of newly placed adoptive parents across all three *Adoption Barometer* reports has been the availability of early help and support when challenges have arisen during or soon after introductions.

The anticipated support needs of children who are being adopted form part of the decision-making around matching with prospective adoptive parents. Legislation relating to adoption varies across the nations of the UK but, for example, the Adoption Agencies Regulations (2005) (England only) state that the local authority must carry out an assessment of support needs of the child, the prospective adopter, and any other children of the prospective adopter, and include the proposals for the provision of adoption support in the child's adoption placement report. However, 70% of newly placed respondents with adoption orders in place in England said that they did not have a written adoption support plan in place (71% UK-wide). The proportion saying that they do not have a written plan has increased year on year since 2018.

Research into the processes around creating adoption support plans for newly adopted children has found that plans tended to focus on the child's past and present needs, with little consideration of future support, and that adopters were largely unaware of the existence of such plans (Kempenaar, 2015). In view of this it seems likely that there may be written forms of adoption support plans in place for many of the children whose parents have said that they do not have one, but that the parents are not aware of their existence or their relevance.

The early weeks of placement are a particularly vulnerable time for new adoptive parents. They are caring for children who are still legally looked after, and they do not have parental responsibility. In addition, new parents may feel under pressure to show that things are going well and that they are coping so that social workers make positive assessments, and the placement is deemed successful. Comprehensive, written support plans, explicitly shared with adoptive parents, would enable professionals to plan for early intervention and support, while reassuring new parents that it is normal to need such support.

Unfortunately, for some adoptive parents, early support was not forthcoming, despite their requests for help.



My child had severe behavioural issues when initially placed. When we asked for support for this, we were told by our agency that it was too early to source help.

Newly placed adopter, Scotland

It has been extremely exhausting and difficult ... We are adopting a sibling group of three from two different foster placements. The LA tried to wash their hands of us after placement, declined our requests for support several times.

Newly placed adopter, England

However, where agencies had created plans prior to the child being placed, supportive interventions could be implemented with minimal delay.

I was lucky to have the support of a child psychologist and a transition plan which had several treatment and counselling sessions during and after the transition. A year later and this is still ongoing.

Newly placed adopter, England

Both our social worker and the children's kept in contact with us each week for the first two months and arranged for us to have DDP [dyadic developmental psychotherapy] support and therapeutic parenting support within 10 weeks of placement. This was really helpful and gave us support and advice about difficulties we were experiencing at the time.

Newly placed adopter, England

Many respondents commented warmly on the ability of agencies and individual social workers to ensure that the child's needs were central, despite the additional challenges of 2020. However, some also noted that the welfare of other members of the immediate family is also vital in ensuring that children settle into their new family. Becoming a new parent is challenging in any circumstances but becoming a parent by adoption brings with it a range of additional considerations. It is vital that parents and siblings are also well-supported from the start and that everything possible is done to avoid placing additional challenges in their way.

I had to drive one hour to deliver our child to school in the morning as social workers had not been able to obtain consent for change of primary school ... If I drove home it would be another hour so, rather than spend four hours in the car, I spent all day waiting in a city until afternoon school pick up. It was a quite depressing sort of way to spend the day alone.

Newly placed adopter, Scotland

Case study

As Covid-19 restrictions came into force, I knew that we would continue to place children with adoptive families but would be restricted in how much face-to-face contact we would have with them. At a time of heightened stress for everybody, this felt like a potential risk.

Our answer was to introduce a new comprehensive adoption support consultation before matching panel for every child – around 180 children in an average year. Adoption support plans were previously written by the child's social worker unless there were known significant needs. The new process involves the adoption support manager, the child's social worker and the family finder, with therapists, education professionals and others engaged as needed.

The resulting individualised report sets out recommendations for introductions, as well as expected short, medium, and long-term support needs. This plan is then provided to the child's social worker who incorporates it into the adoption support plan that is submitted to the matching panel. The prospective adopters sign off on the contents of that document.

Each plan is based on the individual needs of the child, but we also build in universal support at key points in the process. For instance, three months after placement, training on therapeutic parenting is offered. Adoptive parents are not required to take up offers of support or training, but the aim is to normalise the need for support, consider what needs might arise and reassure parents that if they do need support, it will be available.

Although it can be challenging finding time for the additional meetings and working alongside six LAs in the RAA with slightly different approaches, we are already seeing the benefits of this new system.

Matching panel members have given positive feedback about improvements in the quality of support plans being put in place, and the thorough preparation has enabled social workers to be pro-active in linking with specific support services across the UK when children are moving out of the area.

The new system has been introduced alongside a significant investment in training for RAA staff. Everybody now has training in DDP, play therapy and life story work. The Covid-19 support fund also allowed for more flexible, short, and easily accessible therapeutic packages to be provided alongside psychology consultations.

During a challenging time when we might have expected disruptions to increase, we have actually seen fewer new families breaking down during 2020. It is too early to say whether this is a direct result of the new system, but we will be continuing with it even after Covid-19. There is a definite sense that a few hours invested at the beginning of the process will pay dividends in the long run.

Karen Barrick, Adoption Now

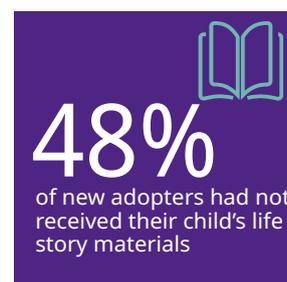
After the adoption order

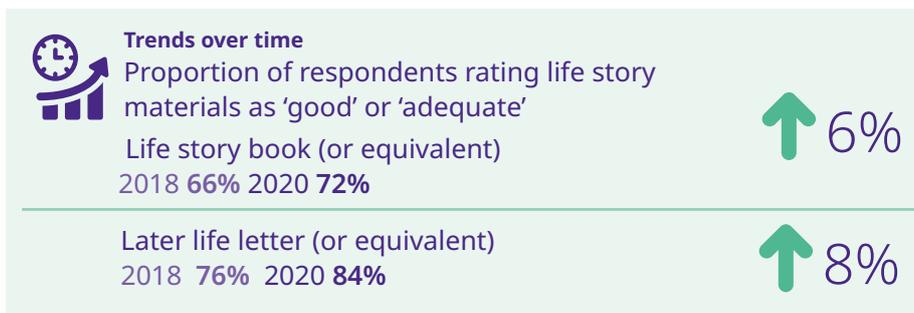
A total of 255 respondents had received their child or children's adoption order during 2020, with 65% making the application within six months of the placement. Nearly three quarters of respondents applied for the adoption order at the earliest opportunity, and only 3% delayed their application due to factors related to Covid-19.

Following the granting of the adoption order, adoptive parents will normally receive life story materials from their child's placing agency. These might take the form of a 'life story book' for use while the child is younger, and perhaps a 'later life letter' with more specific detail for use as the child grows older. These materials are vital in supporting adoptive parents to help their children make sense of their history and identity.

In 2020, only 52% of respondents had received their child's life story book (or equivalent) by the end of the year in which they obtained the adoption order. This statistic has not improved over the three years of the *Adoption Barometer*. In England, statutory guidance (DfE, 2014) states that life story materials must be presented within 10 working days of the adoption order but only 47% of respondents in England who obtained an adoption order in 2020 received their child's life story book by the end of the year.

In Wales, the National Adoption Service has produced comprehensive guidance on life story materials, which states they should be given to prospective adoptive parents at the time the child is placed with them. Seventy-three per cent of respondents from Wales who obtained an adoption order in 2020 had received life story materials before the end of the year, considerably higher than any other UK nation. The National Adoption Service's own research (2021) found that 59% of children had their life journey materials at matching panel in 2019/20, compared to 30% in 2018/19.





In 2015, a study by Coram BAAF and the University of Bristol (Watson et al, 2015) highlighted the wide variations in both timescales and quality of life story materials. It was not uncommon for parents to create their own life story books because they had either never received one from the local authority, or the quality had been lacking. In light of this, the steady improvement in *Adoption Barometer* respondents' positive evaluations of their life story materials is very encouraging.

However, timescales are still not being met in too many cases, and 28% of respondents assessed their child's life story book as somewhat or very inadequate.

Every adopted child deserves and needs to be able to develop a secure understanding of their own life history and identity, and poorly conceived, inaccurate, or inappropriate life story materials hinder this process. The Coram BAAF study noted that "The emotional challenges to adopters using life story books with their adopted children cannot be underestimated...". Where life story materials are received late or not at all, and where they are poor quality or contain inaccuracies, the process of helping children to understand their life journey is only made more difficult.

Confidentiality and data protection

More than one in ten newly placed adopters reported that personal information had inappropriately been passed on to members of their child's birth family at some point during their process. This was a slight decrease from 12% in 2019.

While relationships between adoptive families and birth families may change and develop over time, at the beginning of an adoptive placement, families need to feel confident that information sharing is appropriate to their situation.

Even seemingly minor snippets of information can be pieced together to make it easier to trace a child's whereabouts in the future. It is important that adoptive families and adopted children and young people are in control about what information is shared and when.

Data breaches can be a result of human error, lack of understanding of the need for confidentiality, or weak or improperly followed protocols within services. In 69% of data breach incidents reported by respondents, the source of the breach was a social worker or someone else from the adoption agency or local authority. Nineteen per cent originated with general practitioners, hospitals or other healthcare professionals and 19% originated with family courts. A small proportion of respondents experienced more than one breach.

The type of data inappropriately shared ranged from general details, such as the area where the adoptive family were living (44%) to specific information such as the adoptive family's home address (28%) or full names (40%). Eight per cent of cases involved details of health appointments being sent to birth family members instead of adoptive parents, and 4% revealed the details of the child's new school or nursery to birth family members.



While there is always the possibility for human error, rigorous protocols for handling sensitive data, and training for relevant staff members, including in health services, education and family courts, should reduce the possibility of a potentially serious breach. Organisations should ensure that their policies on data protection are regularly reviewed and include relevant information about the protection of data for pre-adoptive and adoptive families.

Arrangements for continuing contact

It is not uncommon for prospective adoptive parents to meet with one or more members of their child's birth family prior to, or soon after, the child is placed with them. While the proportion of respondents who met birth family members was slightly lower in 2020 compared to previous years, the proportion who actively chose not to meet any birth family members was also lower, at just 5%, compared to 8% in 2019.

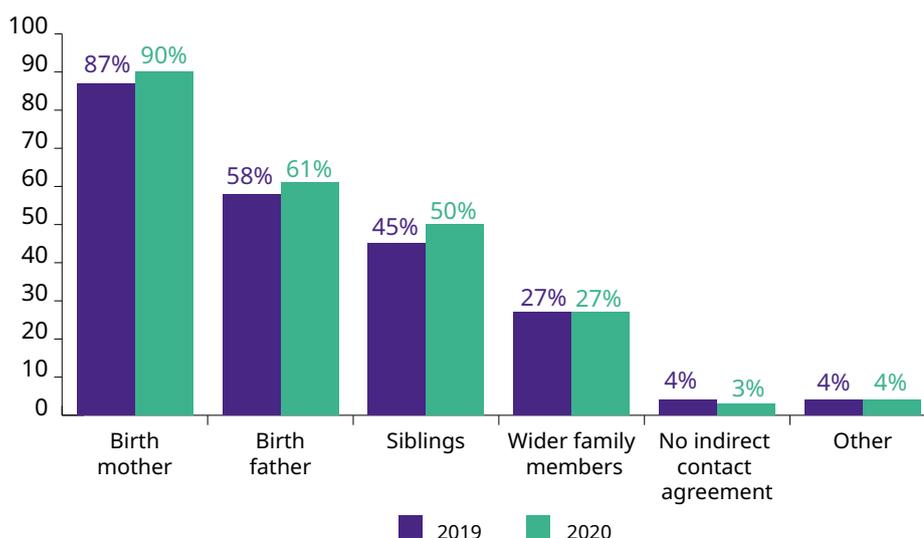
One in five respondents were not offered the opportunity to meet birth family members, compared to 15% in 2019. It is possible that restrictions in place due to Covid-19 may have reduced opportunities for such meetings. A further 26% were advised against meeting birth family members by their social worker, and 28% stated that birth family members were unwilling or could not be located.

Respondents were most likely to have met with the child's birth mother (20%). A smaller proportion met the child or children's birth father (9%) or wider family members (11%).

Where possible, there is usually a presumption towards some level of continuing contact with birth family members, either through indirect means – such as letterbox agreements – or, less commonly, through direct contact agreements. The proportion of newly placed respondents with indirect contact agreements (e.g. letterbox) in place in 2020 was 97%.

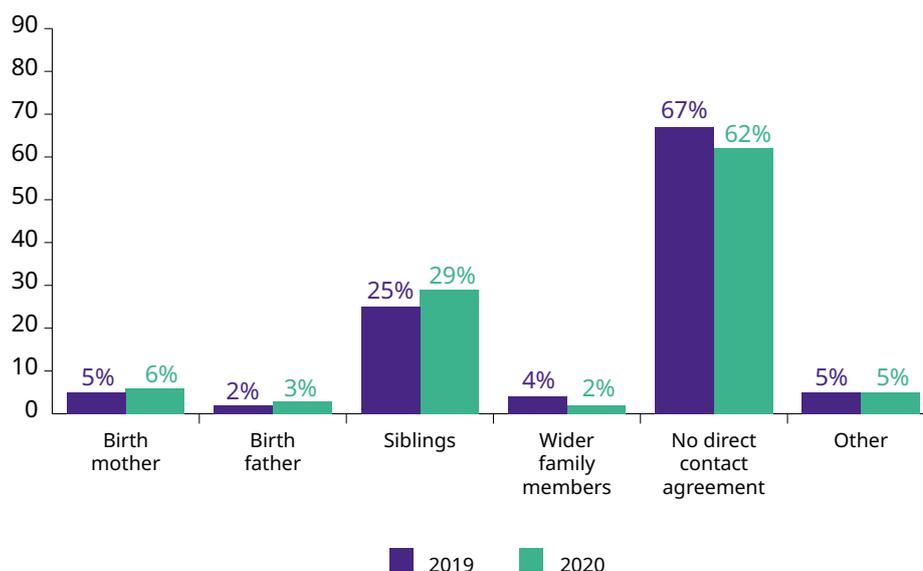


Indirect contact agreements 2019-2020



Although arrangements for continuing direct contact are less common, rates of agreement for direct contact among newly placed adopters in 2020 were also slightly higher than in 2019.

Direct contact agreements 2019-2020



Only 23% of newly placed adopters said that they were unlikely to consider any future direct contact, which is a significant decrease on previous years (35% in 2019). A further 19% were undecided.

Thirty-six per cent were willing to consider future direct contact with their child or children's siblings, and 13% would consider future direct contact with their child or children's birth mother and/or father.

Although still in the minority, the proportion of new adoptive parents who are willing to enter into direct contact agreements from the start or willing to consider them in the future appears to be rising. Where this is in the best interests of the child, it is vital that adoption agencies effectively prepare and support everybody involved, beginning prior to placement, and continuing throughout childhood.

Case study

My niece has learning difficulties and when she gave birth to her daughter, Olivia, it became clear that she was unable to care for her.

I am adopted myself and couldn't bear the thought of Olivia going through the system as my experience wasn't the best, so my husband and I applied to become Olivia's special guardians. Unfortunately, our process was stopped in its tracks when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Six months after his death, I spoke again to my niece who told me Olivia had been matched with a couple, but they had withdrawn their interest in her. I contacted social services to say I'd like to restart the process. They told me that adoption was the only route of permanence for Olivia.

Olivia came home to me nine months ago, aged two. I thought it would be easy as I have three grown children, but it was a shock to the system. I'd forgotten how energetic toddlers are and how much attention they need! I bubbled with my son during the pandemic, which has been a big help. Friends regularly check that I'm OK and the team at social services have been amazing.

Olivia sees her birth parents face-to-face three times a year. We're still family so we talk a lot over the phone. Olivia's birth mum and I have had a few disagreements – she contested the adoption – but mostly it's amicable.

People think I have done an amazing thing, but I just didn't want her to go through what I did. I'd have been devastated if Olivia was no longer part of our family. She's three years old now and a real little star. She makes me laugh every day.

Adoptive parent, Wales

Recommendations

1. Provide an assessment of need and support plan for every child

A full therapeutic assessment for every child with a permanence plan, to be carried out before placement. The assessment should inform a clear written support plan, anticipating future as well as current support needs, agreed with the adopters before placement, and linked to a commitment to provide the support that is needed.

2. Correct adoption leave inequality

Entitlements to statutory adoption leave and pay for self-employed adopters to be brought into line with maternity entitlements for the self-employed.

3. Give all new adopters access to peer support

Adoption agencies to ensure all their new adopters are given access to peer support from the early months of placement – for example through peer mentoring, buddying or community groups.

4. Strengthen life journey support

Governments to issue clear guidance to all agencies about the expected quality of life story materials. Life story materials to be provided to new adopters at the time of placement. Newly placed families to be offered life journey training to explore how to begin to support their child's understanding and acceptance of their story.

5. Protect adoptive families by eliminating data breaches

All agencies to ensure the anonymity of adoptive families is protected, by reviewing measures to prevent data breaches and providing regular training for all professionals involved.



Established adoptive families

What does 'good' look like?

Established adoptive families will be able to access high quality enhanced post-adoption support services, accessible through a defined route, and paid for via a ring-fenced fund. Gatekeepers to this funding will be highly trained, display considerable expertise in the needs of adoptive families, and be able to signpost to relevant health and other statutory services.

Comprehensive universal support is available to all families, including support groups, ongoing training, online support and information, and professional-led support, which is either facilitated, or signposted to, by social care professionals.

Birth family contact will be managed effectively, and families will be supported to manage flexibility in the terms of their original agreements, including introducing direct contact with birth family members if appropriate.

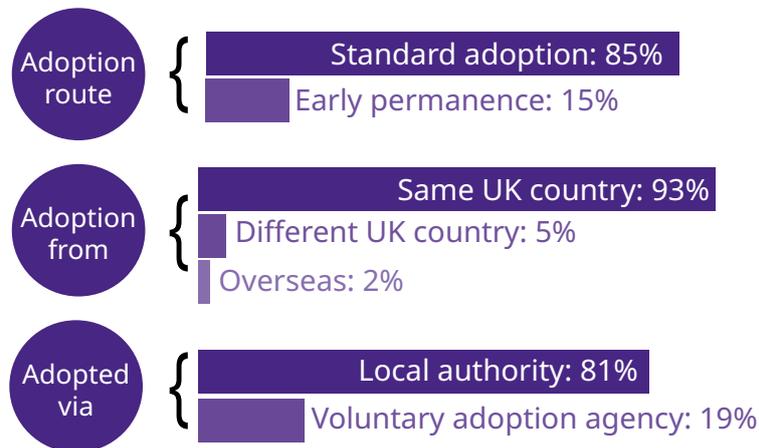
Other professional agencies, including health and education, will have the expertise and funding to provide appropriate support to adopted children and young people.

Assessment of current national policies	Score			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
High quality therapeutic support services are accessible to all adopters via a defined route and paid for through a nationally established ring-fenced fund	GOOD	POOR	POOR	GOOD
There are nationally agreed minimum standards for ongoing universal adoption support and training provided by local authorities, RAAs and VAAs	GOOD	POOR	FAIR	GOOD
There are national standards defining the support to be offered around continuing contact with birth families, which includes regular reviews of contact arrangements	FAIR	POOR	POOR	FAIR
Training on the needs of care-experienced and adopted children is included as part of initial teacher training, and schools are resourced to support the needs of adopted children through a dedicated funding stream	FAIR	POOR	FAIR	FAIR
OVERALL	GOOD →	POOR →	FAIR ↑	GOOD →

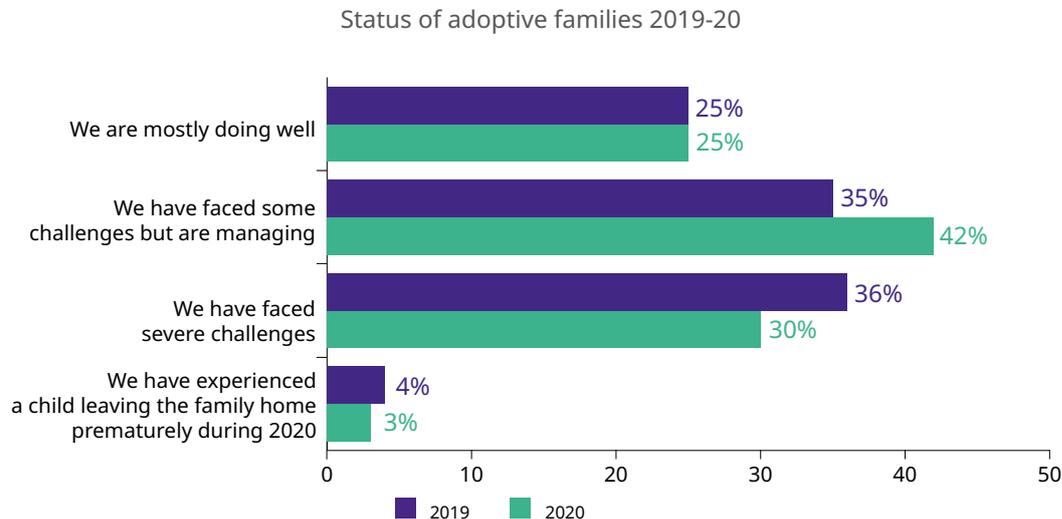
Assessment of adopter experiences, based on survey results	Score			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Adopters are able to access a range of universal local adoption support services from their agency, including support groups and training, and are satisfied with the quality of the service	POOR	POOR	POOR	FAIR
Adopters can access enhanced adoption support services, including therapeutic support from external organisations, and are satisfied with the quality of service	FAIR	FAIR	POOR	FAIR
Adoptive families feel that arrangements for managing continuing contact are working well for them and their children	POOR	FAIR	POOR	FAIR
Adoptive parents find that education professionals are informed about the support needs of adopted children and use resources effectively to meet those needs	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR
OVERALL	POOR →	FAIR →	POOR →	FAIR →

About established adoptive families

There were 1,581 respondents who had a child or children aged 0-25 whose adoption was finalised before 2020, representing 2,657 children between them. Eighty-four per cent of the children represented were aged four or younger at the time of their adoption. At the time of the survey, 56% of respondents' children were aged ten or under.



We asked all respondents to assess their family's current situation according to one of four descriptions. Respondents from Wales were more likely than those from other nations to say that their family was mostly doing well (34%). Respondents from Northern Ireland were more likely to say that they had faced challenges but were managing (55%), and less likely to say that they were facing severe challenges (20%).



Experiences of adoptive family life

Three quarters of respondents would encourage others to consider adoption, and 80% feel optimistic about their family's future. Hundreds of respondents commented warmly on the joys and positive moments they experienced within their family.

She is an amazing little human, the light of our lives, and it's our complete privilege to raise her.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

We have a wonderful, happy, funny and smart daughter who brightens and enriches our lives. We are proud to be her parents.

Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

However, most respondents are facing challenges, and, in some cases, these challenges are severe. As in previous years, education, accessing support and coping with violent and aggressive behaviour remain the highest priorities for many adoptive families. Sixty-four per cent of respondents had experienced violent or aggressive behaviour from their child or children during 2020 (the same proportion as during 2019). More than one in five children were known by their parents to have self-harmed during the same period. Seventy-one per cent of parents feel that they face a continual struggle to get the help and support they need – a figure that has remained unchanged across three years of *The Adoption Barometer* surveys.

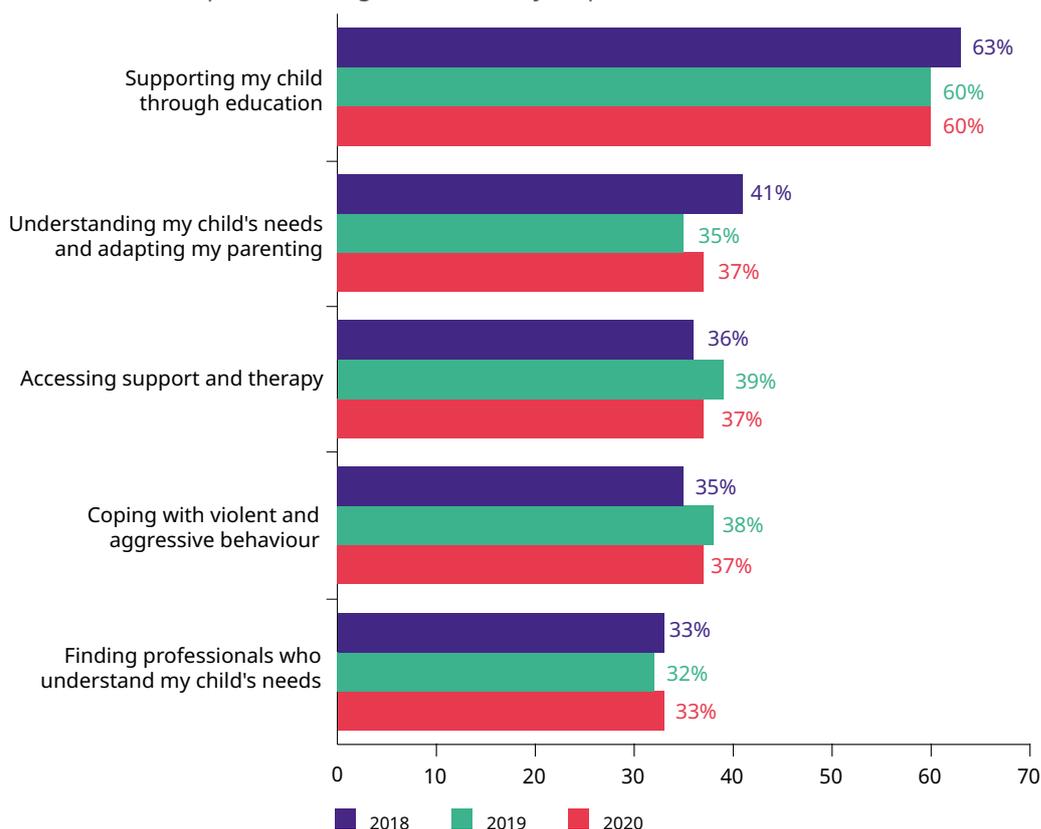
71% 

face a continual struggle to get the help and support they need

The impact of Covid-19

Perhaps surprisingly, Covid-19 seems to have had little impact on the general experiences of adoptive families. Across the three years of *Adoption Barometer* surveys, there has been very little change in any of the key indicators, regardless of the number of survey respondents. Despite lockdowns, restrictions on socialising and partial school closures, the underlying nature and extent of the challenges faced by many families remains the same.

Top five challenges identified by respondents 2018-20



Families in crisis

Of those who had experienced a child or children leaving the family home prematurely during 2020, the most likely outcome was that the child entered local authority care on a voluntary basis (35%). A further 12% had moved on to independent or semi-independent living (aged 16 or older). Smaller numbers of children were living with other adoptive or birth family members, at residential school, in psychiatric care, or accommodated by the local authority under a care order.

Seventy-seven per cent of the children involved had been aged 13 or older at the time of leaving the family home. One in five were aged 17 or older. In 40% of cases, respondents anticipated that their child would return home at some point, but 47% of children and young people were expected to remain out of the home until independence with parents still involved at a distance. For 14% of children, there was no plan for the child to return and legal proceedings were underway or completed.

3% 
had experienced a child or children leaving the family home prematurely in 2020

There was a clear sense among respondents that pro-active support, provided in a timely fashion, would have made a difference to the family's outcome. Respondents expressed a need for long-term support around managing aggressive and violent behaviour, risk-taking behaviours, self-harm, child sexual exploitation, mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, school refusal and keeping other siblings in the household safe.

We have been seeking mental health support for our child for about four years through the adoption agency and local authority.

Adoptive parent, Wales

It is my belief that this could have been avoided if the local authority had funded full time specialist schooling from the age of 10. We found a specialist school place and were prepared to move home so he could attend school and remain in the family, but two years later, funding was still being refused.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

Complete failure by both children's services and post adoption support team to offer any concrete help. I only found out about [non-violent resistance training] after the breakdown. No one offered it to us.

Adoptive parent, England

Where children had left the home, respondents frequently reported that support was no longer offered by adoption teams at the local authority, and they were transferred to other social work teams who may be less well-versed in the needs of adopted young people and their families.

I think that adoption disruption cases should be dealt with by a specialist team – probably post adoption support rather than the standard social work team. These social workers do not have the specialist understanding of adoption and trauma.

Adoptive parent, England

In a briefing paper exploring the findings of serious case reviews published between 2018 and 2019, the NSPCC (2021) noted that, "Practitioners were not always aware of the long-term impact that abuse and neglect experienced in earlier childhood can have on teenagers' mental health and behaviour". Where a child or young person is known to have experienced abuse, neglect, trauma and loss, specialist support should always be available.

Adoptive parents also highlighted the lack of support for the rest of the adoptive family, and especially for other children in the household who were experiencing violence and trauma from their sibling. Seventy-three per cent of respondents whose child was no longer living at home felt that support services were not geared towards whole family support.

We still have a nine-year-old we are supporting through this experience and again he is being overlooked by everyone apart from us.

Adoptive parent, Wales

Once a child had left the family home, respondents reported needing continuing support, both for themselves and for other children in the household. Thirty-nine per cent of parents accessed legal support, and 57% sought out a counsellor or therapist.

It would have been useful to have a central support figure to guide us through the complex and disintegrated system of local authorities, education, therapy, EHCPs [education, health and care plans], etc.

Adoptive parent, England

Respondents frequently referred to their continuing involvement in the lives of children who had left the family home, maintaining relationships, supporting them with housing, finances and other practical

issues. It was not uncommon for adoptive parents to be taking a very active role in their children's lives including, in some cases, regularly having their children to stay in their home, yet feeling as though their views and input were seen as irrelevant.

We are not viewed as the girls' parents despite having 100% [parental responsibility], parenting from a distance and having [one of our daughters] home with us every single weekend.
Adoptive parent, England

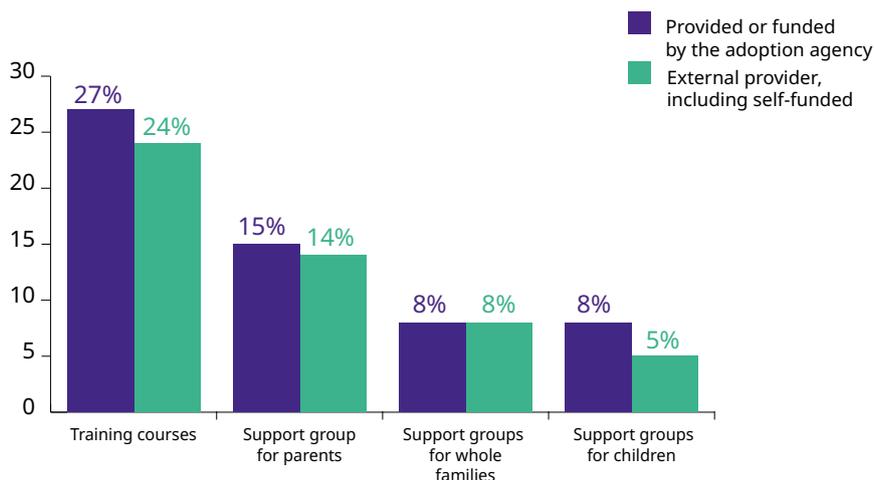
Accessing support

Adoption support offered by adoption agencies falls largely into two categories: universal support that should be available to any adoptive family at any stage – such as general training, advice, information and support groups – and enhanced support offered to families in response to particular needs. Enhanced support might include training in specialist areas, provision of therapeutic services, short breaks and financial support.

36% 
of those facing significant or severe challenges were not offered enhanced support services

Universal support

Access to universal support

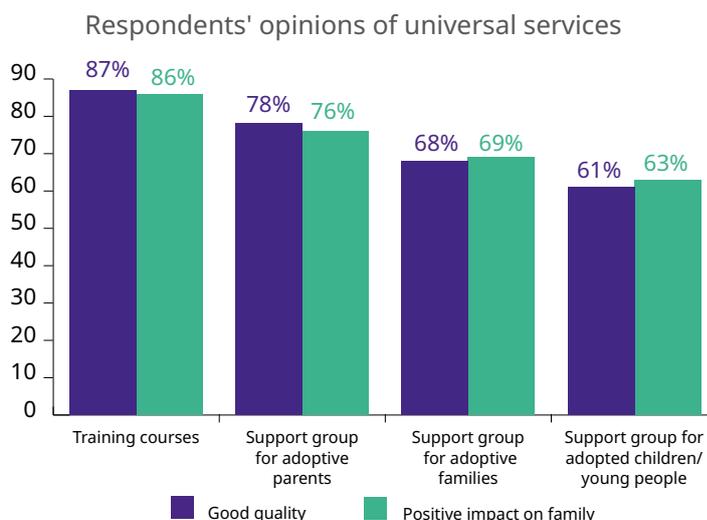


A significant proportion of adopters across the UK accessed universal support during 2020. However, adopters were almost as likely to source this support from external organisations as they were to receive it from their own adoption agency – whether a local authority, regional adoption agency or voluntary adoption agency.

Taking into account those who accessed training via their agency and those who said they had no need of training, UK-wide, 57% of adopters would have liked training but either were not able to access it at all or accessed it from an external organisation even if it meant paying for it themselves. In Wales, this proportion fell to 43%, suggesting that adopters in Wales were more able to access training via their agencies than elsewhere in the UK.

Where adopters did not access training, the reason was most likely to be that they felt they did not need it. However, where adopters and their families did not access support groups, the most likely reason was because they were not aware that it was available. There is still much to be done to ensure that comprehensive universal support services, including peer support, are being offered by all adoption agencies and are well-publicised among all adoptive families.

Those who did access universal support services were largely positive about both the quality of the service, and the positive impact it had on their family.

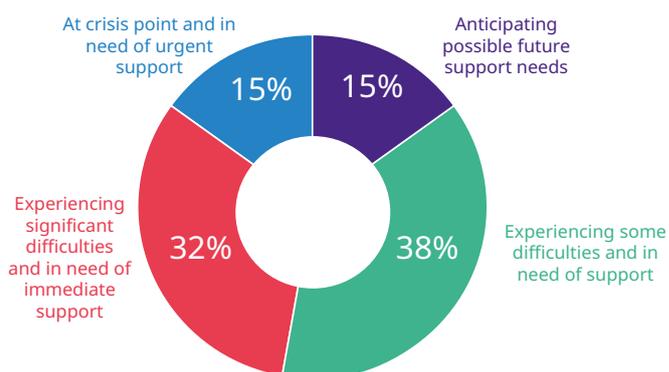


Enhanced support

During 2020, 61% of respondents had contacted their local authority, RAA or VAA for specific advice and support. This is a decrease from 2019, when 66% of respondents had requested advice and support.

Of those who did not request support during 2020, 48% said that they did not need any, and a further 11% said that they were already receiving support that began before 2020. However, one in five respondents who did not ask for support believed that the agency would not be able to provide the support they needed. This figure was slightly higher among respondents from England, at 23%.

Status of respondents requesting adoption support



At the point of contacting their agency for adoption support, 85% of respondents were experiencing difficulties, and 47% were experiencing significant or severe difficulties. Respondents experiencing significant or severe difficulties were more likely to be parents of children aged 11 or older.

Of those who were experiencing significant or severe difficulties at the time of asking for adoption support, 64% were offered enhanced support services, such as an assessment of support needs, therapeutic services, specialist training or counselling. The remaining 36% were only offered universal services, such as general training and peer support, or signposted to statutory services or general parenting courses.

In Scotland, the proportion of respondents with significant or severe difficulties who were offered enhanced services was much lower, at just 41%. Although this was an improvement on 2019, when only 38% were offered enhanced support, it still means that the majority of families in Scotland are not receiving specialist, enhanced adoption support services at the time they most need them.

Case study

My six-year-old son has significant developmental trauma. His attachment disorder makes life at school very difficult for him and challenging for the school to manage. He has horrific meltdowns and goes into fight mode, so he's physically violent towards his teachers and other children.

Thankfully, I was accepted onto Adoption UK's Therapeutic Education and Support Services in Adoption (TESSA) programme in Wales. I was provided with a parent partner – an adopter who's trained to support adoptive parents and signpost them towards help and additional support.

We also received a three-hour session with a clinical psychologist, resulting in a full assessment of what my son's needs are and how they're linked to his behaviour. I was given pointers on how to support my son. I asked staff at my son's school to attend the session and they also found it useful.

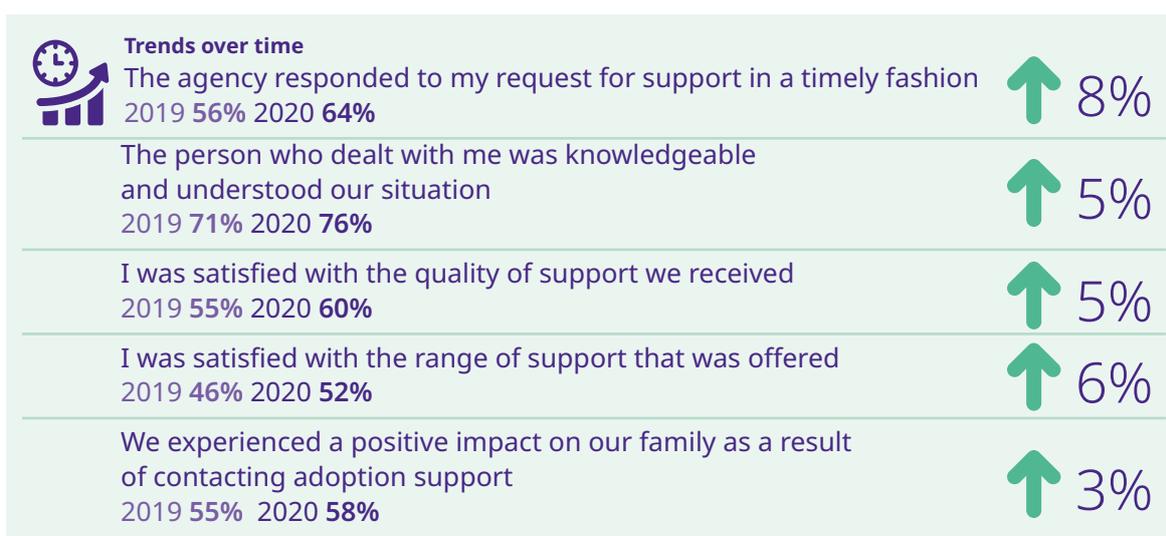
The third part of the programme is a course led by an adoptive parent that goes through various themes of adoption. There were other families on the course, all experiencing differing levels of difficulties with their children. It was important for me to see other parents going through similar experiences, as it made me realise that I wasn't alone.

This support helps me to better parent my son. I now understand more about what's going on with him and I have access to courses and information that help me deal with everyday life.

I would not have managed without this, as it has been an awful 18 months. Having practical tips to deal with situations, being part of a community and having support from other parents has given me the strength to keep going.

Adoptive parent, Wales

Respondents' assessments of the quality of support they received and the impact on their family have increased on all indicators since 2019, which is a considerable achievement considering the circumstances under which adoption support teams and providers were working during the pandemic. In England, the provision of emergency funding through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) may have contributed to increased levels of satisfaction with both the speed of access and the variety of support available. Nine in ten adopters who accessed support via the emergency ASF funding in 2020 said it was helpful in meeting their family's needs, and only 12% experienced a delay or complication in accessing the support (Adoption UK, 2020b).



The importance of parents being dealt with by knowledgeable, supportive professionals at their first contact with adoption support services cannot be over-estimated. In every *Adoption Barometer* survey, parents have spoken passionately about the need to be listened to, believed and understood.

I would like to commend the individuals we have encountered who, I feel, have worked very hard to compensate for the lack of support in a more general sense ... [giving] generous support in terms of time for me as an individual which has helped considerably in terms of coping with the complex challenges we have faced.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

I was assigned an incredible social worker who understands therapeutic intervention. She worked hard to get us various types of therapy. We are currently undergoing trauma therapy. It is outstanding.

Adoptive parent, England

However, despite improvements, too many adoptive families are still waiting a long time for support and struggling to access the enhanced support that they need. Respondents reported having to call several times to receive a response, waiting weeks and sometimes months between communications, and lengthy delays in accessing assessments of support needs and beginning the programme of support.

Poor experiences of attempting to access support can have a longer-term impact on adoptive parents' trust in services and willingness to try again in the future. Of those who did not ask for support in 2020, 13% stated that this was because they had previously had a bad experience and did not want to try again.

I have no faith in their ability to genuinely walk in our shoes and am unlikely to seek help from them in the event of future challenges.

Adoptive parent, England

There seems to be a gap that families can fall through where parents are perceived to be managing, or doing the right things, and therefore the situation is not deemed severe enough for support to be offered. Respondents in this situation highlighted the need for early, effective intervention to prevent situations becoming more severe in the future.

I feel 'fobbed off' as our family wasn't on the point of collapsing, yet with increasing violence we need preventative support and have been asking for this for years.

Adoptive parent, England

We feel that because we 'soldier on' and appear capable, the severity of the problem isn't recognised.

Adoptive parent, Wales

Paradoxically, when families do reach crisis point, the complexity and high level of their needs sometimes makes it even more difficult to access support. The challenge of managing input from numerous agencies was considerable, and respondents frequently reported being passed from one agency to another when in crisis.

We have called 999 on a number of occasions. The police have told us they will not attend and to call children's services. Children's services say to call the police. In the end the ambulance service attended and made a referral to children's services.

Adoptive parent, England

The impact of Covid-19

Forty-nine per cent of respondents said that their family's need for support increased during the pandemic, but Covid-19 restrictions made some aspects of universal support more difficult to provide, especially face-to-face support groups. Thirteen per cent of respondents reported that local support groups for families had been cancelled due to Covid-19, and 11% said that support groups and activities for children had been cancelled.

The impact on support groups for parents was lower, but it is likely that services for adults were easier to move online than services for children. Just under half of respondents agreed that their adoption agency had increased their provision of virtual support services during the pandemic, and 43% said that they had accessed more support from other providers, such as Adoption UK, during 2020.

Despite nearly half of respondents reporting increased support needs during the pandemic, the proportion who had contacted their agency for adoption support was lower in 2020 than in 2019. Of those who did not ask for adoption support, one in 10 said that they did not think support would be available because of the Covid-19 restrictions.

For some families, support that was already in place was postponed or curtailed due to Covid-19 restrictions. While it was sometimes possible to continue to provide support using virtual means, the success of this depended on the type of support being delivered, and the ability of the child to access that format. While online provision was not appropriate for some, others coped with and even benefitted from this change.

For us as a family, the shift to everything online has helped us enormously to access contact with professionals that had previously been difficult.

Adoptive parent, England

Therapy for son has been mainly via Zoom which has worked better than expected but not as good as face to face.

Adoptive parent, England

However, some types of support are simply not possible to deliver via virtual means, and loss of support due to Covid-19 restrictions did have a devastating impact on some families.

We were in receipt of support from an external agency when the pandemic started. It hasn't been possible for this to continue virtually.

Adoptive parent, Wales

The service we most need is respite but this is obviously extremely difficult to provide under Covid restrictions. Without Covid our son would have been able to attend residential weekends at an activity centre.

Adoptive parent, England

We seemed to have support in place and then we went into lockdown and all support ceased. A couple of months later our son had to be removed from home.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

Continuing contact

Where possible, most children will have a formal plan for continuing contact with members of their birth family put in place when they are adopted. Most of these plans will be agreements between adoptive parents and birth family members to engage in indirect contact mediated through the adoption agency, most commonly taking the form of a 'letterbox' agreement facilitating the exchange of letters and sometimes photographs and other items.

81%

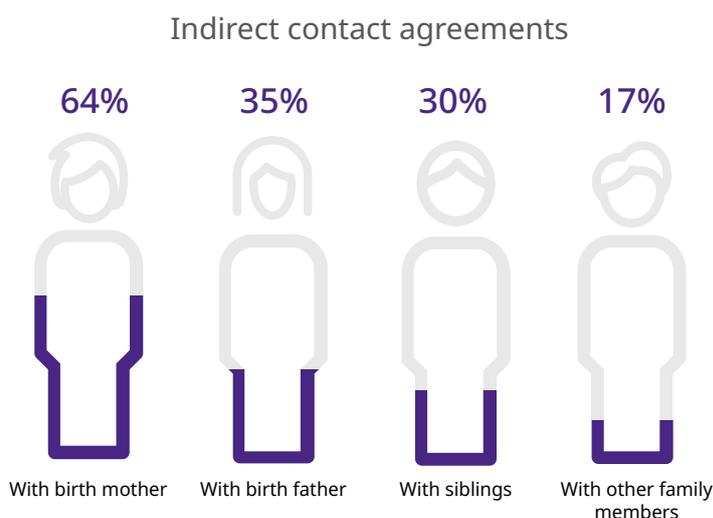
of indirect contact arrangements agreed at placement were still being maintained by adoptive parents

A smaller proportion of children will have formal agreements for direct contact, involving face-to-face meetings, phone calls or virtual methods of direct communication.

Some families also engage in informal indirect and direct contact arrangements, especially with adoptive parents and carers of their child's biological siblings. Although adoption agencies and local authorities may be involved in setting up the initial arrangements, informal contact is usually organised and maintained between the families themselves.

Indirect contact

Eighty-two per cent of respondents had at least one formal agreement in place for indirect contact with their child or children's birth family members.

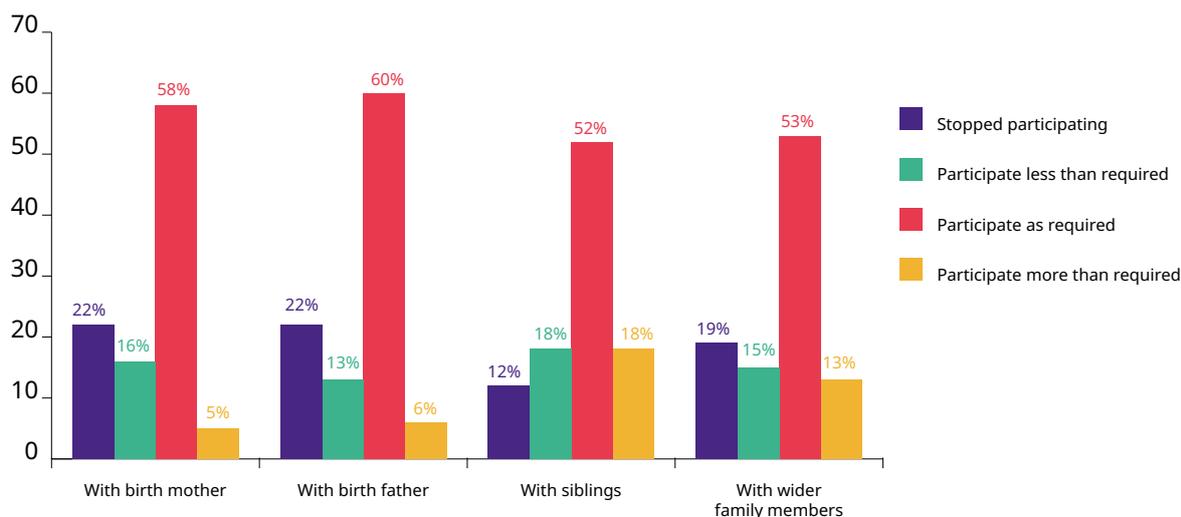


Seventy-seven per cent of children represented in the survey had biological siblings living outside of their adoptive family. Of these, 38% had a formal agreement for continuing indirect contact with their siblings (30% of all children represented, with or without siblings). This does not include those who have made an informal arrangement, or who have direct contact instead of indirect contact.

In Northern Ireland, the rate of formal indirect contact agreements was much lower, at 56%. However, this may be offset by the much higher rates of direct contact agreements in Northern Ireland. Scotland also showed lower rates of formal indirect agreements, at 60%. This is consistent with previous years' data from Scotland.

For the first time this year, we asked respondents how far their current engagement with indirect contact reflected the original terms of their formal agreements.

Levels of adopter participation in indirect contact



Most respondents were still maintaining indirect contact at the level outlined in their child or children’s original agreement or were participating more than required by the original agreement.

However, a significant proportion had either ceased participating or were participating less than required by the original agreement. On average, participation of adoptive families had completely ceased in 19% of agreements. This proportion was higher where families had children aged 13 or older, with an average of 38% of agreements lapsing completely.

Indirect contact arrangements between adoptive families and their children’s biological siblings were the most enduring, with 76% of families with children aged 13 and older still maintaining active sibling contact. Families with older children were more likely to go beyond the terms of their original agreement in their continuing contact with siblings.

Case study

We stopped letterbox contact when our daughter told me, “I don’t want to know anything about my birth mother, and I don’t want her to know anything about me”.

Our daughter, who is almost 13, has a lot of anger towards her birth mother. Initially, her birth mother didn’t write to us at all for almost two years and she didn’t want to meet us. After that, we received 10 short letters from her over the years.

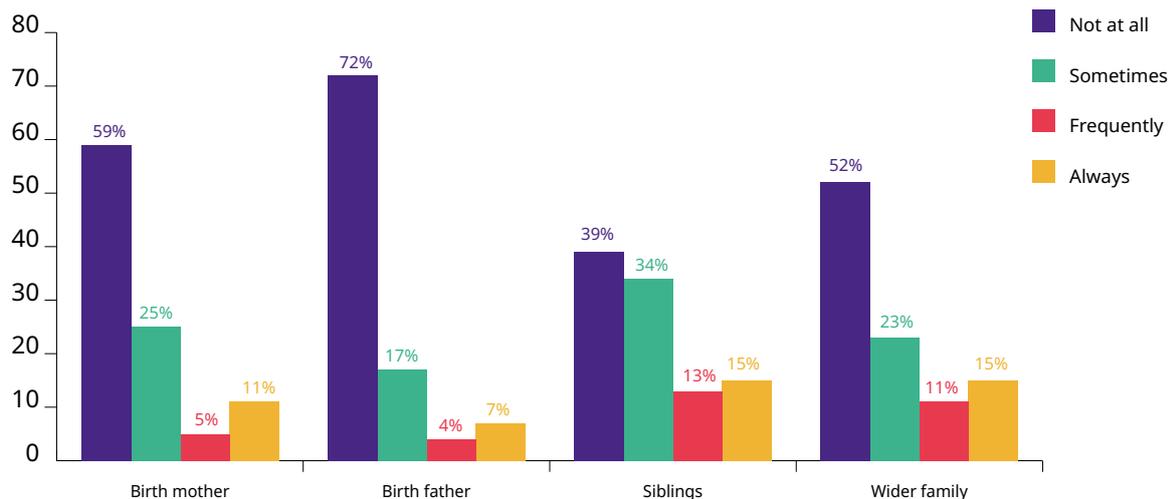
Eventually my daughter told me the letters were triggering unhappy memories for her, especially when she found out that her two birth brothers, who had been in a children’s home, were going back to live with their mother.

Our social worker encouraged us to keep writing, saying it would be beneficial for our daughter. She suggested I should still write but without telling my daughter. I was not prepared to do this as it’s my daughter’s decision, not mine.

I think letterbox is a good idea in principle, but it must be about the child and not pushing them into it regardless. Contact with her birth mother was not helping our daughter, and she didn’t want it. We eventually concluded that enough was enough.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

Participation of birth family members in indirect contact agreements



The rate of non-participation among birth family members was high, with 59% of birth mothers and 72% of birth fathers reported as not participating at all. Comparing participation rates between adoptive families and birth families, it is clear that a significant proportion of adoptive families are participating in indirect contact agreements but receiving little or nothing in response.

Very little has come back from birth family members. As our child grows, it is a difficult choice deciding whether to continue or not as it's a balance as to what will be most hurtful/helpful to him.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

We participated in indirect contact for five years but with absolutely nothing back. Our children specifically requested that we stop. We would consider restarting in the future if their wishes change.

Adoptive parent, Wales

In successive years, the *Adoption Barometer* has highlighted the challenges involved in maintaining continuing contact. This new data on active participation highlights even more clearly that indirect contact agreements arranged when a child is placed do not necessarily create reciprocal, enduring links between children and their birth family members.

The low rate of birth family participation reported by respondents points to a need for more support to enable birth family members to participate, but many respondents also pointed to the need for support for both themselves and their children.

There can be a lot of 'trauma' related aspects to these communications for the adopted child and us as adoptive parents too. This needs to be explored openly and a positive, productive way forward established, otherwise it can be a wasted opportunity and negatively charged, making the whole experience even more traumatic.

Adoptive parent, Wales

Difficult keeping in touch with [birth mother] via letterbox as children are very angry with her and don't want us to share information about them with her. However, we would like to keep in touch so we can build a relationship.

Adoptive parent, England

We just needed someone to do some contact letter work with our son, and perhaps a little about identity, before we resume letterbox contact. In the past this would have been undertaken by our post adoption social worker. There is no such person now, no money for such support and we are waiting until the next round of [adoption support fund] to get this help.

Adoptive parent, England

Case study

My ten-year-old son Billy really looks forward to hearing from his birth great granny as she always writes a lovely letter. When her letter arrives, we sit on the sofa in the sitting room, and Billy will say, "Let me get comfy," and then I read it to him. He listens intently and sometimes stops me, asking, "What was that bit again?"

She's told Billy how his paternal grandfather was a good amateur footballer, how she feeds stray cats when they come into her garden and how she can't write very well as she has arthritis. Billy thrives on these little bits of information, which are so important because we've not been able to keep up regular contact with his birth mother. She didn't write at all for the first three years and when she has written, she hasn't put anything constructive. Billy has asked us not to write to her anymore.

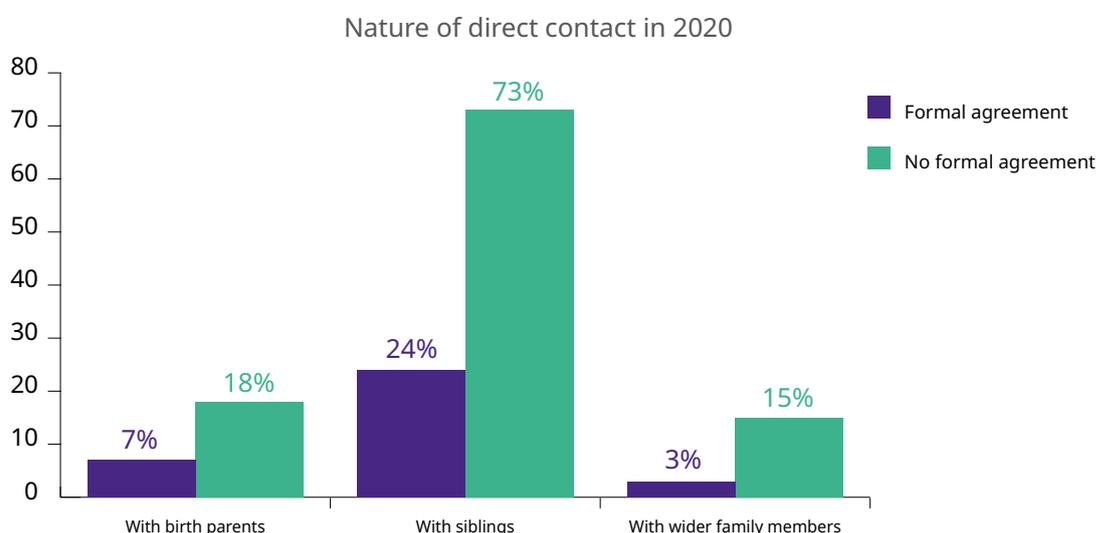
But the letters from Billy's great granny have been so beneficial to him. She's providing him with the information he needs to make sense of his identity. The first letter we received back from her was so accepting of us. She explained she was very sad Billy had to be adopted but realised it was the best thing for him and that he has a new mum and dad, who really love him. Her letters have been so important in helping Billy to understand his history and make some sense of his adoption.

Adoptive parent, Wales

Direct contact

Twenty-two per cent of respondents reported that their child or children had participated in direct contact with any member of their birth family during 2020, including via virtual means. Of all the children represented in the survey, 5% had direct contact with a birth parent, 4% with a member of their wider birth family and 21% with a sibling living elsewhere.

The majority of these direct contact arrangements were not supported by a formal agreement for direct contact. Of those who had direct contact during 2020, most had informally arranged contact with one or more siblings, except in Northern Ireland, where 53% of children had direct contact with their birth mother, mostly supported by a formal agreement.



Of those whose children did not have direct contact during 2020, 60% said that they were not considering any direct contact at present. One fifth of respondents would consider direct contact with siblings, but only a small number would consider it with the birth mother (7%) or birth father (5%).

The proportion of adopted children having direct contact has remained stable over three years of *The Adoption Barometer*, and there is evidence of diametrically opposing views among adoptive parents, which poses challenges for those seeking to review current systems for direct contact.

The letterbox approach works well. We do not want, and it is not appropriate under any circumstances, for that arrangement to change. The push by some areas of the community to encourage direct contact is not what we signed up for and is not in our child's best interest.

Adoptive parent, England

We would love our adopted children to have direct contact with their birth family ... for the sake of adopted people, please lobby the government hard for change.

Adoptive parent, England

Where families are willing to engage in direct contact, there are often barriers to putting this in place, including difficulty tracing relatives, administrative difficulties within agencies and lack of support both for the birth family and the adoptive family. Some reported losing contact with siblings who were moving around the care system or leaving care, and others cited the move to regionalisation in England as a disrupting factor.

We were not involved in an older sibling's planning meeting when he moved from foster care to independence. This led to contact breaking down.

Adoptive parent, England

We have asked for support to move towards direct contact with [the birth mother]. This was more than a year ago and still no progress.

Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

My son would like direct contact but the agency doesn't feel it's right.

Adoptive parent, England

Even when successfully arranged, some found direct contact difficult to maintain.

Direct contact is too chaotic so was stopped.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

We have direct contact only with siblings but this is tricky as they are much older than my daughter and many of them have dropped out of contact. She finds it hard to understand why this has happened.

Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

Respondent comments across the whole range of issues relating to continuing contact demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach to contact, and especially to direct contact, is unlikely to be appropriate. Even within the same family, different children can have differing needs. If continuing contact is to be a positive and supportive factor in adopted children's lives, then a bespoke, flexible and lifelong system of support will be required.

Direct contact works well for one of our children and doesn't work well for the other. It is disruptive and unsettling for our child and family.

Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

We used to have direct contact on a voluntary basis with the children's birth mother but she made choices that made this impossible to continue. My eldest son feels the contact we did have was damaging.

Adoptive parent, England

My son, myself and his birth mother greatly value the direct contact.

Adoptive parent, England

The impact of Covid-19

Restrictions in place due to Covid-19 have made maintaining direct contact more difficult for some families, especially where the age or capacity of children has made virtual means of maintaining connections more challenging.

Only 18% of respondents who were having direct contact said that Covid-19 restrictions had no effect on their arrangements. Fifty-two per cent said that the frequency had reduced during 2020, or it had stopped completely. Respondents' comments revealed uncertainty about whether direct contact would be allowed, and a sense that Covid-19 brought extra complications to already challenging situations.

Our children's sibling is moving around the foster care system, which, along with the lockdowns, has made it impossible for direct contact – this is very hard for our children as they miss her.

Adoptive parent, England

The Covid-19 guidelines are unclear as to whether we can have face-to-face contact with our daughter's sibling.

Adoptive parent, England

Where direct contact was being planned for, but had not yet begun, Covid-19 restrictions introduced delay and uncertainty.

At the start of 2020 we were making arrangements for my son's first meeting with his birth siblings and then Covid-19 hit. A year on and he still hasn't been able to meet them. It doesn't seem right to have their first meeting on a screen, but it's a huge delay in the context of their short lives.

Adoptive parent, England

Covid-19 restrictions also had impacts on the way indirect contact was handled, with many respondents reporting that their agency moved to email communications only, rather than posting letters and other items. There were mixed feelings about this with some raising concerns about the security of email communications, while others noted that it had brought about some unexpected benefits.

Birth mum wrote back for the very first time in 2020 after being able to write via email not post due to Covid-19.

Adoptive parent, England

Through Covid-19 we can only email contact letters. The agency appears to have sent my son's letter from his birth parents to the wrong email address.

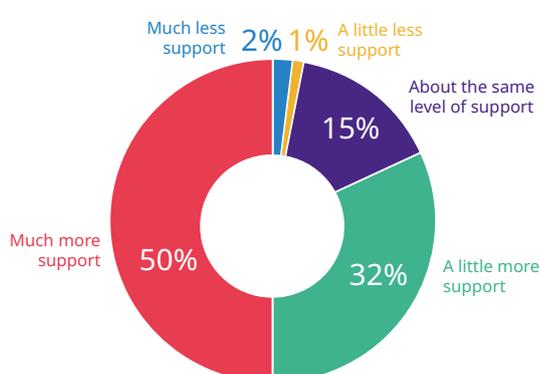
Adoptive parent, England

While governments across the UK provided guidance for local authorities on managing face-to-face contact between children in care and their families during the pandemic, the situation for adoptive families was less clear, especially where so many arrangements for direct contact are informal, with minimal or no input from local authorities. For too many, this lack of attention to their needs has resulted in a year of missed opportunities to build and maintain relationships with members of their birth families.

Education

There were 1,211 respondents who had one or more adopted children who attended pre-school, school or college during 2020, representing 1,834 individual children.

Compared to other children their age, how much support does your adopted child need in their education setting?



61%
are worried that their child will leave school with few or no qualifications

More than four out of five children represented in the survey need more support in education than their peers. This figure has remained constant across all three years of *The Adoption Barometer*. Seventy-nine per cent of respondents agreed that their child's adverse early experiences have impacted on their ability to cope academically, and 86% agreed that they have impacted on their ability to cope socially and emotionally.

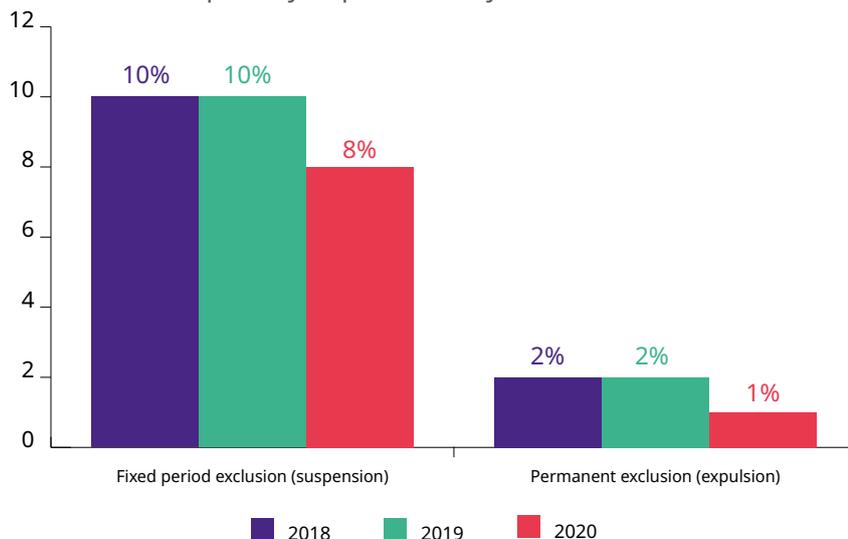
Respondents' satisfaction with their child's experience of the education system has remained stable or worsened slightly in all indicators across three years of *The Adoption Barometer* data. While most respondents felt that their child's teacher listened to them and respected their knowledge (71%) and that the setting worked with them to support their child (74%), two thirds said that it felt like a continual battle to get the support that their child needs – an increase from 62% in 2018 – and only 45% felt that their child's teachers had a good understanding of the needs of care-experienced children.

Sixty-one per cent were concerned that their child would leave education with few or no qualifications (59% in 2018), and this rose to 69% among parents with children aged 13 and older.

There was a fall in the proportion of children receiving both fixed period exclusions (suspensions) and permanent exclusions (expulsions) during 2020 when compared to previous Barometer data. This is perhaps to be expected considering the partial closure of schools during spring and summer.

National data from the same period is not yet available, so it is not possible to ascertain whether exclusion rates have been lower nationally than in previous years. However, the rate of permanent exclusions in England 2018/19 was 0.10% (DfE, 2021) so, even if England's national figures for 2019/20 remain the same, adopted children are still significantly over-represented.

Adopted children represented in the survey who were temporarily or permanently excluded 2018-2020



The proportion of respondents who stated that they had home educated one or more adopted children during 2020 was 22%, representing a huge increase on 2019 (7%). However, although the survey question specifically instructed respondents not to count periods of home learning due to partial school closures as 'home education' if their child remained on roll at school, it seems likely that these figures have been affected by respondents who may have misunderstood the question.

Adoption UK's report *Home Learning During the Covid-19 Lockdown* (2020) revealed that 10% of respondents were 'likely' or 'very likely' to consider long-term home education following their experiences of home learning during partial school closures. Although some families may have followed through with this intention, it seems unlikely that more than one in five adoptive families are now home educating. Future Barometer surveys may more accurately reveal the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the proportion of adoptive families who home educate.

The impact of Covid-19

In Adoption UK's report, *Home Learning During the Covid-19 Lockdown* (2020), 50% of parents and carers reported that their child was experiencing emotional distress and anxiety during partial school closures, and 31% were experiencing an increase in violent and aggressive behaviour from their child.

Nine months later, as a second wave of school closures was beginning, respondents to the *Adoption Barometer* survey were clear that the Covid-19 pandemic continues to have a far-reaching impact.

However, there have also been some positive changes. In April 2020, 85% of care-experienced children were not getting any additional support from school in respect of their care-experienced status (Adoption UK, 2020). By early 2021, 64% of *Adoption Barometer* survey respondents were saying that their child had been

The impact of Covid-19

76%



The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on my child's learning and attainment

77%



School closures had a negative impact on my child's social and emotional wellbeing

well-supported by school. As schools moved quickly to adapt to changing circumstances, and guidance became clearer about the entitlement of previously looked after children to attend school during lockdowns, it seems as though early deficits in support were at least partially remedied.

During the first wave of school closures, 51% of parents of secondary-aged children said that their child seemed calmer without school (Adoption UK, 2020). As the pandemic has dragged on, and lockdown restrictions and waves of school and bubble closures have taken their toll, it is perhaps not surprising that respondents to the *Adoption Barometer* survey were more negative about the impact on their children. However, one in 10 respondents strongly disagreed that school closures had had a negative impact on their child's social and emotional wellbeing, suggesting that, at least for some children, time away from the school environment has brought benefits.

Case study

Our son Jay, who's nine, thrived during the home-schooling lockdowns.

Jay has mild cerebral palsy and FASD, so struggles with writing and maths. School provided three daily tasks but made it clear there was leeway, so we played to Jay's strengths. We covered the basics then supplemented his learning with other things, like a virtual tour of the British Museum, baking and art. We also have two older birth sons, aged 13 and 16. All three were at home, learning at different stages, so home-schooling wasn't plain sailing, but there was lots of help and guidance from the school. Jay's teacher provided detailed and constructive feedback on the work he submitted, and the virtual class playtime kept him connected with classmates.

His headteacher did a live catch up almost every day, while his class teacher always replied quickly to emails. Jay's school did the best they could under very hard circumstances.

Being adopted myself, I appreciate the understanding around adoption in schools now is vast compared to a generation ago. When I was at school there was no support, and no allowances were made. When I walked out in the middle of my Highers no one knew it was because of stress caused by my brother's adoption placement falling apart.

But Jay's school still doesn't fully understand the complexities of adoption, or FASD. When Jay's in trouble I constantly remind them that he has brain damage. Other children in his class with autism and ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] get loads of help, and rightly so, but Jay doesn't.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

Recommendations

1. Secure long-term funding for adoption support

A 10-year commitment to the Adoption Support Fund in England; multi-year ring-fenced funding to be introduced in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

2. Train education and health professionals in early childhood trauma and associated conditions

From initial teacher training and beyond, all education professionals to be trained and resourced (through targeted funding) to support the needs of care-experienced children, including those adopted internationally. Training should include understanding of highly prevalent conditions such as FASD and attachment disorder. Health professionals should receive similar training.

3. Improve data on adopted children in school

All governments to collect and analyse data on attainment, special needs and exclusions for adopted children.

4. Improve support for birth family contact

All adopters to be offered specific training and support relating to their child's contact arrangements. All contact plans to be reviewed regularly with the family and experienced staff at their agency to ensure that all participants – including birth family – are well supported. Agencies to be prepared to offer quick-access support to adopted teenagers and their families in the event of a destabilising impact arising from unmanaged contact.

5. Provide family support when children leave home prematurely

In circumstances where children leave home prematurely, adoptive families must be provided with support from social workers with knowledge of adoption and skill in re-unification. Support should include help to repair and rebuild relationships wherever possible.

Families with older adopted children

What does 'good' look like?

As adopted young people grow into adulthood, families will be provided with effective and timely support around direct contact with birth families, including training and advice for adoptive parents.

Adoptive families and adopted young people will be signposted towards appropriate support for accessing tertiary education and moving towards independence. Statutory services will be trauma-informed and have a thorough understanding of the needs of adopted young adults. Outcomes for adopted children will be tracked, and this information used to drive improvement in provision of services.

Adoptive families will feel confident that their child will receive any additional support they need as they move into adulthood and transitions from statutory services for children and young people to those for adults will be seamless and well-managed.

Assessment of current national policies	Score			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
There is a nationally agreed framework for supporting previously looked after young adults as they transition from services for children and young people to services for adults	POOR	POOR	FAIR	FAIR
Outcomes for adopted and previously looked after children are tracked nationally and this information used to drive improvements in the provision of services	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR
OVERALL	POOR ↻	POOR ↻	FAIR ↻	FAIR ↻

Assessment of adopter experiences, based on survey results	Score			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Adopters feel well-prepared for the possibility of planned or unsolicited direct contact with birth families during teen years	FAIR	FAIR	FAIR	GOOD
Adoptive families with older children can access support that is tailored to the specific needs of adopted adolescents and young adults	POOR	POOR	POOR	POOR
Adoptive parents feel optimistic about their older children's futures and can see them making progress towards their goals as they move into adulthood	POOR	POOR	POOR	FAIR
OVERALL	POOR ↔	POOR ↔	POOR ↔	FAIR ↗

About families with older adopted children

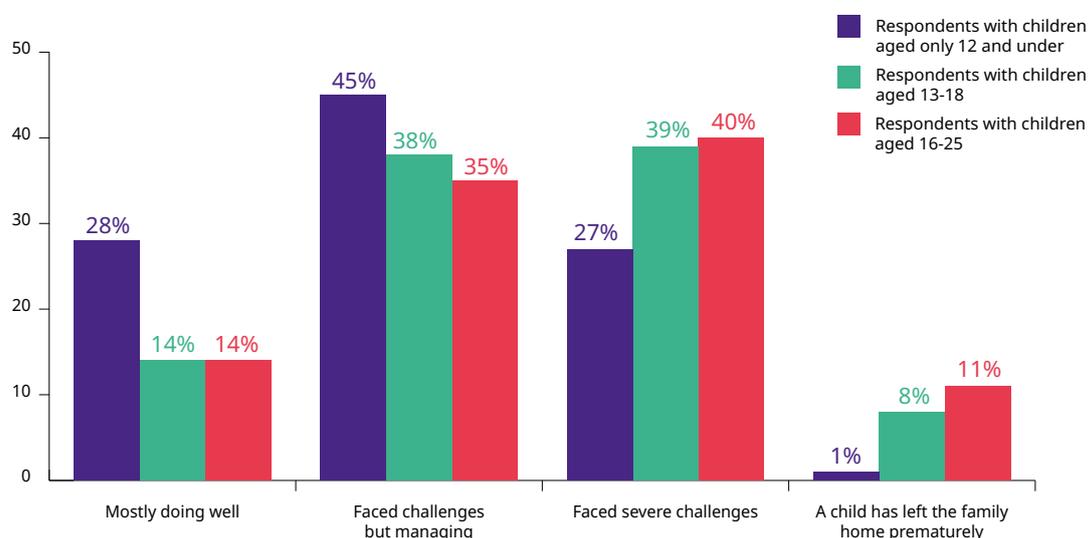
The teenage years are a time of enormous development and change in every family. *The Adoption Barometer* survey captures this shifting landscape for families with older adopted children by including specific question sets for parents of 13-18-year-olds and parents of 16-25-year-olds.

In addition to the regular Barometer questions for families with older children, this year's survey included additional questions related specifically to experience of transitioning to adulthood. The data from these questions, together with the data from the separate survey for adopted young people and adults are discussed in more detail in the 'In focus' section, beginning on p67.

There were 414 adoptive parent respondents with a child or children aged 13-18, representing 617 children, and 214 respondents with a child or children aged 16-25, representing 326 children.

Overall, these families were facing more challenges and were less likely to assess their situations positively than respondents with younger children. Only 59% of respondents with children aged 13-18 and 56% of those with children aged 16-25 would encourage others to consider adoption, compared to 75% of respondents as a whole.

Status of adoptive families by age of respondents' children



The comparison between the self-reported status of families whose children are all aged 12 and under, and those with one or more children aged 13 and older is stark. While much adoption policy in the UK focuses on the early stages of creating adoptive families – recruitment, training and preparation of adopters – there are thousands of families with older children, many of whom will have adopted too long ago to benefit from more recent changes in adoption support, who are now navigating the journey through adolescence and beyond with all the additional complicating factors that care experience can bring.

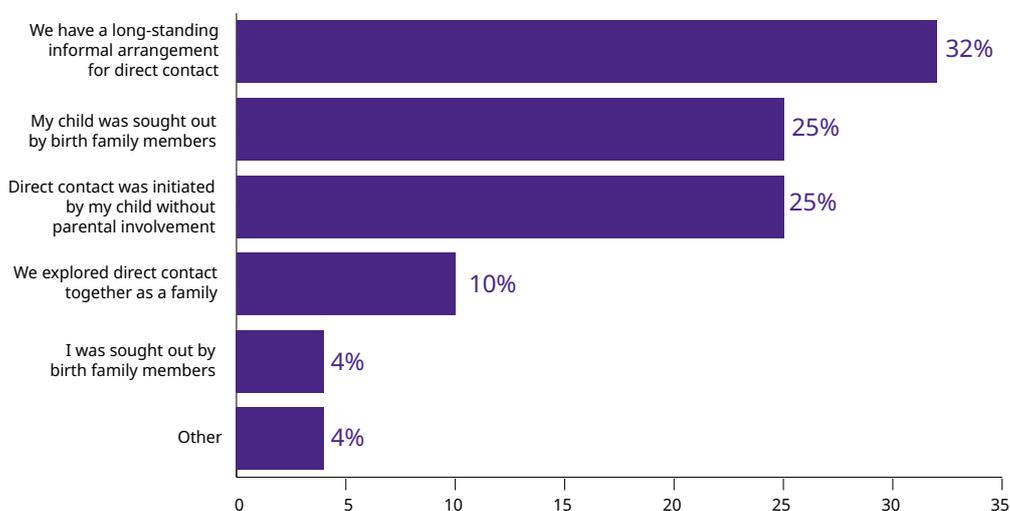
Continuing contact

The proportion of adopted young people aged 13-18 who had direct contact with a birth family member outside of a formal agreement has increased year on year since the first *Adoption Barometer* and stood at 28% in 2020. In half of these cases, the contact was initiated without the involvement of the young person's adoptive parents.

25% of 13-18-year-olds who had informal contact with birth family members initiated it themselves without their adoptive parent's involvement

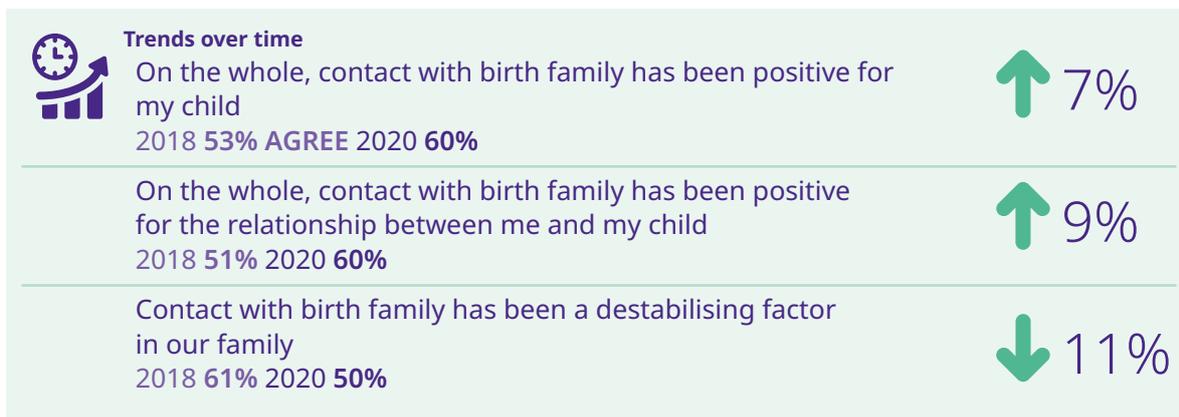


How informal direct contact was initiated



In 18% of cases, informal direct contact was initiated by birth family members contacting either the adopted young person, or the adoptive parent via social media.

While the proportion of young people aged 13-18 having informal direct contact has increased, the proportion of respondents who feel that such contact has had a negative impact has been steadily decreasing. Despite this, half of respondents who had experienced informal direct contact in 2020 believed that it had been a destabilising factor in their family.



Among 16-25-year-olds, one third of young people had experienced direct contact with a birth family member during 2020. More than half of these ongoing contact relationships were described as 'difficult'.

It is widely recognised among adoptive families and the professionals who work with them that innovations such as social media have changed the landscape around contact between adopted young people and birth family members. Meetings with birth family members that may previously have taken months or years to arrange working through mediators can now be accomplished in a few moments through a search on social media, and 28% of children aged 13-18 were known or suspected to have used social media to search for information about their birth family members. The likelihood is that the true figure is higher as some will be searching without their parents' knowledge. The proportion of respondents who felt well-prepared for the possibility of direct contact during their child's teen years has increased from 54% in 2018 to 63% in 2020, perhaps demonstrating the growing level of awareness of the possibility of unplanned contact among adoptive parents.

Respondents' comments revealed that experiences of initiating contact with birth family members in the teen years can vary from seriously destabilising to life-enhancing, with everything in between.

Birth father posted adverts on Facebook and Tiktok searching for my son. They had a secret meeting and my son was given alcohol and drugs.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

They found their birth family on the internet. The birth family bombarded them with multiple contacts every day and late at night.

Adoptive parent, England

At 17 [my son] found his birth family on Facebook and initiated direct contact. This has gone remarkably well ... Previously, he longed for them with no real understanding of what being with them would be like. Now he understands, loves and honours them but realises we are his closest family. I am very happy for him in this.

Adoptive parent, England

Among respondents whose children did have direct contact, there was a strong sense that more flexible, timely support to prepare for, establish and maintain these relationships was essential. Where this was missing or delayed, the results could be devastating.

Post adoption services are not agile enough to meet the needs of children. We requested support for our sons contacting their birth family in November and 4 months later the boys have gone missing to their birth family while we are waiting for the application for funding for life story work to be agreed.

Adoptive parent, England

Where families had been engaging in indirect contact and were considering moving towards direct contact, or extending indirect contact past the age of 18, many reported barriers to accessing support for these changes. In particular, several respondents commented that there didn't seem to be a coherent plan for moving forward with continuing contact once letterbox arrangements came to an end.

Now that my son is 18, I contacted the LA to ask them what would happen. They said that letterbox contact would cease. At my request they have agreed to continue this for another year. I am shocked at this approach.

Adoptive parent, England

Concerns about possible lack of support were also a factor in some respondents feeling reluctant to engage in direct contact.

I have no confidence in the ability of our agency to keep us safe were we to undertake contact. They do not maintain confidentiality around letterbox and do not, in my opinion, fully understand the risks inherent in direct contact.

Adoptive parent, England

Adoption is lifelong, and support for adopted young people needs to be available throughout their lifespan, including support to establish and maintain relationships with birth family members where this is desired. Social media allows relationships to be initiated without preparation or mediation, leaving all parties potentially vulnerable. It is vital that preparation for this possibility begins well before the teen years and continues into adulthood.

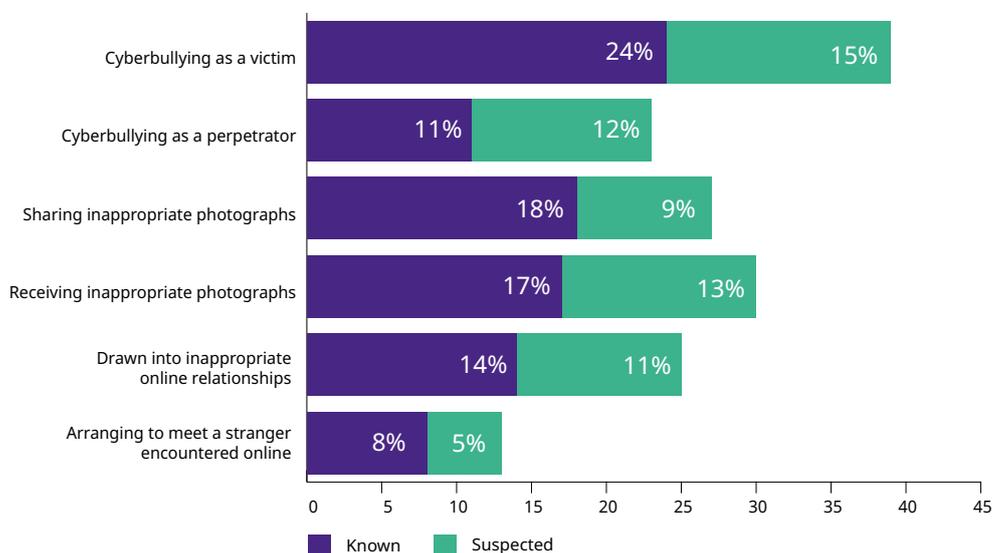
Managing risk

Social media is undoubtedly a factor in increasing the possibility of unplanned contact between adopted young people and members of their birth families, but its use can also expose young people to increased levels of risk in other areas.

Eighty-seven per cent of the 13-18-year-olds represented in the survey had access to social media, yet only 55% of parents felt that their teenager knew how to keep themselves safe on social media and was able to do so. Sixty per cent of respondents whose teenagers were using social media felt that it had a negative impact on the quality of family life.

One quarter
of 16-25-year-olds were involved with drug or alcohol misuse during 2020

Involvement in online risk among 13-18-year-olds with social media access

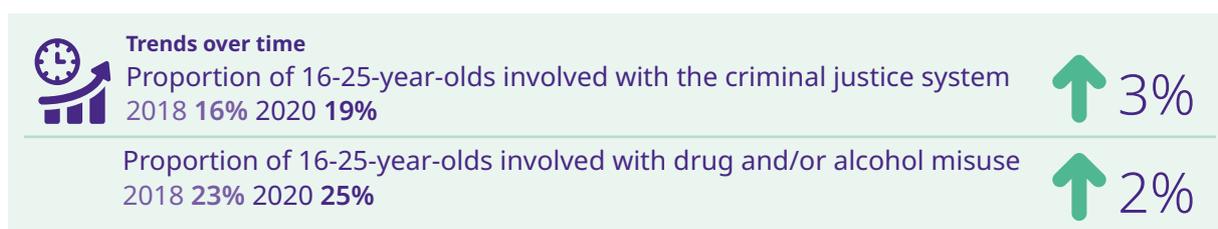


Cyberbullying was the most prevalent risk experienced through social media use, although perhaps most worrying is that, despite Covid-19 restrictions being in place for much of 2020, 13% of 13-18-year-olds with access to social media were known or suspected to have arranged to meet a stranger they had encountered online.

Offline risks were also a concern for respondents with teenage children. Eleven per cent of 13-18-year-olds were known or suspected to have been involved in criminally exploitative activity during 2020. This was much lower than in 2019 when 19% were suspected to have been involved, but with 87% of this age group reported to have spent less time with their peers outside of school during Covid-19 restrictions it is possible that lockdowns have had the unintended benefit of protecting some young people from involvement in high-risk activity.

Of those young people who were known or suspected to have been involved in criminally exploitative activity, the largest proportion (53%) were involved in county lines activities. There was also significant involvement in petty crime, becoming part of a gang and in child sexual exploitation, with overlaps between these groups suggesting that some young people were being drawn into a number of such activities.

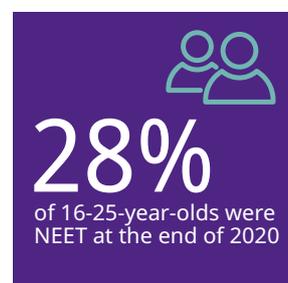
Among 16-25-year-olds, reported involvement in high-risk activities has increased slowly but steadily since the first *Adoption Barometer* report. If Covid-19 restrictions have reduced opportunities for 13-18-year-olds to become involved in high-risk activities, this does not seem to have been a protective factor for the 16-25 age group.



Respondents' comments revealed concerns that younger teenagers were groomed into risky activities, sometimes by those they had counted as friends. As teenagers grow older and begin to establish their independence, it becomes more and more difficult for parents to support them. Forty-three per cent of parents of 16-25-year-olds did not feel confident that they were able to support their child to manage risk and stay safe.

Outcomes for adopted young adults

Of the 326 adopted 16-25-year-olds represented by survey respondents, 72% were living at home with their adoptive parents, or away at higher education but returning home during the holidays, and a further 10% were living independently. Seven per cent were living in some form of supported accommodation, and small numbers were living with a foster carer or in a children's home, in short term accommodation, with birth family or street homeless.



At the end of 2020, 28% of adopted young people represented in the survey were not in education, employment or training (NEET), which is a considerable increase compared to the end of 2019 (21%). According to the Office for National Statistics (2021), 11.6% of young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK were NEET during the period October-December 2020, representing a 0.6% increase on the same

period in 2019. The adopted young people represented in *The Adoption Barometer* survey were more than twice as likely to be NEET compared to UK averages.



Trends over time

Proportion of 16-25-year-olds involved with mental health services
2018 39% 2020 46%

↑ 7%

Respondents to the survey expressed concerns about their children's futures, with 73% agreeing that their child would need a significant level of ongoing support to live independently, and only 50% feeling as though their child was getting the support they needed. Only half of respondents with children aged 16-25 could say that they felt optimistic about their child's future.

Case study

Our daughter is 20 and has been NEET for four years now.

At 15 she refused to go to school as she was being bullied. Following a home assessment with an education welfare officer it was decided she would not return to school due to her severe mental health issues. She completed her coursework from home, achieving three GCSEs – which was beyond what we could have expected.

We encouraged her to apply for a college drama course, which she started the following academic year. But after a few weeks she complained about the course, everyone on it and the teacher, so stopped going. At this point we had no say over what she did with her life. We were side-lined as she completely shut us out. She'd stay in bed all day and stay up all night.

She left our home just before she turned 18 to live in a hostel. Over the last two years she's lived in five different hostels. She's on universal credit and personal independence payment so amassed quite a lot of money, but because of the people she was mixing with, she became involved with drink, drugs and men who use her, including one who has spent around £5,000 of her savings.

We now have little to no contact with her. We're terrified about her future and our hearts are broken.

Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

The impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 restrictions have had an enormous impact on the lives of teenagers and young adults in 2020, creating uncertainty around examinations and future education and employment opportunities, as well as impacting on young people's abilities to socialise with their friends both in and out of education.

However, it is not clear what, if any, additional impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the challenges that already faced adopted young people and their families during 2020. Parents of children aged 13-18 were no more likely than those with younger children to say that school closures had a negative impact on their child's social and emotional wellbeing, which may correspond to findings from Adoption UK's *Home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown* report (2020) which found that more than half of secondary aged pupils seemed calmer without the stress of school.

Rates of involvement in criminally exploitative activities were considerably lower among 13-18-year-olds in 2020 compared to 2019, which may have been a positive impact of more time spent at home during lockdowns, although this is speculative. Despite young people perhaps

being more likely to rely on social media during lockdown, reported instances of challenges associated with its use were also lower in 2020, except for cyberbullying, which saw only a fractional increase.

The mental health of adopted children and young people is a long-standing concern. There was an increase in the proportion of 16-25-year-olds accessing mental health services in 2020, at 46%, up from 42% in 2019. However, there was also an increase between 2018 and 2019, suggesting that this could be part of a longer-term trend and not necessarily an impact of Covid-19.

The significant support needs of families with older adopted children and young people have been documented in successive *Adoption Barometer* reports and, despite Covid-19, these have not materially changed. While Covid-19 restrictions may have created additional challenges for some and brought benefits to others, the underlying needs of this group are wider, deeper, and more long-term than the temporary upheaval of a global pandemic, and no less pressing than they were before. With or without Covid-19, adopted young people and adults need much, much more.



In focus: transitions to adulthood

Successive Barometer reports have highlighted the significant challenges facing many adoptive families with children aged 16 and older as they navigate the transition to adulthood. Adopted young people are much more likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET) at this age than their peers, and an increasing proportion are experiencing difficulties with their mental health.

A survey of adopted young people and adults for Adoption UK's *Better Futures* report (2020) revealed that two thirds found it difficult to complete their post-16 studies because of other things going on in their lives. Respondents and interviewees spoke honestly about the challenges they faced as young adults – including navigating a shifting landscape of support services, reconnecting with birth family members and coming to terms with their histories at a time of life that can be challenging for any young person.

This year, the *Adoption Barometer* survey included additional survey questions for parents of children aged 16-25 to establish a clearer picture of the challenges facing families and a better understanding of what would help.

We also circulated a survey for adopted young people and adults aged 16 or older, which was created with the support of a small focus group of adopted adults. The results of this survey present the views of 159 adopted people who are living, or who have lived through the transition to adulthood (aged 16-25) as an adopted person, presenting both immediate reactions, and reflections based on hindsight and further life experience.

The respondents to this survey were adopted as far back as the 1960s and before, and as recently as the first decade of this century. Fifty-five per cent were aged 16-25 at the time of completing the survey, and 51% had begun living with their adoptive family during the 2000s.

Their views about adoption in general covered a whole range – from those who would wish to see an end to the practice, to those who felt they had not needed any additional support at all related to their adoptive status.

I found many of these questions quite difficult to answer because I never saw being adopted as needing additional support specific to adopted children. Therefore, having access to other adopted children/support professionals with expertise in adoption etc. as listed here are not things I ever required either at the time or retrospectively.

Adopted adult aged over 25



Adopted adults over 25 felt that **adoptive parents** who were **comfortable talking about adoption** was the **most important supportive factor** in childhood

Stop adoption. If people really care about the child they will accept legal guardianship. If not, then long term fostering is the best option if family preservation cannot be achieved. Adoption is cruel.

Adopted adult aged over 25

Consequently, responses revealed wide variations of views on some issues, highlighting that services for adopted children, young people and adults must balance the provision of universal adoption support with the need for individualised supportive interventions tailored to each person's circumstances and experiences.

Childhood foundations

The transition to adulthood will take place on the foundations that have been laid earlier in the lives of adopted children and young people. In modern adoption, the majority of adopted children are removed from their families due to abuse and neglect. All adopted children have experienced trauma and loss, regardless of their individual early life circumstances.

Early, effective and flexible support offered to adoptive families and adopted children and young people during their childhood is essential to prevent escalation of difficulties leading to crisis points, and to ensure adopted young people reach the threshold of adulthood in the best possible position.

I realise now how different my life may have been if I had received support concerning my adoption in my teenage years.

Adopted adult aged over 25

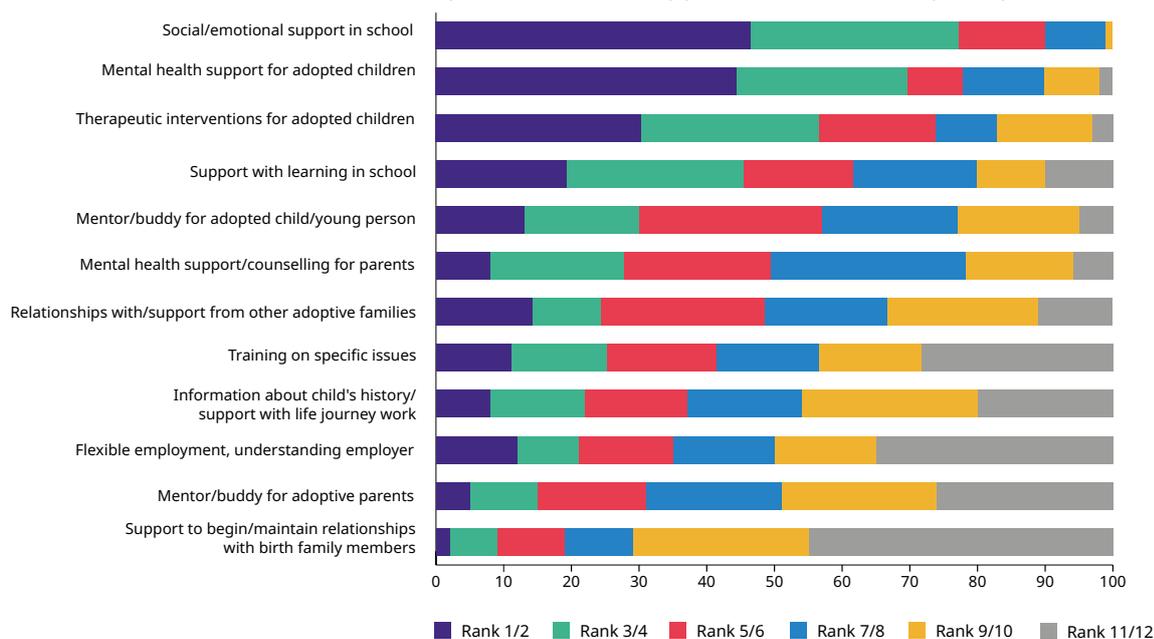
I came out of the fog at 11 due to the internet and it broke me. I had no access to support and had to just suffer.

Adopted young person aged 16-25

Where children have left the family home prematurely, adoptive parents frequently report years of asking for support that might have prevented crises occurring, and only 25% of parents of children aged 16-25 felt that the support they had received in the past had prepared them well to support their child's transition to adulthood.

In recognition of the importance of creating stable foundations in childhood, adoptive parents were asked to think about protective and supportive factors that they considered most important for families with younger children. Respondents were offered 12 protective factors relating both to parents' needs and children's needs and, with the benefit of their experience, asked to arrange them in rank order from most important to least important (where rank 1 was the most important).

Rank order of childhood protective and supportive factors: adoptive parents

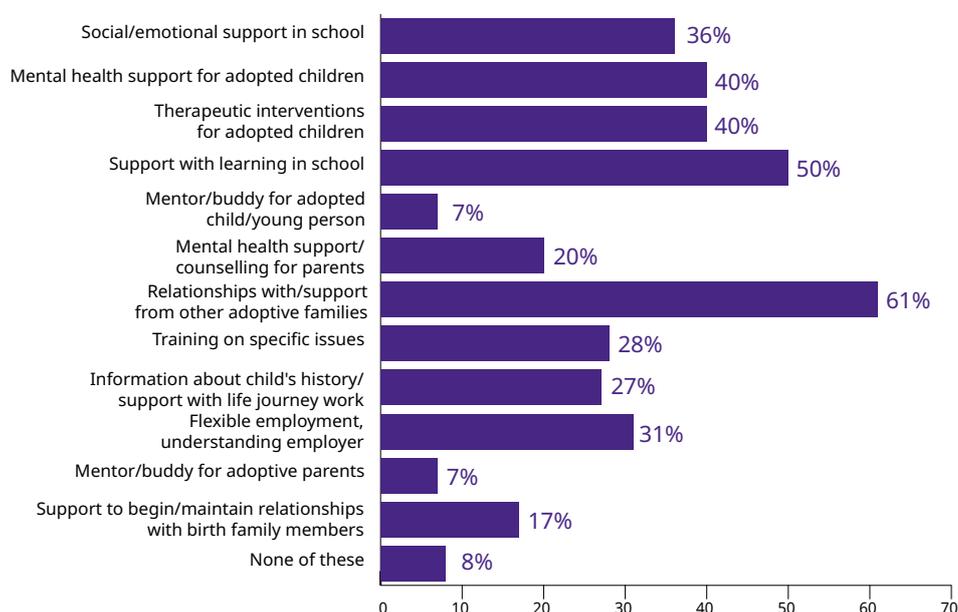


Thirty per cent of adoptive parents ranked 'social and emotional support in school' as the most important protective and supportive factor for children aged under 16 (rank 1). Mental health support for adopted children was ranked at 1 by 19% of respondents and at 2 by 26% of respondents.

However, when adoptive parents were asked which of these protective and supportive factors they had actually been able to access when their own child was under 16, it was clear that there were gaps between what was identified as important and what was actually available. Most adoptive parent respondents said that they were not able to access the two factors deemed most important – social and emotional support in school, and mental health support for adopted children.

Relationships and support from other adoptive families was the supportive factor most commonly available to parents, which demonstrates the enormous role the adoption community plays in supporting its members, sometimes in the absence of other forms of support.

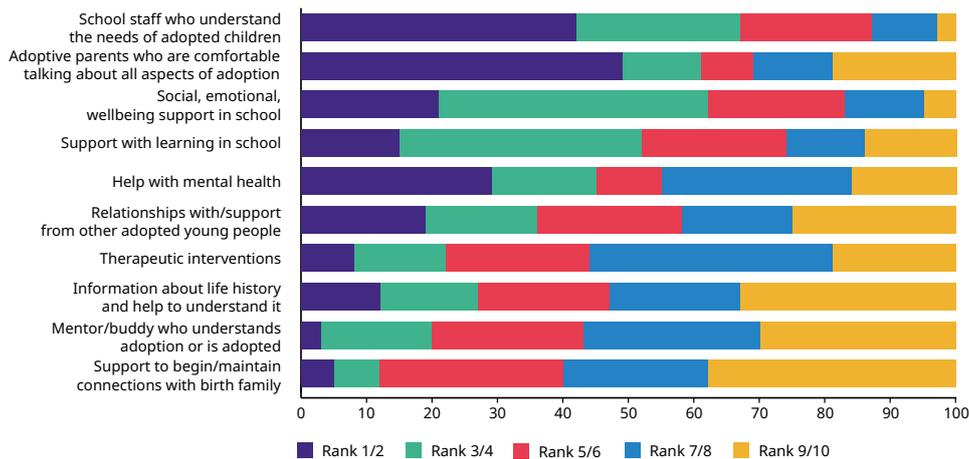
Access to childhood protective and supportive factors: adoptive parents



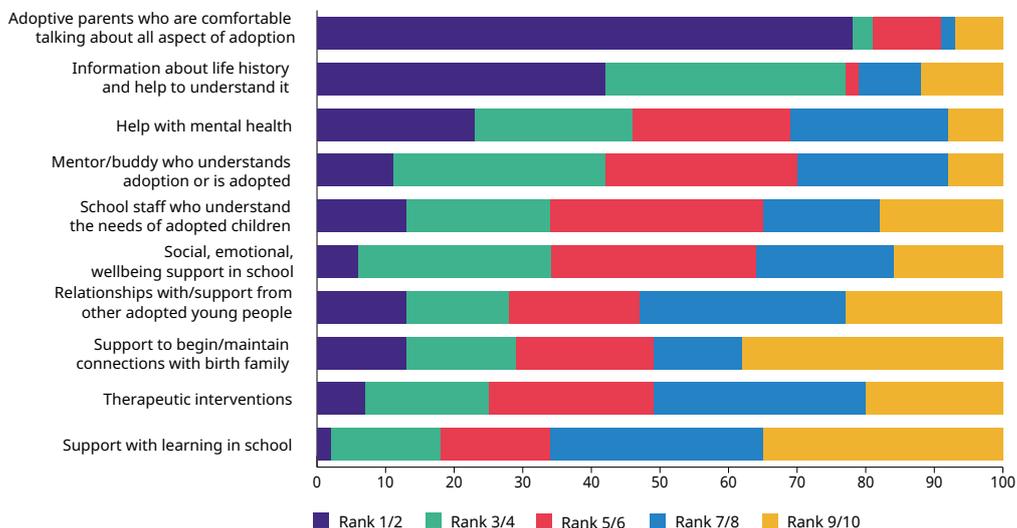
Adopted young people and adults were also asked to consider what protective and supportive factors they believed were most important to give adopted children (aged under 16) a stable foundation on which to prepare for the transition to adulthood. Respondents were offered a list of 10 factors focused on the possible needs of adopted children, and asked to arrange them in order of importance, with rank 1 being the most important.

The responses of young people aged 16-25 are presented separately from the responses of adopted adults aged over 25 in order to identify any differences between the views of those currently living through this transition, and those who are reflecting on their earlier life experiences.

Rank order of childhood protective and supportive factors: adopted young people responses



Rank order of childhood protective and supportive factors: adopted adults responses



Adopted young people aged 16-25 placed a high level of importance on factors relating to education, reflecting a similar focus among adoptive parents. It is perhaps not surprising that adopted respondents aged over 25 placed less emphasis on school-based factors as their school days were further in the past. When considering what was important during childhood, this older group was more likely to focus on factors relating to their life history and identity.

While relationships with other adopted young people and mentors or buddies who understand adoption/are adopted themselves, did not rank at the highest levels for any of the respondent groups, such provisions were frequently mentioned in adopted respondents' comments. This suggests that, while other supportive factors might take priority, the opportunity to form relationships with other adopted people was valued by respondents.

I feel it would have been beneficial to have known and spent time with other adopted young people as I felt isolated and alone.

Adopted adult aged over 25

Older adopted respondents were also slightly more likely to consider support to establish or maintain relationships with birth family members as most important, compared to younger adopted respondents or adoptive parents. However, this factor was also most likely to be ranked as least important across all three groups of respondents.

Mental health was also considered an important factor among adoptive parents and adopted respondents of all ages.

Talking to other adopted young people I feel that almost 99% of us have suffered with mental health issues, myself included (I always thought it was just me) and that it should be normalised given our start in life and maybe have more support for us in that area.

Adopted young person aged 16-25

Adopted young people and adults were united in considering the willingness of their adoptive parents to talk with them about all aspects of adoption as being of high importance during their childhood years. This preference was even stronger among older adopted people and highlights the crucial importance of supporting openness about everything that adoption entails within safe and nurturing family relationships.

Case study

I was adopted as a baby in 1971 and had a happy childhood. My parents were very open about my adoption, but we never discussed my birth parents other than general details e.g. personal characteristics as described from social services.

During my teenage years, I struggled with my identity. School wasn't the best experience, I felt misunderstood and didn't fit in. At that time, I knew my birth mother's name but didn't want to hurt my parents, so I'd secretly rifle through telephone directories to try to find her.

After leaving home, the urge to learn about my identity intensified. I felt a duty to protect my parents as I didn't want to hurt them by mentioning that I was looking for my birth family. The search process itself was stressful and it was only a decade later, after a chance conversation with a taxi driver who was from the same area as my birth mother, that we were reunited.

I was 30 when I opened Pandora's box. There was no emotional or intermediary support from social services back then, just factual information. It was raw and I wasn't ready for what happened next. At stages it was like a time warp, with everyone being transported back to the 1970s and earlier. My birth mother hadn't seen me since I was a few weeks old. When she first met me, she handed me a silver picture frame with a photograph of her holding me as a baby. She'd never wanted to give me up.

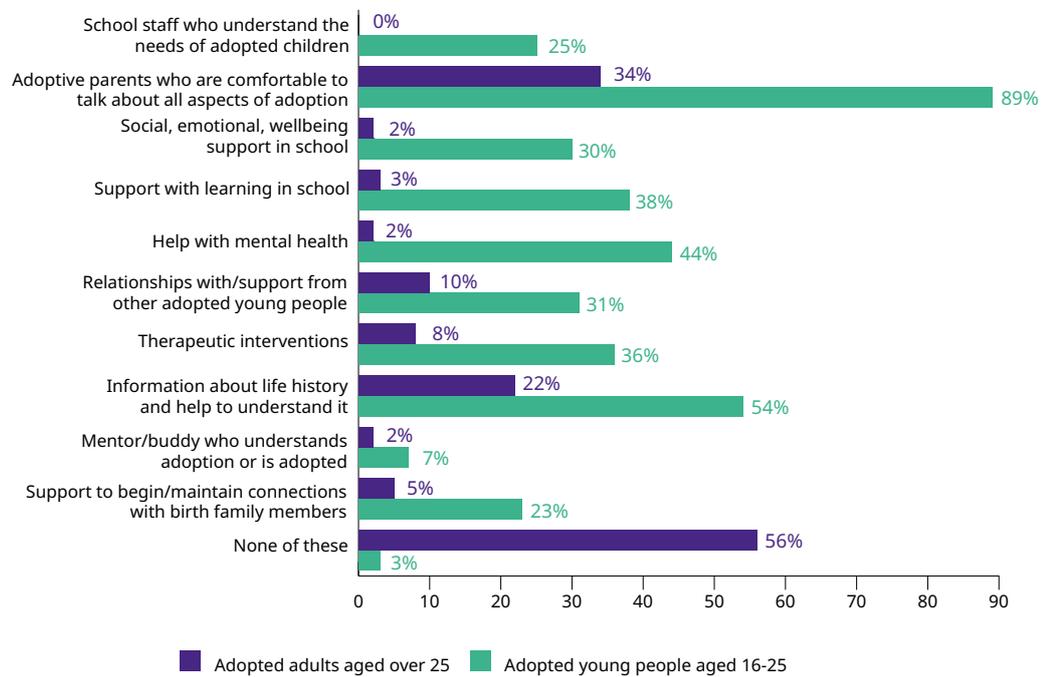
When I met my birth father, I noticed he had the same pigmentation as my daughter. One of the first questions he asked, which was understandable, was "What do you want?"

We invited my birth parents and my parents to my daughter's christening. You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. Now, I have strong relationships with my birth parents and we see each other regularly, but I do wonder if the journey amongst all parties would have been less awkward and natural if my parents had been more candid about my birth parents when I was a child?

Adopted adult, Wales

Adopted young people and adults were also asked which of these protective and supportive factors they had actually been able to access during their childhoods (before the age of 16).

Access to childhood protective and supportive factors: adopted young people and adults



Perhaps the most striking feature of the comparison between younger adopted people and adopted adults is the proportion of respondents over 25 who were not able to access any of the protective and supportive factors in their childhood (56%). None of the older respondents felt they had school staff who understood the needs of adopted children. Eighty-nine per cent of respondents aged 16-25 felt that they had adoptive parents who were willing to talk about all aspects of adoption, compared to only 34% of those aged over 25. It seems that those who were adopted more recently have been able to access more support in all areas than those who were adopted longer ago.

Each adopted person is a unique individual, and each adoptive family must navigate its own set of circumstances. However, from the responses to questions about the childhood protective and supportive factors that would best prepare an adopted person and their family for the transition to adulthood, some clear priorities can be identified:

- Support, training and guidance for adoptive parents to enable them to create an environment in which all members of the family can feel safe to talk about all aspects of adoption openly throughout their adopted children's childhood.
- Social, emotional and mental health support for adopted children and young people both in and out of school.
- Training for education professionals to ensure that the specific needs of adopted children are understood and attended to in education.
- Sensitive, timely life journey support for adopted children and their parents, bearing in mind that while some may not prioritise the need for this in childhood, older adopted people were more likely to consider it a significant factor when reflecting on their earlier lives.

Becoming a young adult

Adolescence and early adulthood are times of enormous change for any young person. However, adopted young people can face additional complicating factors.

Living outside the family home was unexpectedly difficult without necessarily understanding why this was the case, or associating this with adoption ... This arrives at a time when birth parents have a legal right to contact the child directly through social workers (where this might have been mediated by adoptive parents previously). And at a time when embarking on new types of relationships can bring up difficult emotions.

Adopted adult aged over 25

Thirty-two per cent of adopted young people and adults said that they were not in education, employment or training at some point between the ages of 16-25, and 54% had visited a health professional because of concerns about their mental health during the same period.

Fifty-two per cent were either in contact with birth family members or were actively searching for them between the ages of 16-25. This proportion was consistent across age groups, but there were some differences between older and younger respondents in terms of when the relationships with birth family members had begun.

Younger respondents (aged 16-25) were much more likely to be continuing already established relationships with birth family members during their transition to adulthood (24%) compared to those over 25 (6%), whereas older respondents were more likely to be making brand new connections with birth family members.

54%

of adopted people had visited a health professional as a young adult because of concerns about their mental health

Case study

I've recently connected with a half-sister I didn't even know existed. I'm quite a chatty person who's open to meeting new people, but our conversation was a bit strange. I didn't know what to expect, although I added her on Facebook. It felt weird, and it still does.

One of my other sisters, who has the same adoptive parents as me, tracked down our birth mum. She went to our birth mum's house to introduce herself and then got her to call me, completely out of the blue. The whole thing felt really inappropriate and overwhelming. In my final year at university, I just didn't need this distraction. I had to say that I was sorry and although I appreciated the phone call, I would rather have connected with her in a more organised way.

The way it happened made it so awkward. My birth mother asked if she could text me, which I agreed to, but then she wanted to call me again, which I was not comfortable with.

I'd advise any adopted young person thinking of meeting their birth relatives to go through the relevant professionals so that they can receive the help and support they will need. It'll work out better in the long run.

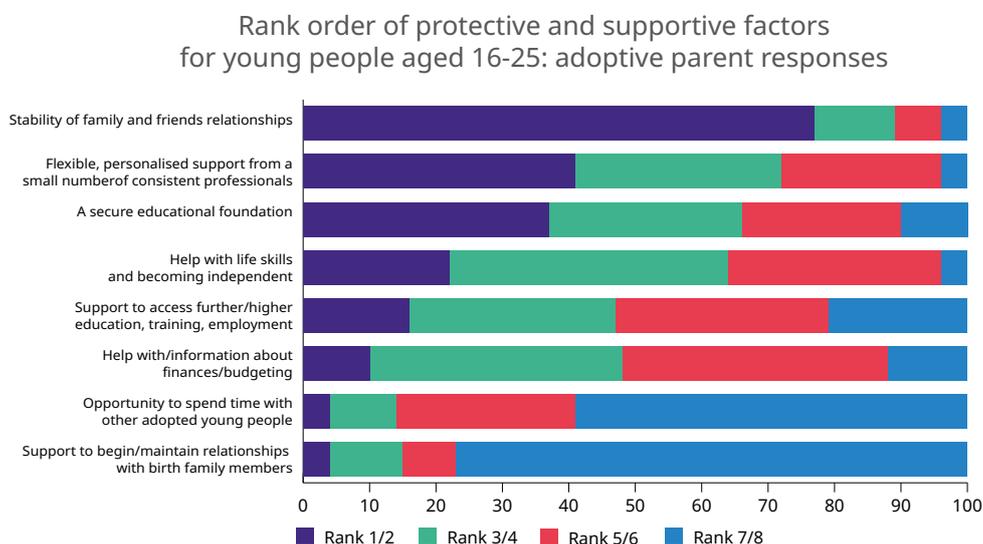
Adopted young person, Wales

It is clear that the transition to adulthood can come at a time when adopted young people are experiencing considerable additional challenges related to their life history, identity, care experience and adoptive status, and that additional support may be needed during this time to help the whole family to navigate this transition.

As in childhood, support for young people during the transition to adulthood can take the form of targeted interventions, or more general protective and supportive factors that create stability and security for families and individuals.

Adoptive parents and adopted young people and adults were offered a list of eight protective and supportive factors that might be considered important for young people aged 16-25 as they transition to adulthood. Respondents were asked to rank these in order from most important to least important (with rank 1 being the most important).

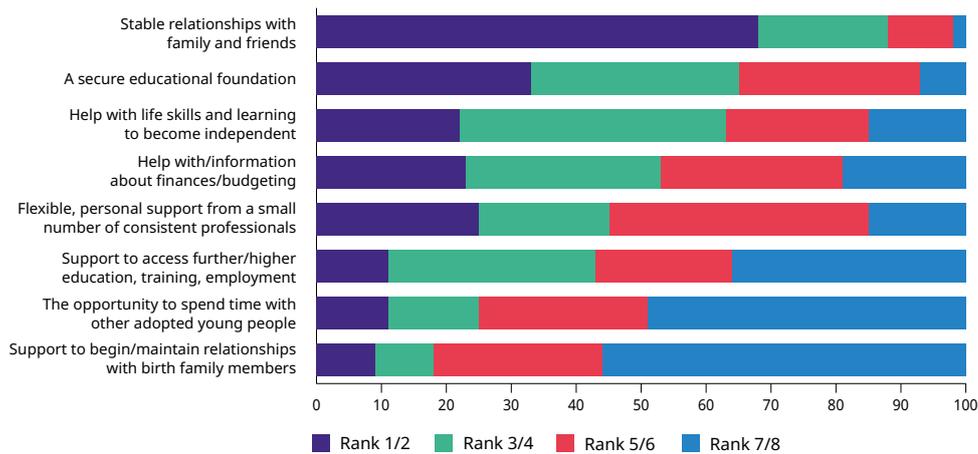
The responses of adoptive parents, adopted young people (aged 16-25) and adopted adults (aged over 25) have been presented separately so that differences between their views can be identified.



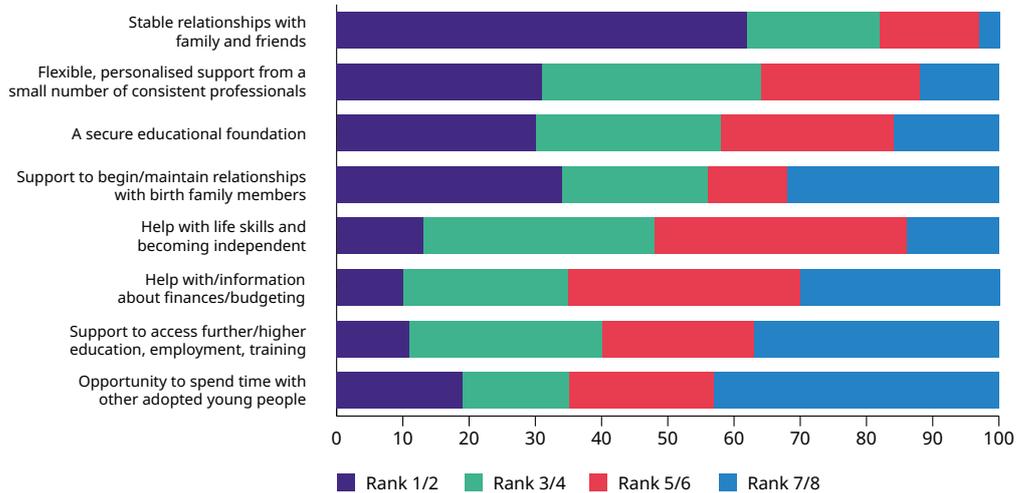
Among adoptive parents, stability of family and peer relationships was the most important factor for supporting young people aged 16-25 overall. Adoptive parents also valued flexible, personalised support from a small number of consistent professionals. This factor was adapted from the recommendations of *Into the Mainstream* (Allen, 2003), a report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation investigating the experiences of care leavers entering work, education and employment.

Adoptive parents have consistently highlighted the challenge of supporting their young adult children to navigate a range of support services, which is only made more difficult when professionals seem to be in and out of young people's lives. Nearly 20 years after the publication of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, it is still vital that young people who have experienced so much change, uncertainty and loss are able to secure consistent and accessible support.

Rank order of protective and supportive factors for young people aged 16-25: adopted young people



Rank order of protective and supportive factors for young people aged 16-25: adopted adults aged over 25



Like adoptive parents, adopted young people and adults valued stability of friend and family relationships above all other protective and supportive factors. Both in childhood and in the transition years, the relationships experienced by the adopted person were seen as integral to both preparing for and transitioning to adulthood safely. The support offered to young people must therefore be situated in the context of their whole family and support network to provide the best opportunity for these relationships to be healthy and stable.

While adoptive parents and adopted young people aged 16-25 continued to assign lower importance to beginning or maintaining relationships with birth family members, adopted people over 25 considered this slightly more important during the transition years than in childhood. However, while 22% of over 25s ranked this as their most important factor, 29% ranked it as their least important factor, indicating considerable polarisation of views, with more than half of respondents at extreme ends of the spectrum.

Accessing support

Seventy-one per cent of adopted adults and young people who responded to the survey said that they felt they needed more support than their peers to transition to adulthood. This was consistent across age groups.

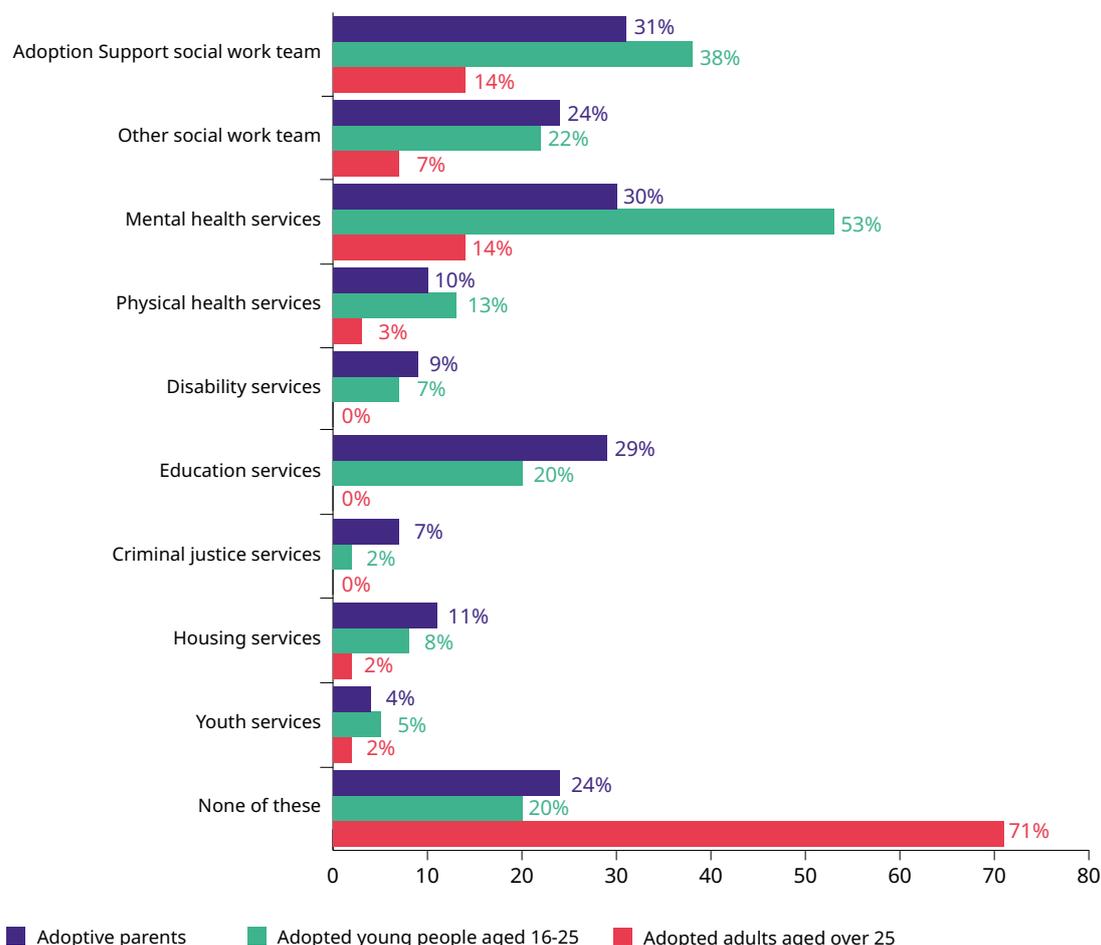
However, it was clear from responses that adopted people felt that support was difficult to access. Only 35% of 16-25-year-olds, and 16% of over 25s felt that they had been able to find support that understood their needs as an adopted young person. Almost three quarters of adults aged 25 and over felt as though they had fallen down the cracks in terms of accessing support, and 77% said that they needed support but didn't know how to access it.

The situation seems to be slightly better for those currently aged 16-25, but it is far from ideal. Only 44% feel that they are receiving all the support they need, and 47% say they need support but don't know how to access it.

Adoptive parents identified high levels of support needs among their 16-25-year-old children. Seventy-eight per cent of older children represented by adoptive parent respondents were reported to need support with accessing training, education and employment, and 77% needed support with skills for independence such as managing finances. Half of the young people represented by adoptive parent respondents were reported to need additional support with basic self-care skills (e.g. preparing meals) and only 7% were reported to have no support needs.

75% 
of adopted respondents could not find specialist support for adopted young people between the ages of 16 and 25

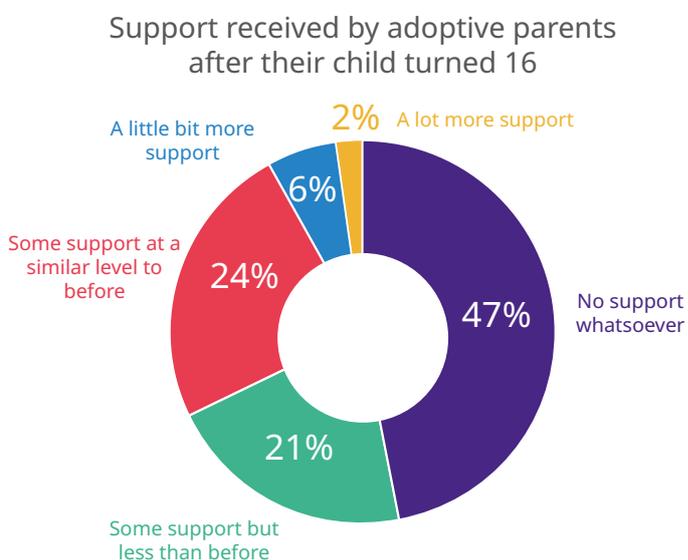
Sources of support accessed by adoptive families and adopted young people



When adoptive parents were asked about the basis on which their child had received support from professional services, the majority were accessing support through their child's status as a previously looked after child (44%) or through their child's education, health and care plan, statement of special education needs, or equivalent (32%).

The majority of adopted respondents over 25 reported that they had not accessed any of the listed services during these years. Considering that 77% reported wanting to access support but being unable to, it is likely that barriers to accessing support explain the low levels of access to services rather than lack of need.

Where there is a lack of formal support available, or barriers to its access, families are left to their own resources. Eighty-eight per cent of adopted young people aged 16-25 regarded their adoptive parents as their main source of support, but parents themselves reported feeling unsupported for many years. When asked about support they had received as a parent (as opposed to support they had accessed for their child) when their child was younger, 56% of parents said they had received little or no support.



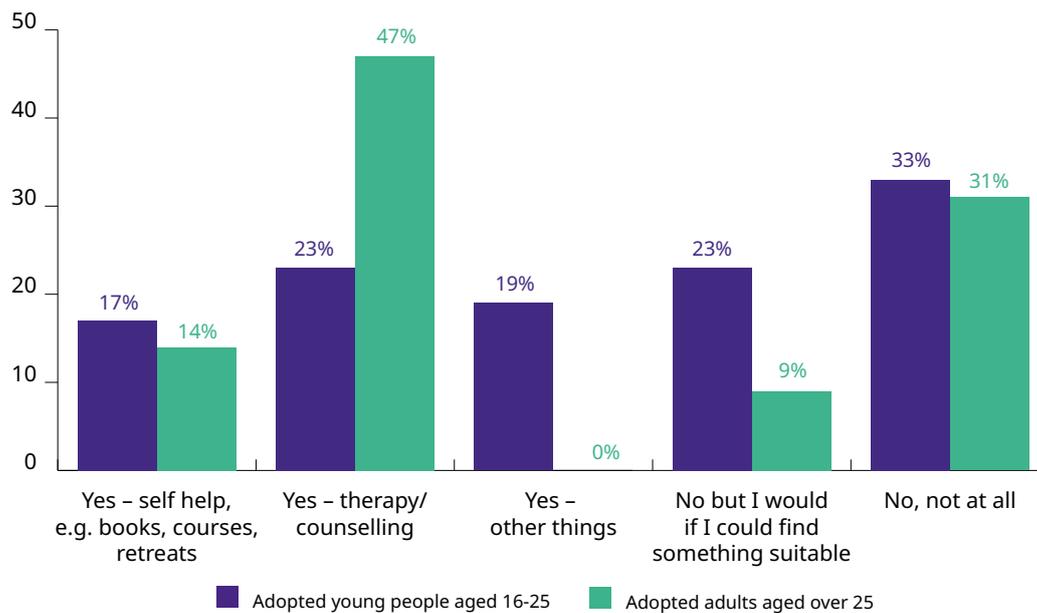
As their children turned 16, most adoptive parents felt that the support offered to them as parents was either non-existent, or less than they had received when their child was younger. Where support was being received from formal services, adoption support services were the most likely source (46% of parents receiving support).

In 2020, 32% of adoptive parents of 16-25-year-olds had accessed emotional support and counselling for themselves, and a further 20% had sought out peer support and training. Nearly one third of adoptive parent respondents have paid for membership of supportive organisations such as Adoption UK since their child or children turned 16. Investment in support for parents, who so many adopted young people rely on as their main support, is an investment in the young people themselves.

The barriers to accessing support experienced by adoptive families and adopted people have led to many funding services themselves. Sixty-eight per cent of adoptive parents of 16-25-year-olds reported paying for support for themselves or their children, including 23% who had paid for counselling or therapy for their child, and 21% who paid for counselling or therapy for themselves.

Adopted respondents also reported that they (or their parents on their behalf) had self-funded counselling, therapy, self-help and other forms of support after they had turned 16.

Have you (or your parents on your behalf) ever paid for counselling, therapy, self help or other support since turning 16?



A common difficulty reported by adoptive parents and adopted young people and adults was finding sources of support that could effectively take account of an individual's status as an adopted person, with all that this entails. Specialist support geared to understanding the needs of adopted and care-experienced young people was difficult to obtain, and this challenge continued into adulthood.

My transition to adulthood was extremely difficult and I suffered a number of mental health issues but the help available on the NHS was not tailored for my needs. CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] is about changing your thought processes. Example: anxiety is based on fear of things, for example bad things happening. As an adoptee, the fear or abandonment is not just a fear, it is a reality and a trauma we have been through. It's something which has already happened to us, not something we are just worried about.

Adopted adult aged over 25

Adoptees are the experts on adoption. Trauma trained counsellors that are ideally adoptees are what we need. Not more social workers. The way our access to help and who can provide it is decided by public servants is a disgrace ... There are no suitable support services available. The way post adoption support in the UK is currently organised is a scandal.

Adopted adult aged over 25

The adult adoptee community has no support. Mental health services are practically non-existent and even if you have the means to pay privately, finding adoption informed therapists capable of working with relinquishment trauma or CPTSD [complex post-traumatic stress disorder] in the UK is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Adult adoptees are an utterly forgotten demographic... Services stop when we're adults. For some of us, services never existed when we were children either.

Adopted adult aged over 25

Only 25% of adopted young people and adults felt that they could find support that understood their needs as an adopted person between the ages of 16-25. When asked if they had ever received support, counselling, or therapy from an organisation or individual with specialist understanding of adoption (including support received over the age of 25), just one third said that they had.

The proportion of respondents, especially among those aged over 25, who would like to receive support from someone with a specialist understanding of adoption if they could find an appropriate service raises serious concerns about the availability and accessibility of these specialist services. Respondents had support needs specific to their experiences as an adopted person that lasted well beyond childhood, with almost half of older respondents accessing privately funded therapy or counselling. It is essential that the lifelong support needs of adopted people are recognised, and action taken to ensure that they are effectively met.

Case study

As an adopted person with two adopted children, I can't emphasise enough the importance of specialist support for adoption. A lot of therapists think that if you can't remember trauma, it won't affect you, but I still have a lot of issues around loss and rejection, despite being adopted when I was very young back in the 1960s.

I've had a good life but there are still issues and at no point has anyone ever asked, "Do you need help?" I did seek support from the post adoption support centre after I'd traced my birth mother and wanted to make contact. I had half a dozen sessions with a counsellor who offered advice and acted as an intermediary, writing to my birth mother and offering her counselling.

When we did meet it was very emotional. It meant everything to me as I could get answers to questions that I'd waited all my life to ask. I found out I had two half-sisters – one of them looks just like me. It was important for me to see people who look like me. I've recommended the post adoption support centre to many other people as the help they provided was excellent.

Unlike me, my teenage daughters were born into drink and drugs, so have a lot to unpack. Both have dyslexia, and my youngest is also autistic, has ADHD and a condition which affects brain formation. Her behavioural needs have resulted in the rest of the family experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. We've fought for support throughout their lives. No teacher we have encountered has done thorough training in attachment and the needs of the adopted child. One therapist my children saw didn't acknowledge that I was adopted, didn't follow boundaries, and didn't do any prior research into what the children knew about their birth parents. We did see a good art therapist who was able to address some of the girls' issues, but she wasn't trained in adoption. I had to educate her about attachment and rejection. None of the support we've received has been outstanding. When you're offered support, you're in a place of crisis so you don't investigate what you're given because you're just so grateful to take whatever is being offered.

Adopted adult and adoptive parent, England

Managing transitions between support services

Between the ages of 16 and 25, most young people who are receiving support from services such as children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) will experience a transition between services designed for children and young people to services designed for adults. The exact age at which this transition will take place can vary depending on the type of service and the local protocols in different areas.

73% 
of parents said their child's support reduced or ceased when they aged out of services for adolescents

My mum got me some counselling. It was helping but when I turned 21 the social worker said they would not pay any more. Mom and Dad paid for a while longer, but it was expensive, and they couldn't keep paying. I felt bad about them paying too. I feel younger than my age, so did not feel ready at 21.

Adopted young person aged 16-25

[We need] better support for mental health, especially for transition from CAMHS to adult mental health.

Adopted young person aged 16-25

The potential negative impact of such transitions was documented in Adoption UK's *Better Futures* report (2020), where one of the young people, Anna, described being discharged from CAMHS when she reached 16, but then finding that she didn't meet the threshold to be accepted onto adult mental health services. She was subsequently admitted as an in-patient to a mental health unit.

Adoptive parents reported significant challenges in supporting their older children through the transition to adult services. Of those whose children had experienced this transition, 88% said that they had needed to learn new skills and carry out significant research to support their child to navigate the change in services yet, despite their efforts, 73% said that the support received by their adopted child had declined or stopped as a result of aging out of services for children and adolescents. In view of this, it is not surprising that 67% felt that transition from services for children and adolescents to services for adults had resulted in a damaging impact on their family.

Case study

Our daughter was eight when we adopted her. She was 14 when things started to get really difficult. One day she said she was going to kill herself and pulled out a kitchen knife, but thankfully my husband grabbed it off her.

There were then multiple overdoses, resulting in her being hospitalised, before she moved on to self-harming, cutting her arms and legs. We never found the implement she was using. She'd also run away for days and there would be search parties before the police brought her back.

Then she began to starve herself, not eating for weeks. She was repeatedly put on a drip in hospital, but we only saw the eating disorder specialist nurse once.

She was discharged from CAMHS without any diagnosis. She then had to wait nine months to be seen by adult mental health services, who offered her a place in a class along with 20 other people. She went once but never went back.

She doesn't receive any mental health care, or see any professional health care workers, so we still don't know what's wrong with her.

Once a child turns 18, as a parent you're shut out. I've witnessed her mental health deteriorate rapidly and yet social services won't discuss anything with me. She's getting no help and won't accept any help. She's not in a position to take onboard what they're telling her.

Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

Both adoptive parents and adopted adults and young people frequently commented that the move to independence and adulthood came too early for some young people, and that services expected too much of them too soon.

This sentiment was echoed in the CELCIS report, *Being a student with care experience is very daunting* (O'Neill et al, 2019), which noted that older care leavers, while ineligible for formal supports, still experienced complex challenges relating to their care experience. The authors recommended that "access to supportive services should be consistent, enduring and without discrimination on the basis of age...".

The significant negative impact on adoptive families and on adopted young people of losing support from services designed for children and adolescents at a time in their lives when challenges are likely to increase rather than decrease, suggests that removing barriers to support based on the age of

the young person could be a minimum first step to ensuring that all young people are adequately supported.

The adopted young people and adults who completed the survey had other suggestions as to what might help them navigate the complex landscape of support for young adults.

I think after 16 we should all have a special mentor who can provide emotional support as well as advice about training and education, jobs, money and housing. Someone to call on when we are struggling or need advice. Before that, we need to know that we're going to get help as we grow up and not be on our own with it. We need to know how to be an adult when we're not ready to be one.

Adopted adult aged over 25

At 18 my life became very complicated as I started working and living independently. There was no network to recognise my transition at the stage ... Having someone (ideally adopted) to buddy up through my search/discovery journey would have been priceless.

Adopted adult aged over 25

I needed an adult social worker that understands the effects of early life trauma ... they don't truly understand the reason it's so difficult being a young person with an adoptive background.

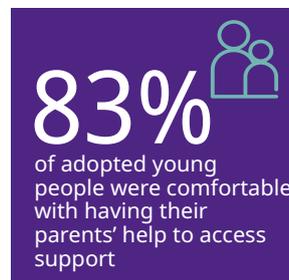
Adopted young person aged 16-25

To have a centre where adopted children from the age of 16-25 can meet up and talk about everything and get support and others helping them as they have been in the same situations.

Adopted young person aged 16-25

Young people living away from home

Among respondents over 25 (99% of whom were living away from their adoptive parents) 25% had left their family home before the age of 18, suggesting that a significant proportion of adopted young people are managing the transition to adulthood while also managing the challenges of adapting to independent living at a very young age.



Where very young adults are living away from home, the relationships between the young person, the adoptive parents, and the services that families are involved with can sometimes be difficult to manage. While some young people living independently may wish to separate themselves from their adoptive families, others retain closer relationships with their families and value the support that their adoptive parents can offer them.

The social worker won't talk to my parents now and I want her to. Other professionals won't either, but I need them to, because I still need my parents' help. But professionals think I should be old enough to manage everything by myself and I can't. No 17-year-old can. Other peers have help from their parents and it's considered OK. But I'm expected to grow up a lot faster, just because I'm on [Section 20]. It's unfair and it's not right.

Adopted young person aged 16-25

As I was in care from the age of 12, I would have liked carers and social workers to allow my adoptive parents to be part of my life rather than cut them out as it damaged my relationship with my adoptive parents.

Adopted adult aged over 25

Among adopted young people aged 16-25, 83% were comfortable with having their adoptive parents' help to find and access support. However, only 39% of adoptive parents felt that they were included in partnership working with other agencies and professionals around the needs of their older child. Where their adopted child had left the family home aged 16 or older, 89% of adoptive parents felt that services were not geared towards whole family support.

An NSPCC analysis of serious case reviews involving teenagers (NSPCC, 2021) found that, "Sometimes practitioners perceived a young person to be independent and mature. This led them to be quick to act in accordance with the young person's expressed wishes, even when it was not necessarily in the young person's best interests," but also that, "the young person's wishes and needs were overlooked because they displayed behaviour perceived as challenging or because practitioners took a parent or carer's word over their child's". This highlights the challenges involved for practitioners when trying to achieve a balance between the wishes of young people, their need to be kept safe, and the level of involvement of their parents and carers.

The NSPCC also noted that practitioners sometimes closed the cases of young people who did not attend appointments due to an assumption that the child did not want to engage. The wider reasons for this were not considered. Adoptive parents reported a mixed picture of accessing support on behalf of their 16-25-year-olds, with 14% stating that once their child refused an offer of support, no further support was offered.

An adopted young person who may seem 'difficult to engage' is most likely a young person with significant needs stemming from early trauma, neglect, abuse, loss and care experience, as well as potential current challenges around identity, life history, relationships with birth family members and mental health needs. In view of this, the NSPCC recommendations that practitioners should "persevere to ensure that they are able to engage with a young person" and that "cases should not be closed purely on the strength of non-attendance" are particularly pertinent.

Adoptive parents reported a range of support needs for themselves and their children once a very young adult had left the family home.

Needed help with getting him somewhere to live. Didn't know where to start.

Adoptive parent

We are still trying to access mental health support, but the waiting list is huge.

Adoptive parent

Adopted young people and adults spoke passionately about the need for sustained and expert support once they had left the family home at any age. Several commented that they felt emotionally younger than their peers and unready for independence, which provides further impetus to ensure that, where the adopted young person wishes it, adoptive parents are fully included in the support plan that is in place for the young person.

Counselling support, self-esteem work and support for understanding relationships is really key at this time for sustaining consistency in education, work and life more generally. It cannot be assumed that this need will be recognised by educators, adoptive parents or adopted people themselves.

Adopted adult aged over 25

You are always less mature emotionally, though some, like my son, also adopted, are not able or willing to recognise this and it is a big problem.

Adopted adult aged over 25

Adopted adults and young people frequently reported that they faced practical challenges due to their care-experience and adoption that others would never even need to think about.

For me, the issue boils down to lack of identity and systems being created which create barriers for adoptees, e.g. I was declined my first mortgage because I couldn't provide a medical history.

Adopted adult aged over 25

The focus of this report is on transitions to adulthood for adopted young people aged 16-25. This group faces significant barriers to accessing support whether they live at home with their families or are living independently. The availability of support both during an adopted person's childhood, and during the transition years, will be a vital factor in ensuring that adopted young people get the best possible start to their adult lives.

However, older adopted adults who responded to the survey presented a clarion call for comprehensive, expert and lifelong support that extends well beyond the age of 16, 18 or 25. Many described coming to a deeper understanding of the impact of being adopted much later in life, without the benefit of any suitable support during childhood to act as a foundation, and then finding that the support services being rolled out for the current generation of adopted children and adoptive families were not available for them. As one respondent said, "We don't stop being an adoptee just because we grow up".

Adoption affects us for the whole of our life, to differing degrees, and it needs to be recognised as a life-changing event by families and schools who spend so much time with adoptees but who often still believe in the fairy tale ending.

Adopted adult aged over 25

Conclusions

Although there were variations in the views and experiences of the adoptive parents and adopted young people and adults who responded to the surveys, some key principles have emerged:

- Both in childhood and during the transition to adulthood, support needs to be geared towards every member of the adoptive family. Adopted young people and adults placed a very high value on having adoptive parents who were able to talk to them about all aspects of adoption, and the proportion of 16-25-year-olds who saw their adoptive parents as their main source of support demonstrates the need for parents themselves to be adequately supported so that they can effectively support their children.
- Timely and early support is essential. Preparation for the transition to adulthood must not be left until a child is on the threshold of turning 16 or older. Lack of effective support in childhood can mean adults coming to terms with the impact of their experience as an adopted person much later in life with little help available to them.
- Adopted adults have much wisdom to offer adoptive families and practitioners working with them. While survey respondents were likely to naturally focus on those issues that seem most relevant at their current stage in life (such as education for younger respondents), older adopted people have the benefit of hindsight and perhaps a more rounded view of the priorities for support in childhood and adolescence. Their views on the importance of, for instance, life journey support, should inform adoption support planning for adopted children and adolescents.
- Arbitrary age-based cut-off points for access to support services are not appropriate for those whose early years have been impacted by trauma, neglect, care experience, and the loss of their first families. These experiences can have a lifelong impact and there should be a presumption that support will be available throughout an adopted person's lifetime.

Recommendations

1. Extend adoption support services to at least age 26

Adoption support that is available to children and young people up to age 18 should be extended to at least age 26, to respond to the fact that many adopted people need specialist support into adulthood. This would bring support for previously looked after young people more into line with that for care leavers.

2. Improve the transition from child to adult services

To avoid young people falling off a 'cliff edge' during their transition to adulthood, governments should bring thresholds for adult services more into line with those for child and adolescent services.

3. Training and peer support for all adopters when their children reach age 13

All agencies to offer specific training for their adopters on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, made available from when their children reach age 13, and access to peer support. Training to include online safety, navigating contact, managing challenging behaviour and helping your school support your child.

4. Establish adoption youth advisory boards in each nation

To help ensure adopted young people and adults are getting the support they need, wherever feasible they should be involved in designing those services, via youth advisory boards.

Nation by nation



England

As the year opened and statistical releases revealed that the number of adoptions in England had fallen by one third since 2015, the children's minister at the time, Michelle Donelan, wrote to all directors of children's services confirming that adoption would be a priority for the government. By April, the nation was in Covid-19 lockdown. The Department for Education (DfE) released £8m in funding to provide emergency support for adoptive families. Local authorities and regional adoption agencies were able to use this funding to provide virtual peer support, helplines, couples therapy and online counselling. An Adoption UK report found that 95% of those who had received services funded by the emergency scheme would like to see them permanently funded under the Adoption Support Fund (ASF).

96%
are likely to make further use of the Adoption Support Fund in the future

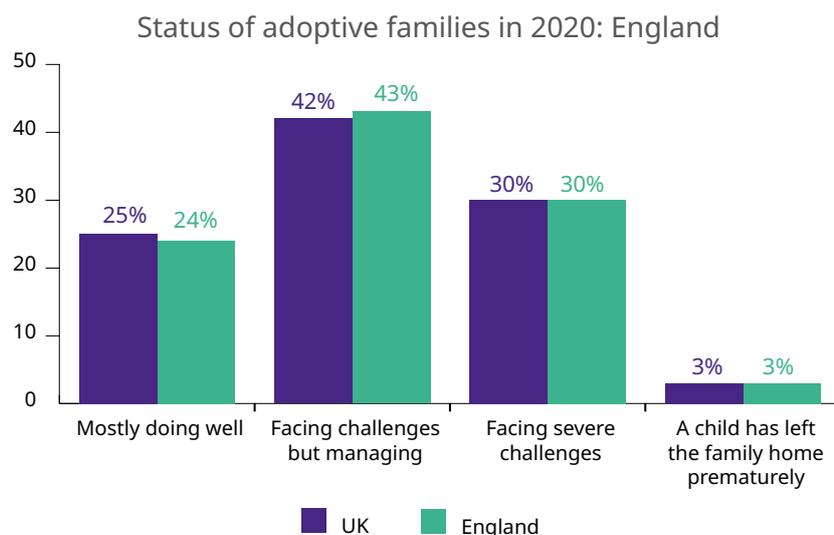
However, the future of the ASF is still not secure, with continuing funding currently being agreed on a yearly basis. Adoption UK continues to call for a 10-year commitment to the fund.

The first weeks of 2021 saw the announcement of the long-awaited care review which will examine the care system in England, including the support provided for adoption. It remains to be seen how the findings of this year-long process will impact the adoption community.

About respondents from England

The total number of respondents who lived in England for the majority of 2020 was 1,663. Of these, 1,117 were established adoptive families, with one or more children adopted before 2020. These established families represented 1,739 children between them.

Seventy-three per cent of respondents from England would encourage others to consider adoption, and 80% feel optimistic about their family's future.



The Adoption Support Fund

During 2020, 38% of respondents living in England made, or attempted to make an application to the ASF through their agency, a decrease of 5% from 2019.

Of those who did not request support via the ASF, 39% said that they did not need the support in 2020, and a further 20% were not eligible either because they did not have an adopted child living with them, or their child or children had aged out of eligibility.

Thirteen per cent of those who did not seek support via the ASF did not know about the fund, and a further 5% had heard of the ASF but did not know how to go about accessing it.

ASF funding for therapeutic interventions is subject to a fair access limit of £5,000 per annum. Applications that exceed the fair access limit require match funding from the local authority. The fair access limit aims to ensure that ASF funding is made available to as many families as possible. However, while only a small proportion of applications are outside of the fair access limit each year, these tend to be the families with the highest level of need.

Only 6% of respondents who made an application to the ASF in 2020 were recommended a package of support that went above the fair access limit but in 44% of these cases match funding was not agreed, suggesting that the fair access limit does act as a barrier to some families with the most complex needs.

The recently published evaluation of the ASF (Oxford Brookes University, 2021) found that “There were good and mostly improving levels of satisfaction with aspects of seeking help through the fund including with the assessment process...” (page 10). However, although *Adoption Barometer* survey respondents’ opinions about the process of requesting support via the ASF has improved slightly in all indicators across all three years of *Adoption Barometer* surveys, satisfaction with some aspects of the process is still relatively low. Only 54% felt that the process for accessing the ASF was clear and straightforward and 51% felt that it was completed in a timely fashion.

The local authority has taken seven months just to submit an application to the ASF and I can't wait any longer.

Adoptive parent, England

We still don't know which social worker completed our ASF application, haven't had sight of the application form (despite repeated requests) and don't know who to contact ... It all seems to take an awfully long time.

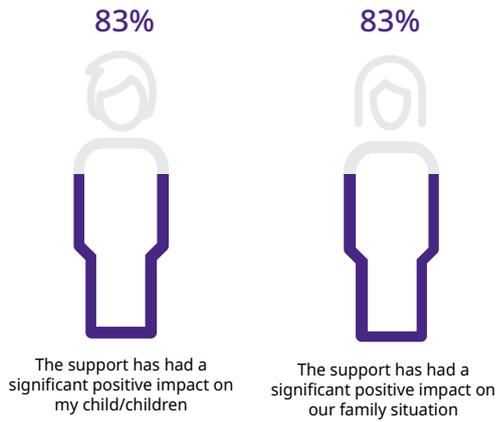
Adoptive parent, England

We asked for specialist support through the adoption support fund and the assessment was Feb 2020. It took until January 2021 to start therapy and it must be completed by March 2021. She only just got going. To reapply means starting the process all over again and there will be a gap in provision.

Adoptive parent, England

The Oxford Brookes evaluation (2021) noted that positive experiences were often linked to a good connection with an individual social worker, whereas negative experiences were linked to delays in the process. This is replicated among *Adoption Barometer* respondents, 72% of whom felt that the social worker assigned to them was knowledgeable and understood their situation.

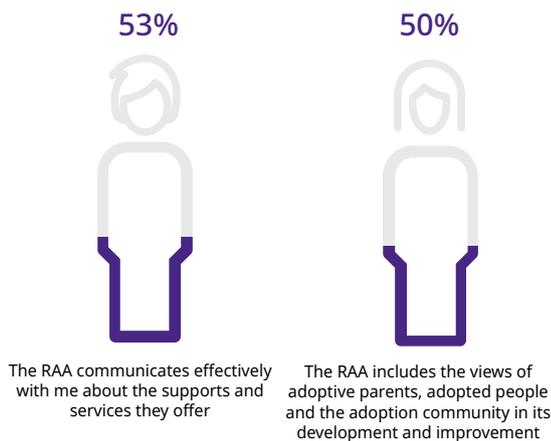
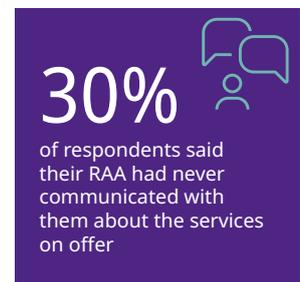
Among the 409 respondents who actually received ASF-funded interventions during 2020 (including those who started the process before 2020), levels of satisfaction are much higher.



Sixty-one per cent of respondents receiving ASF-funded support said that they received the support within six months of making the initial phone call to their agency, which represents a significant increase on previous years, but may be artificially raised by respondents who accessed emergency funding, which allowed support to be delivered quickly during the pandemic. Ninety-six per cent said that they would be likely to make further applications to the ASF in future.

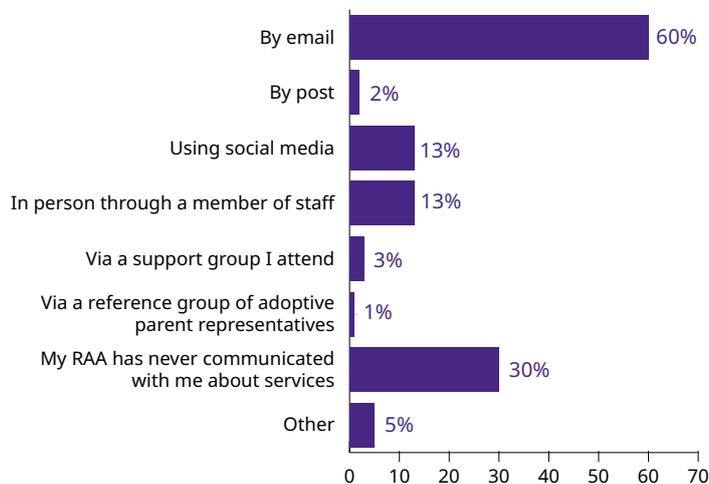
Regionalisation

Eighty-three per cent of respondents in England were living in an area that has become a regional adoption agency (RAA) area, and every RAA was represented by respondents, with Adopt East having the largest representation, followed by Adopt South West and Adopt North East.



In 2019, only 52% of respondents stated that they were in a RAA area, even though, at the time, more than 70% of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies were part of a RAA. This year's survey included a complete list of RAAs which respondents were able to select from, including lists of local authority areas included in each RAA, which is likely to account for the large increase.

How does your RAA communicate with you about the services they offer? (Select all that apply)



Thirty per cent of respondents who said that they were living in one of the listed RAA areas said that their RAA had never communicated with them about the services they offer and, of the 5% who selected 'other', a considerable proportion commented either that they did not receive any communications, they did not know they were living in an RAA area, or they had never heard of RAAs.

It is now more than five years since the DfE set out its intention to see all local authorities become part of a RAA (Regionalising Adoption, 2015). Most adoptive families now live in a RAA area, but the confusion evident in many of the survey responses highlights the challenge of ensuring that all adoptive families, some of whom will have adopted a decade or longer ago, are informed about the changes happening to adoption services in their area.

Adding to the confusion for adoptive families is the variety of models and approaches used in regionalisation. For some respondents, the RAA in their area has a clear identity and services are positioned firmly under the RAA umbrella, yet others still viewed their local authority as the service provider, despite nominally being part of a RAA.

These differences become especially relevant when adoptive families' support services transition from the placing authority to the authority where they live (if different) after three years as they can find themselves navigating a very different set of systems and a pro-active approach is often needed to ensure continuity of support.

We transferred from placing RAA to local and this delayed our ASF application significantly. Our support has changed as the different agencies didn't offer the same things. No continuity.

Adoptive parent, England

Respondents also expressed frustration at the impact of the change from individual agencies to RAAs, especially in maintaining continuing contact arrangements, and providing continuity of support. For some respondents, relationships built up with individual social workers and adoption support teams were seemingly lost in the transition.

We don't have regular contact with our adoption agency, or an assigned social worker. Since they changed to a regional adoption agency, I've no idea who anyone is any more.

Adoptive parent, England

We have had four different social workers in the last year because the change to the RAA seems to have meant staff leaving. It has been bumpy to get a continuous understanding of our family's needs.

Adoptive parent, England

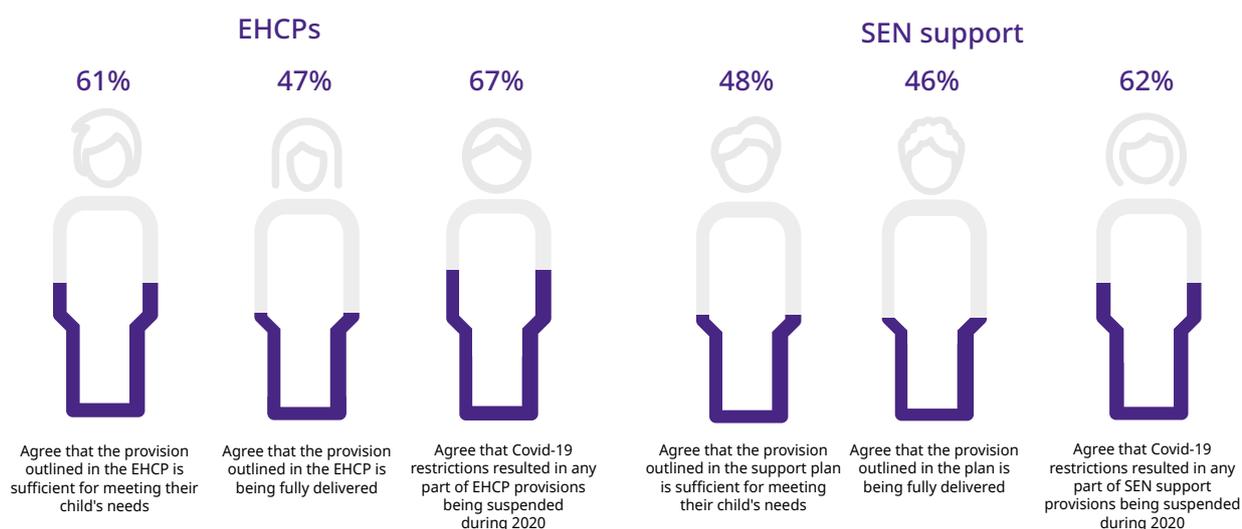
However, for some, the transition to a RAA had meant improved support. Where families had previously faced barriers in accessing support locally, regionalisation of services meant the opportunity for a fresh start.

We had a very positive experience of contacting our regional adoption agency this year ... This is in complete contrast to our experience with the LA in previous years when we were refused adoption support as we were in crisis.

Adoptive parent, England

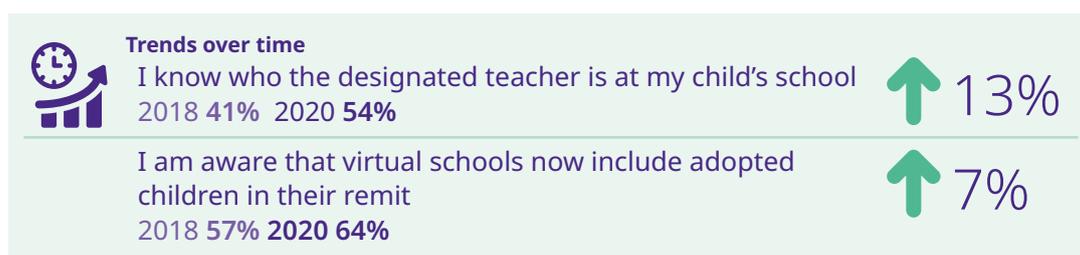
Education

There were 808 respondents from England with a child or children of compulsory school age who had been on roll at a state school during 2020. Forty per cent of the children represented had an education, health and care plan (EHCP) and a further 40% were registered for special educational needs (SEN) support in school.



Children who have moved to permanence via adoption or special guardianship from the care of a local authority in England or Wales attract additional funding for their school in the form of pupil premium plus (PP+). This has been in place since 2014.

In addition, since 2018, all state schools in England must have a designated teacher for previously looked after children, and the role of the virtual school head has been extended to include previously looked after and adopted children.



Awareness of these initiatives has been steadily increasing among *Adoption Barometer* survey respondents since 2018, but the proportion who know who their child's designated teacher is remains very low. This is concerning, considering that this is a statutory role with a duty to encourage the involvement of parents and carers in decisions relating to their child's education, and specifically regarding the use of PP+.

Of those who did know who the designated teacher was, 85% had had a meeting with that teacher. Similarly, 62% of those who knew about the role of the virtual school had contacted their local virtual school head for advice, guidance or support, suggesting that where adoptive parents are aware of the support available, they are very willing to avail themselves of it.

Although 96% of respondents were aware that their child was eligible for PP+ (2.5% were not aware, and the remainder were not eligible), only 75% said that their child's school had claimed PP+ in respect of their child. Twenty-two per cent did not know whether the school was receiving PP+.

It is not clear whether respondents in this 22% are unsure because they are unclear about how PP+ eligibility is declared (i.e. they are unaware that they must declare their child's eligible status) or because they have declared their child's eligibility but have not heard from the school about whether the funding has been received or how it is being used.

Despite the introduction of the designated teacher role in 2018, respondents' satisfaction with the way PP+ is being used in schools has not improved. Adoptive parents still face barriers to finding out how the funding is being used, and the majority do not consider that it is being used appropriately to support the needs of adopted children.



Trends over time

The school is transparent in the way it uses PP+
AGREE 2018 35% 2020 31%

↓ 4%

The school is using PP+ appropriately for the
needs of adopted children

AGREE 2018 41% 2020 40%

↓ 1%

Northern Ireland

During the year ending 31 March 2020, 111 children were adopted from care in Northern Ireland, which is a significant increase from 73 in the previous year. Forty-five per cent of the children were adopted by concurrent carers. Eighty-four per cent of adopters were married couples and one in 10 were same sex couples.

Despite minister for health, Robin Swann, announcing an intention to progress the adoption and children (Northern Ireland) bill through the Assembly towards the end of 2020, its progress continues to be delayed.

The bill is set to update existing legislation for adoption that is over 30 years old, establishing the legal right to an assessment of adoption support needs for the first time.

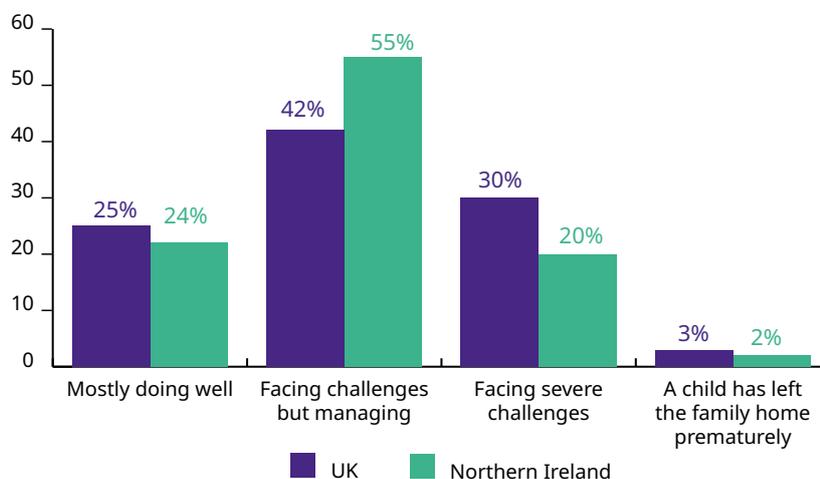
29% 
 feel that their child's teachers have a good understanding of the needs of care-experienced children

About respondents from Northern Ireland

The total number of respondents who lived in Northern Ireland for the majority of 2020 was 83. Of these, 50 were established adoptive families, with one or more children adopted before 2020. These established families represented 79 adopted children between them.

Seventy-eight per cent of respondents from Northern would encourage others to consider adoption, and 87% feel optimistic about their family's future.

Status of adoptive families in 2020: Northern Ireland



Adoption support

Respondents in Northern Ireland were most likely of all UK nations to say that their support needs had increased during the Covid-19 pandemic (53%) and 63% contacted their agency for advice or support during 2020.

There was a wide variation in the types of adoption support received by families, from reflexology to respite provision. Nearly one third of those who provided detail about the type of support they had received referred to provision through virtual means, or on the telephone. One in five received support relating to maintaining contact or managing other situations involving their child's birth family, including bereavement.

63% 
 contacted their agency for advice or support during 2020

The introduction of the right to an assessment of support needs is a key part of the Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill, and this is likely to be welcomed by adoptive families. Forty-two per cent of respondents felt that they would have benefitted from an assessment of support needs in 2020 alone. As one respondent asked, “How do we know what is needed without assessment?”. Families reported feeling unsure about understanding their child’s underlying needs and needing reassurance that they were parenting their child in the most effective way. Others felt that they did not know what support was available and what would be appropriate, and a professional assessment would allow early intervention to prevent possible future escalation of needs.

I'd like someone to check if I'm doing it correctly. Tell me where I need improvement in any area. The social workers say you're doing great, but am I?

Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

It's difficult to know what is normal for an adopted child vs other children and when even minor issues occur, what support is available.

Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

I would like a professional to identify what would help us, not just me guessing.

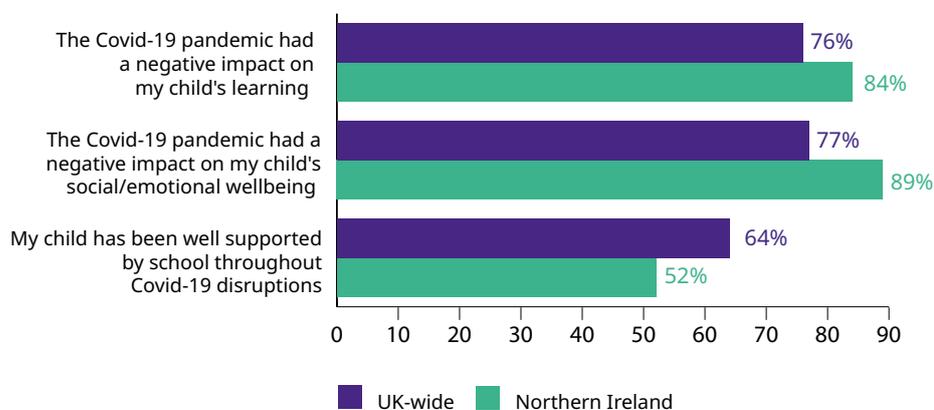
Adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

Education

Seventy per cent of Northern Ireland respondents feel that their child needs more support in school than their peers (compared to 81% UK-wide), and they are less concerned than respondents from other nations that their child will leave school with few or no qualifications (50%, compared to 61% UK-wide).

However, respondents from Northern Ireland were the most negative about schools’ understanding of the needs of care-experienced and adopted children, with only 29% agreeing that their child’s teachers had a good understanding, compared to 45% UK-wide. Seventy-one per cent of Northern Ireland children represented in the survey experienced social and emotional challenges related to school and three quarters of parents felt that staff training on the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences would benefit their child in school.

UK and Northern Ireland: education during Covid-19



Respondents from Northern Ireland were more concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on education, and less likely to feel as though their child had been well supported during the pandemic. When respondents were asked to reflect on their child's experiences of transitions associated with school, just over half of the children represented were described as struggling with transitions at the beginning of a new school year or when returning from school after a holiday., However, 60% had struggled with transitions related to Covid-19 school closures, suggesting that the pandemic and its associated disruption has exacerbated an already challenging situation for many adoptive families in Northern Ireland.

Scotland

In 2020, 'The Promise' – the next stage of Scotland's independent care review – was pledged for 2021 to drive forward the programme of change devised in consultation with care-experienced individuals, professionals, parents and carers. The initial report acknowledged the importance of including adoptive families in discussions around the necessity of holistic family support.

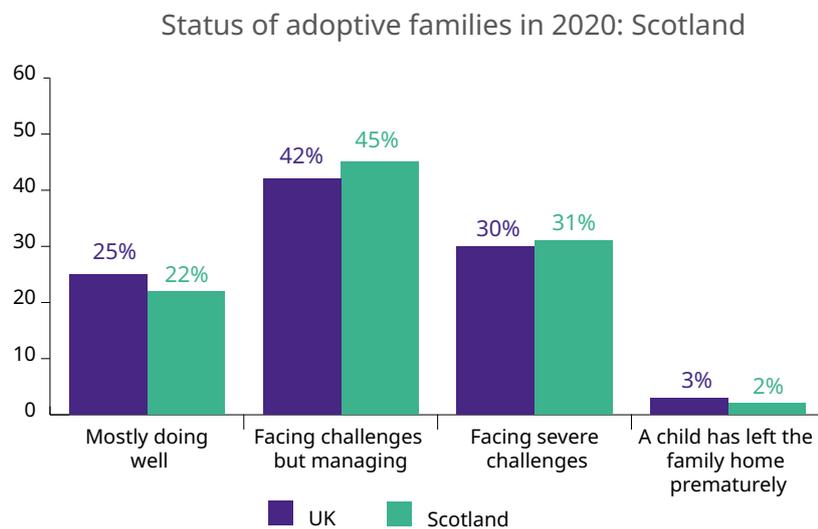
However, despite the recognition of need identified in the care review, there remains no centralised adoption support for Scottish families. The 2019-20 Care Inspectorate's *Fostering and adoption report* (2021) stated that the quality of adoption services was reported as being very good overall in Scotland, with 87% of agencies' support being graded as 'good' or better. This does not reflect in anecdotal evidence or survey responses from adoptive families in Scotland, who report a lack of access to required therapeutic support.

The Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund is in its final year of current funding and continues to offer opportunities for support for schools. However, families still report inability to access specific services for their adopted children in education.

About respondents from Scotland

The total number of respondents who lived in Scotland for the majority of 2020 was 280. Of these, 193 were established adoptive families, with one or more children adopted before 2020. These established families represented 280 adopted children between them.

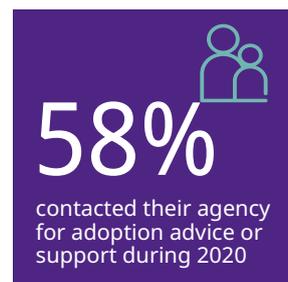
Eighty-two per cent of respondents from Scotland would encourage others to consider adoption, and 81% feel optimistic about their family's future.



Adoption support

Adoptive families in Scotland were more likely than families in other parts of the UK to be experiencing significant or severe challenges when contacting their agency for support (54% compared to 47%), but least likely to be offered enhanced adoption support.

Fifty-eight per cent of respondents from Scotland contacted their agency for adoption advice and/or support during 2020, but only 8% received an assessment of support needs and, of those who received an assessment, just one in five were offered a specific package of adoption support through their agency.



Just over a quarter of all respondents from Scotland said that they had received support or therapeutic services from their agency during 2020, including support that had begun before the start of the year. However, when asked to describe the support that their family was receiving, 44% of this group described support that was universal in nature (e.g. general training, general advice from a social worker, support groups or signposting to other agencies).

The remaining 55% described enhanced support tailored to their specific situation, including: life story work; creative arts therapies and play therapy; counselling; short breaks; support with birth family contact; and referral to the TESSA programme. This group receiving enhanced adoption support in 2020 represents 13% of all adoptive parent respondents from Scotland (not including prospective adopters).

It was clear from respondents' comments that some families in Scotland have faced considerable barriers to accessing enhanced and specialist adoption support.

I feel the agency is limited in what they can provide. We need psychology, counselling for both our son and ourselves. We have had to pay for professional interventions and the waiting lists are so long.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

Through the local authority I got to go to a Richard Rose life story training session. I realised that therapeutic life story work was probably what was needed most ... My social worker agrees but there seems to be a shortage of life story practitioners in Scotland.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

Our LA is very small – too small in my view to offer high quality adoption services. They are too small to offer internal support, so you are left trying to get support from an overstretched NHS, CAMHS, etc.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

While some respondents did report difficulties in finding professionals in adoption support who had a full understanding of the sometimes complex needs of adoptive families, 76% of respondents from Scotland said that they felt the social worker who dealt with their request for support was knowledgeable and understood their situation. However, although many appreciated the value of responsive individual professionals, there was a sense that this did not compensate for a perceived lack of wider services or support.

My local authority and specifically my social worker is incredible and understanding. However, there are just no services or support on offer in our area.

Adoptive parent, Scotland.

Where specialist services were available, either provided by the adoption agency or an external organisation, recipients were positive about the impact on their families.

The support from AUK Scotland team and the FASD Hub has been crucial to our wellbeing. The training the FASD Hub provided to school has improved their interactions with our child.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

I was lucky as I'd been in the mailing list for TESSA [a specialist adoption support service] prior to lockdown and it came just at the right time. It's helped me a lot.

Adoptive parent, Scotland

Education

There were 149 respondents from Scotland with a child or children who attended pre-school, school or college during 2020, representing more than 200 adopted children. Half of the children represented have an additional support for learning (ALN) plan in respect of additional learning needs.

In Scotland the Care-Experienced Children and Young People Fund can be used to provide extra support for eligible care-experienced children. Although the funding is calculated on the basis of the number of children looked after (£1,200 per looked after child aged 5-15 in 2020/21), local authorities can use it to benefit all care-experienced children aged 0-26, including adopted children and young people.

The funding is allocated to local authorities, and the chief social work officer and chief education officer should work in collaboration with partners, professionals, parents/carers and children and young people to allocate the funds in order to have the most impact on raising attainment and improving educational outcomes for care-experienced children and young people.

Awareness of the existence of the Care-Experienced Children and Young People Fund was slightly lower among respondents in 2020 (32%) than in 2019 (35%) but still considerably higher than in 2018 when only 18% of respondents had heard of the fund.

The proportion of respondents who had actually discussed the use of the fund with their child's school was low, at just 16%, but this represented a considerable increase on 2018, when only 7% had discussed the fund with their child's school.

The large majority of those who had not discussed the fund with their child's school had not heard of it. This funding is allocated every year, and all care-experienced children are eligible to benefit from it. It is therefore vital that those in each local authority with responsibility for administering the fund ensure that professionals and partners involved in decision-making are aware that adopted and previously looked after children are eligible to benefit, and that parents/carers and adopted and previously looked after children and young people are fully informed as to how the funding is being used in their area. Failure to do so will mean that a significant proportion of the children who are eligible to benefit will be missing out.



Wales

The £2.3m investment in adoption services announced by the Welsh government in June 2019 has continued to be rolled out across Wales in 2020. The central team and the five regions were each allocated a proportion of the funding to create and expand services, and a further £100k was made available to the National Adoption Service (NAS) for adopter recruitment.

The Adopting Together Service (ATS) completed its first full year in 2019/20. Providing specialist adopter recruitment, enhanced adopter training, peer support and therapeutic support for families, the ATS aims to find and support families for children who wait the longest for adoption.

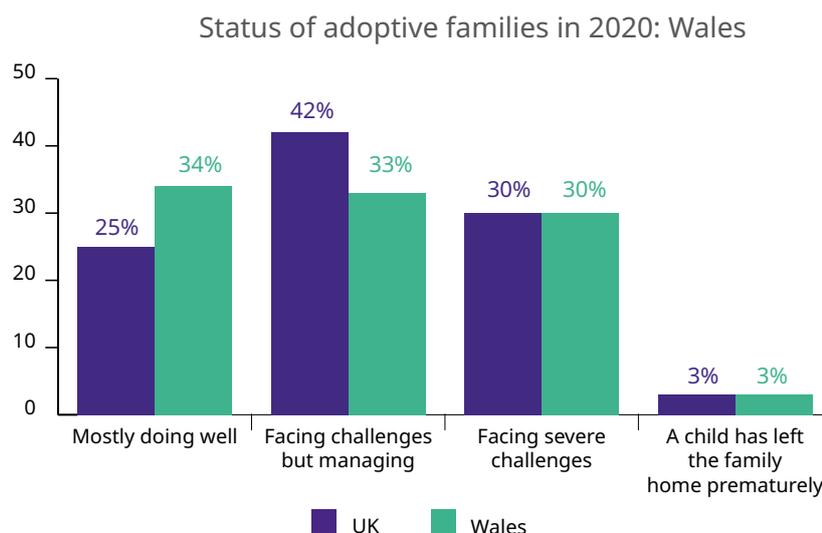
Adoption UK has partnered with the NAS in the foundation of the 'Connected' service for adopted children and young people. This service is currently reaching 150 adopted children and young people and is anticipated to expand to all regions in Wales.

The importance of individualised support and training for adoptive families has been recognised by the introduction of post adoption training modules for adopters on the NAS website. Developed in conjunction with AfA Cymru and Adoption UK, these training modules can be used by individuals or as part of group training and cover topics including life journey work, non-violent resistance and contact with birth families.

About respondents from Wales

The total number of respondents who lived in Wales for the majority of 2020 was 335. Of these, 218 were established adoptive families, with one or more children adopted before 2020. These established families represented 351 children between them.

Eighty per cent of respondents from Wales would encourage others to consider adoption, and 83% feel optimistic about their family's future.



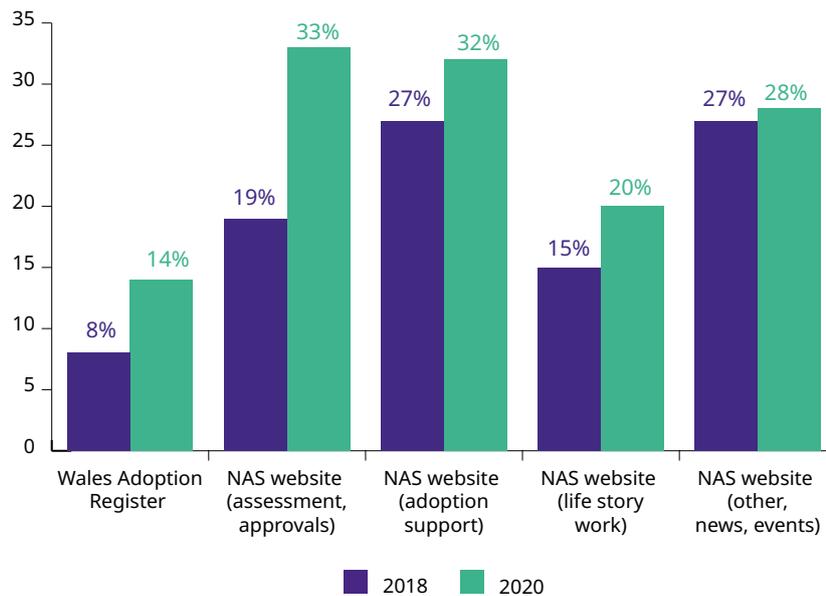
The National Adoption Service

Six years on from the launch of the NAS in Wales, awareness of the service continues to rise among *Adoption Barometer* survey respondents. Use of all NAS services has increased among respondents since 2018.

76%
of adopters are aware that their agency is part of the National Adoption Service

Trends over time
I am aware that my local authority or voluntary adoption agency is now part of NAS
2018 59% 2020 76% **↑ 17%**

Use of NAS services: 2018-2020



Adoption support

In June 2019, the Welsh government announced a £2.3m investment in adoption services, including funding to provide new services such as the Therapeutic Education and Support Services in Adoption (TESSA) and a new children and young people's service. This year's *Adoption Barometer* is the first opportunity to see what, if any, immediate impact this has had on the experiences of adoptive families in Wales.

55%
received adoption support within one month of calling their agency

Trends over time
I feel confident that I know where to go and who to contact for adoption support
2018 71% 2020 80% **↑ 9%**

I am regularly informed about training, events, and other support initiatives
2018 77% 2020 82% **↑ 5%**

Thirty-seven per cent of respondents from Wales had received adoption support from their agency in 2020. Eighty-one per cent of these families received support within six months of making the first phone call to their agency (71% in 2018), and 55% received support within one month of making the initial call.

Among Welsh respondents who did not request adoption support in 2020, 74% either did not need support, or were already receiving support, compared to 59% UK-wide. This suggests that adopters in Wales are more likely to approach their agencies for support if they feel they need it, and are less likely to be put off by barriers such as lack of awareness or previous negative experiences.

Adoptive families who requested adoption support in Wales during 2020 were more likely to be offered an assessment of support needs and a package of therapeutic support than in any other nation except England, and more likely than in any other nation to be offered a multidisciplinary assessment of support needs.

Respondents' perceptions of the impact of the support they received have continued a positive trend, rising again in all indicators in 2020.

Our RAA has improved its post adoption support dramatically over the last couple of years. They have managed to maintain that good level of support throughout 2020 and we have been really impressed with them.

Adoptive parent, Wales

We were matched with an in-house local authority therapist who has been an amazing support. We were also offered TESSA support simultaneously.

Adoptive parent, Wales

However, the positive indicators above apply only to families whose requests for support actually resulted in provision of support during 2020. Respondents' comments revealed that some were still encountering barriers to receiving support, including delays in returning phone calls and emails, lack of understanding of severe and complex needs and problems with availability of services.

The support that we often need is around respite and mental health services. There is only so much the adoption agency can do – it's services we need.

Adoptive parent, Wales

We waited three months for an initial response to my request for support for our daughter. Only when the health board championed our cause did we get a response.

Adoptive parent, Wales

It is unfortunate that the rollout of increased funding for adoption support in Wales has coincided with Covid-19 disruptions, which have undoubtedly created additional challenges for some families (44% of respondents from Wales said their support needs had increased) and simultaneously made it much more difficult for agencies to offer consistent support. Despite this, access to quality, enhanced adoption support appears to be improving for adoptive families in Wales.

References

- Adoption UK (2020). *Home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown*.
- Adoption UK (2020b). *Review of the Covid-19 Emergency ASF Scheme: insights for future adoption support*.
- Adoption UK (2021). *Better Futures*.
- Allen, M (2003). *Into the mainstream: Care leavers entering work, education and training*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Care Inspectorate (2021). *Fostering and Adoption 2019-20: A statistical bulletin*.
- Department for Education (2014). *Statutory guidance on adoption for local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support services*. London: Crown Copyright.
- Department for Education (2015). *Regionalising Adoption*. Ref: DFE-00172-2015
- Department for Education (2021). *Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England*.
- Kempenaar, M. (2015). *Adoption Support Plans: exploring the processes*. DSW Thesis, Cardiff University
- National Adoption Service. *Life Journey Work Good Practice Guide*.
<https://adoptcymru.com/resource/nas-ljw-practice-guideee.pdf>
- National Adoption Service (2021). *Annual Report 2019-20*.
- NSPCC (2021). *Teenagers: learning from case reviews briefing*.
- Oxford Brookes University (2021). *Evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund: baseline survey of families*. Department for Education, London
- Office for National Statistics (2021). *Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: March 2021*.
- O'Neill, L., Harrison, N., Fowler, N. & Connelly, G. (2019). *'Being a student with care experience is very daunting': Findings from a survey of care experienced students in Scottish colleges and universities*. Glasgow: CELCIS
- Watson, D., Latter, S. & Bellew, R. (2015) Adopters' views on their children's life story books. *Adoption & Fostering*, 39, 2, 119-134

Notes



Our vision is an equal chance of a bright future for every child unable to live with their birth parents. We work to secure the right support at the right time for the children at the heart of every adoptive and kinship care family.

Head Office

Units 11 and 12
Vantage Business Park
Bloxham Road
Banbury OX16 9UX

Phone 01295 752240

Email info@adoptionuk.org.uk

Scotland Office

Gf2 Rooms 3 & 4
Great Michael House
14 Links Place
Edinburgh EH6 7EZ

Phone 0131 322 8501 / 0131 322 8502

Email scotland@adoptionuk.org.uk

Wales Office

Penhevad Studios
Penhevad Street
Cardiff CF11 7LU

Phone 029 2023 0319

Email wales@adoptionuk.org.uk

Northern Ireland Office

Adoption UK (at Groundwork)
63-75 Duncairn Gardens
Belfast BT15 2GB

Phone 028 9077 5211

Email northernireland@adoptionuk.org.uk

Adoption UK helpline

0300 666 0006

adoptionuk.org



twitter.com/adoptionuk



facebook.com/AdoptionUK

For details on any of our policies on confidentiality, data protection, child and vulnerable adult protection, equal opportunities and complaints procedures, please contact any of our offices.

Registered Charity No. 1160647 (England and Wales) Registered Charity No. SC037892 (Scotland)
Adoption UK is a company limited by guarantee Company Number 9454981