

Celebrating Success, Inspiring Innovation

The Adoption Barometer 2021 in Wales

September 2021



AdoptionUK

Teulu gyda'n gilydd
Together we're family

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Foreword



I am pleased to say that, once again the *Adoption Barometer* report paints a positive picture for Wales. It's great to see such strong engagement from Welsh adopters which assures me that Welsh adopters are able and willing to tell us how it is for them. It is a much valued 'reality check'.

With 80% of responders from Wales likely to encourage others to adopt and 83% feeling optimistic about the future, the findings are a vote of confidence. The report reiterates the importance of the work we are doing through the National Adoption Service to improve adoption services across Wales as well as the necessity to keep it up!

It is important that we recognise and celebrate the improvement that has already taken place. Of particular note is:

- approval and matching where there is further improvement and Wales is the only UK nation to score 'good' for both policy and adopter experience
- improvements for families where a child has been recently placed and timeframes for receiving support
- Welsh adopters significantly more likely to receive life journey materials in a timely manner.

That said, we are not complacent about the need for continued improvement. The good news in the report provides an encouraging basis from which to tackle the ongoing 'issues' that the report identifies.

NAS will continue to work on understanding adoptive parents, children and young people's priorities for support and is actively working on many of these for example: support and guidance for parents on areas such as contact, more services to meet social and emotional needs, adoption 'aware' training for education professionals and sensitive, timely life journey support.

The focus on transition to adult hood is helpful, re-enforcing the importance of support being available as and when issues emerge. This is the approach that NAS is putting in place. It's beginning to work for many families which is great, but we recognise that there is still a way to go.

We remain committed to listening to adoptive families and working with our partners to continue the improvement journey.

Suzanne Griffiths

Director, National Adoption Service for Wales

Introduction

The *Adoption Barometer* is Adoption UK's annual flagship report covering the experiences of adoptive families from approvals and matching, through to the transition to adulthood. Now in its third year, the report is increasingly anticipated by decision makers in all four nations, informing policy and driving real change.

The *Adoption Barometer 2021* draws on the results of surveys of nearly 2,500 adoptive parents and 159 adopted young people and adults to create a comprehensive analysis of the adoption landscape from preparation stages to the transition to adulthood.

This report, *Celebrating Success, Inspiring Innovation*, focuses on the findings of the *Adoption Barometer 2021* in Wales.

Key findings

- Prospective adopters' evaluations of their experiences of the approvals process were overwhelmingly positive.
- Timescales for the approvals process were maintained, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, with prospective adopters in Wales experiencing fewer delays than elsewhere in the UK.
- Newly placed adopters were very positive about their early experiences as an adoptive family, including preparation, introductions and early support.
- Timeliness and quality of life story materials has steadily improved across the three years of *The Adoption Barometer* with 80% of newly placed respondents describing their life story materials as 'good' or 'adequate' in 2020.
- Almost all newly placed respondents had agreements for indirect contact with birth family members, but fewer had agreements for direct contact than elsewhere in the UK. There is evidence of increasing openness towards direct contact among new adopters.
- The proportion of established adoptive families who described themselves as 'mostly doing well' rose in 2020 and 83% said that they felt optimistic about their family's future.
- Education, accessing support and therapy for their children, and coping with violent and aggressive behaviour were the most significant challenges for established families.
- Adopters in Wales were slightly more likely than elsewhere in the UK to access universal support (e.g. support groups, training) from their agencies and 82% said they were regularly informed about such services. Levels of satisfaction with accessing enhanced adoption support has risen in all indicators, but there is still room for further improvement.
- Most adoptive families are maintaining their original indirect contact arrangements to some extent, and respondents from Wales reported slightly higher levels of birth family participation than elsewhere in the UK. Rates of direct contact remain low and respondents from established adoptive families were less likely to consider starting direct contact than in previous years. However the number of respondents who reported that contact is well managed and effectively run by their agency has increased from 52% in 2018 to 72% in 2020.
- Fewer than half of respondents feel that their child's teachers have a good understanding of the needs of care-experienced children and more than half worry that their child will leave school with few or no qualifications.
- Exposure to risk for adopted teens was lower in 2020 than in previous years, with rates of involvement in criminally exploitative activity falling considerably among 13-18-year-olds, and fewer 16-25-year-olds involved in the criminal justice system or with drug and alcohol misuse.
- 16-25-year-olds in Wales were more than twice as likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) compared to their non-adopted peers.
- Adopted young people and adults placed a strong emphasis on the importance of relationships – with family, peers and professionals – in preparing for and going through the transition to adulthood.
- Adopted respondents of all ages reported difficulties accessing support that understood their needs as an adopted young person (aged 16-25) and nearly half of adopted adults had paid for therapy or counselling since turning 16.

About the data

Data for the *Adoption Barometer 2021* was collected via two surveys, open from 11 January 2021 until 28 February 2021. The survey for prospective adopters and adoptive parents was open to all eligible respondents with adopted children aged 0-25, and not limited to members of Adoption UK. It was circulated by Adoption UK, both online and via direct mailing to members, and was also circulated by Adoption UK volunteers within support groups. A number of local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies, and other organisations connected with the sector also promoted the survey. All results of this survey have been filtered by nation and relate to the experiences of adopters and prospective adopters during the calendar year 2020.

The survey for adopted young people and adults was focused on 'Transitions to Adulthood'. It was open to any adopted person in the UK aged 16 or over and was circulated via the same channels as the survey for parents, with additional support from individual adopted adults, and groups and organisations providing support to adopted young people and adults. Results from this survey have not been filtered by nation.

About adoptive parent and prospective adopter respondents

- There were 355 prospective adopter and adoptive parent respondents from Wales, representing 14% of total survey respondents.
- The majority of respondents in Wales were aged 35-54.
- 97% of respondents in Wales identified their ethnicity as white British.
- 13% were single at the time of beginning their adoption process.
- 15% identified as part of the LGBT+ community.
- 51% were members of Adoption UK.
- 44% of respondents in established adoptive families had one or more children aged 11 or older.

About adopted young person and adult respondents

- 29% of respondents were aged 16-28, 26% were aged 19-25 and 45% were aged over 25 at the time of completing the survey.
- 28% began living with their adoptive family in the 1960s-1970s or before, 22% in the 1980s-90s and 51% in the 2000s.

Summary of key findings and recommendations



Approvals and matching

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

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

There were 97 respondents in Wales who were undergoing an adoption approvals or matching process at any point during 2020. Of these, 38 had a match approved during 2020. 98% were pursuing a traditional adoption route, with 5% considering early permanence either alongside traditional routes, or as their only route. Although the proportion considering early permanence has increased very slightly since last year's *Adoption Barometer*, it is still well below the UK average of 35% due to a different legislative basis.

The most common motivating factor for respondents to consider adoption continues to be that they are unable to have birth children (58%). However, 21% were pursuing adoption as their first choice for starting a family.

Most prospective adopters were adopting via their local authority, with 17% adopting through a voluntary adoption agency. Choice of agency was largely influenced by the promptness of the agency's response to initial inquiries (42%), the quality of the information event (31%) and recommendations by family, friends or professionals (31%).

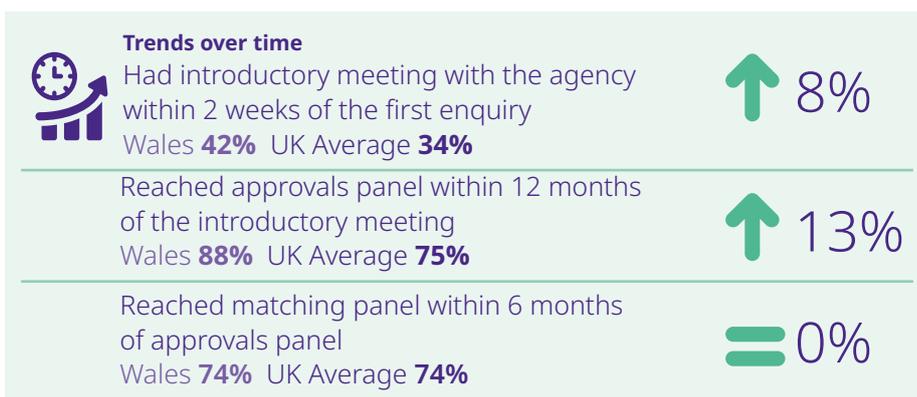


Experiences of the process

Prospective adopters' evaluations of their experiences of the approvals process were overwhelmingly positive. 94% agreed that the information they were given was thorough and 96% said that their training was informative and useful. However, 47% felt that there were times when the process seemed so difficult that they wondered if they could continue, although this was lower than last year (54%).

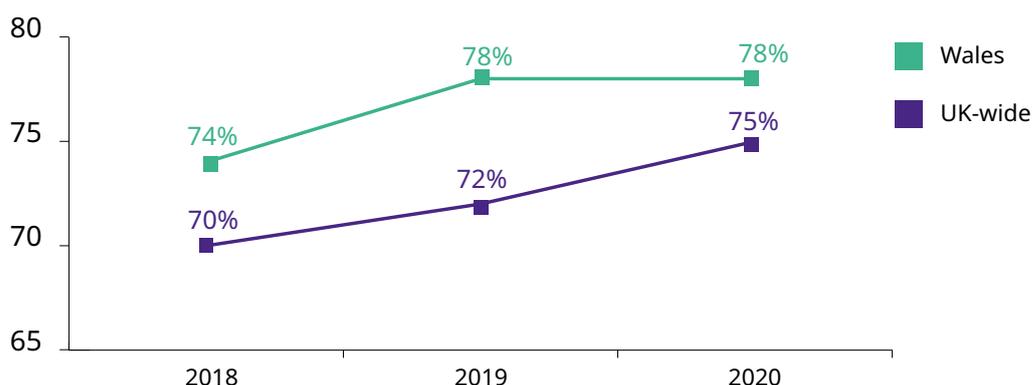
Respondents from Wales were more positive about their experiences of the approvals process than the UK average in almost every indicator.

Timescales



Half of prospective adopter respondents who had reached approvals panel felt that their process had run smoothly and with no delays, compared to 39% UK-wide. One in five felt that there had been delays caused by Covid-19. However, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the proportion reaching approvals panel within 12 months of their initial enquiry has been relatively stable in Wales across all three years of *The Adoption Barometer*.

Proportion reaching approvals panel within 12 months of initial enquiry





Newly placed adoptive families

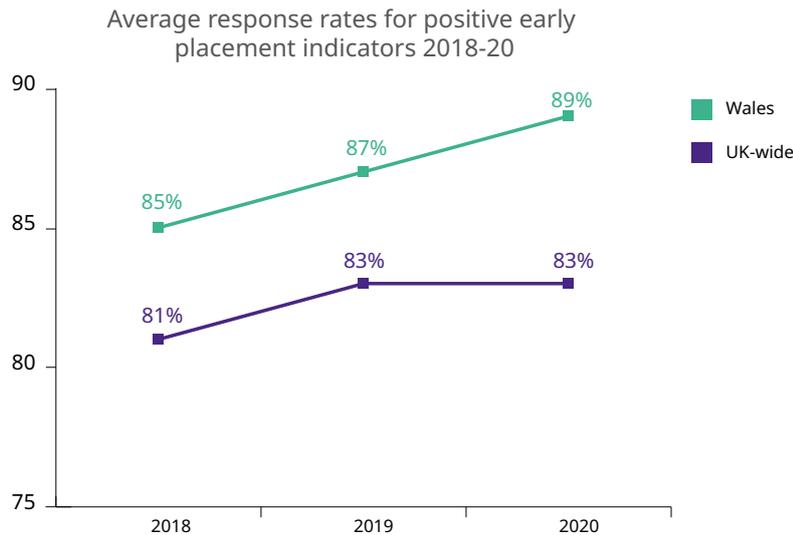
Assessment of current national policies	Score
The quality of life story (life journey) materials and the timescales for their delivery are established by national standards	GOOD
Every child being placed for adoption receives a multi-disciplinary assessment of support needs prior to placement which is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

Assessment of current adopter experiences, based on survey results	Score
Newly placed adopters feel confident that both they and their children have been well prepared for the start of their new family	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
Life story (life journey) materials are of a high quality and received by, or soon after, the completion of the legal process	FAIR
OVERALL	FAIR

There were 42 *Adoption Barometer* respondents from Wales who had a child or children move into their family on adoptive or early permanence placement during 2020. In 92% of cases, the child or children were adopted from Wales, and the rest were adopted from another country in the UK.

The early days

Newly placed adopters in Wales were very positive about their early experiences as an adoptive family, with 92% agreeing at their introductions (where applicable) were handled well and ran smoothly, and the same proportion agreeing that their children had been well-prepared for the move to their new adoptive family. Responses in all indicators – covering preparation, information, introductions and early support – were more positive in Wales than UK averages, and more positive in 2020 than in previous years.



In common with the rest of the UK, early-placement adopters in Wales were more likely to say they experienced stress, anxiety and/or symptoms of post-adoption depression in 2020 than in previous years (62% compared to 56% in 2019), perhaps in part due to the challenges posed by Covid-19 restrictions. However, 42% of Welsh respondents reported wondering whether they had done the right thing and whether they'd be able to cope, compared to 50% of UK respondents. In Wales, this figure has fallen from 48% in 2018 and 2019.

On the whole, the data suggests that Welsh respondents in 2020 had a more positive experience of early placement than elsewhere in the UK, and a more positive experience than respondents in previous years.

After the adoption order

There were 41 respondents in Wales who had applied for an adoption order in 2020. Welsh respondents tended to wait longer to make the application than in other nations. 44% applied for the adoption order within six months of their child/children coming to live with them (UK average 65%).

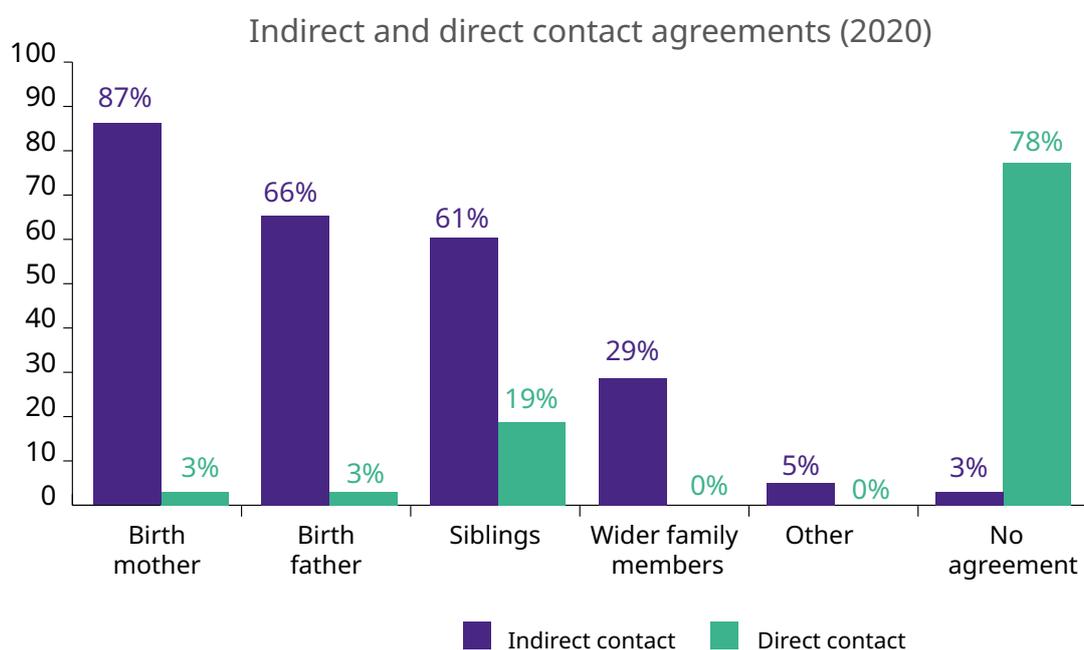
75% of Welsh respondents with an adoption order said that they did not have a written post adoption support plan in place by the end of 2020 (UK average 71%), and 15% said that they had delayed applying for an adoption order until they had a robust plan for adoption support in place (UK average 8%). However, of those who said they did have a written plan, 80% said that they were happy with its contents.

The provision and quality of life story materials in Wales has continued a steady improvement. Life story books (or equivalent) and later life letters (or equivalent) had been received by 73% of respondents who had an adoption order in place. The proportion describing life story materials as 'good' or 'adequate' rose from 56% in 2018 to 80% in 2020, and just 3% described their life story materials as 'very inadequate', compared to 11% in 2018.

Arrangements for continuing contact

There has been a significant decrease in the proportion of new adopters in Wales who actively chose not to meet any members of their child's birth family, from 16% in 2018, to just 3% in 2020. The overwhelming majority of respondents were willing to consider meeting birth family members where possible, although the proportion who actually met them was quite low, with 20% meeting their child's birth mother, 8% meeting the birth father and 10% meeting other family members. 40% were advised against meeting birth family members by their social workers, and a further 28% stated that birth family members were not willing or could not be found.

Rates of agreements for direct contact remained high with 97% of respondents having at least one indirect contact agreement. Welsh respondents were less likely to have agreements for direct contact (22%) than UK averages (38%).



A considerable proportion of respondents who do not currently have agreements for direct contact would be willing to consider them in the future, most commonly with their child or children's siblings (44%). 29% said that they would be unlikely to consider any future direct contact, which was a slight fall from 33% in 2018.

Assessment of current national policies	Score
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
There are nationally agreed minimum standards for ongoing universal adoption support and training provided by local authorities, RAAs and VAAs	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
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
OVERALL	GOOD



Established adoptive families

Assessment of current adopter experiences, based on survey results	Score
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 service	FAIR
Adopters can access enhanced adoption support services, including therapeutic support from external organisations, and are satisfied with the quality of service	FAIR
Adoptive families feel that arrangements for continuing contact are working well for them and their children	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
OVERALL	FAIR

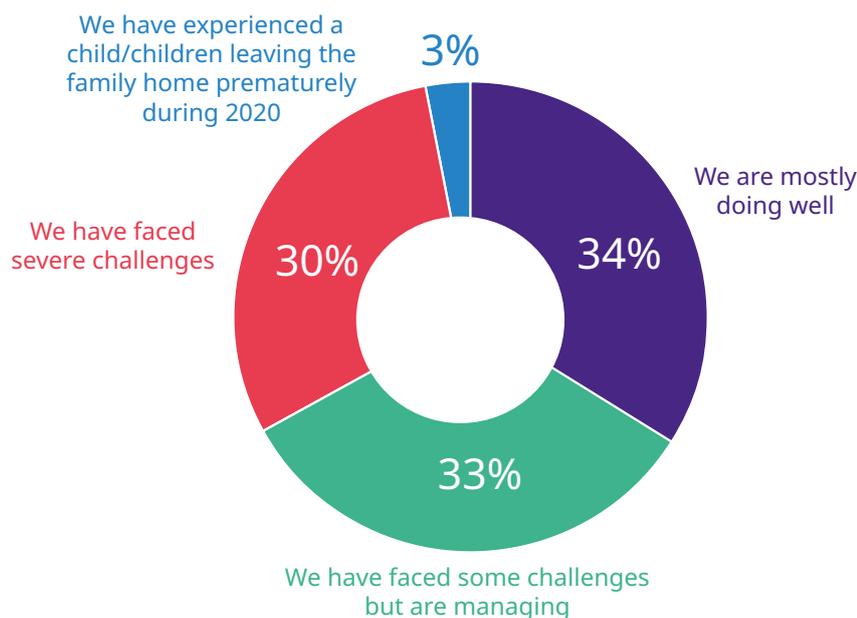
Established families are those who have one or more adopted children aged 0-25 whose adoptions were finalised before 2020.

There were 218 established family respondents in Wales, representing 345 adopted children between them. 88% of the children represented were aged four or younger at the time of their adoption, and 44% were aged 11 or older at the time of the survey.

Respondents were asked to describe their family's overall status during 2020 by selecting one of four statements.

The proportion who described themselves as 'mostly doing well' rose and the proportion of those who were facing 'severe challenges' fell compared to 2019. On the whole, the status of families in Wales was comparable to that of families across the UK.

Status of adoptive families in 2020



Experiences of adoptive family life

Four out of five respondents would encourage others to consider adoption, and 83% said that they felt optimistic about their family's future. However, two thirds of respondents felt that the difficulties their adopted child or children experience have placed a strain on their family and wider relationships, and the same proportion said that it feels like a continual struggle to get the help and support their child needs.

The most frequently cited challenge facing adoptive families by far was supporting their adopted children through education, with 64% selecting this as one of their top three challenges. A further 40% highlighted the challenge of accessing support and therapy for their child, and 36% felt that coping with violent and aggressive behaviour was one of their top three challenges.

When asked what would make the biggest positive difference to their family situation, 52% chose easier access to ongoing therapeutic services, 50% chose trauma-informed and attachment aware schools and 33% chose trauma-informed support from health and social services. These priorities were similar for adoptive families across the UK.

While rates of diagnosed conditions common to care-experienced children were slightly lower on average among Welsh respondents when compared to UK averages, rates of suspected conditions were frequently higher. This raises a question as to whether lower reported diagnoses are a result of lower incidence of the conditions or related to lower rates of access to diagnosis.

Although only one third of respondents evaluated their family as facing severe challenges or at crisis point, it is clear that the support needs of established adoptive families remain high. 58% reported experiencing violent and aggressive behaviour from their child in 2020, and 23% of children represented were known or suspected to have self-harmed.

Adoption support

Adopters in Wales were slightly more likely than those in the rest of the UK to be accessing universal support services (general training and support groups) provided or funded by their agency. Almost a third accessed training courses during 2020 (compared to 27% UK-wide) and, despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, 18% accessed support groups for adoptive parents (17% UK-wide).

Of those who did not access universal support services, Welsh respondents were most likely to say that this was because they had no need of the service during 2020 and were less likely than others in the UK to say that they were not aware of such services. In fact, 82% of respondents said that they were regularly informed about training, events and other support services, which is extremely encouraging.

Those who did access universal services were overwhelmingly positive about both the quality and impact of the service, and satisfaction scores on all indicators have increased since 2019.



Use of the National Adoption Service (NAS) website for general advice and support has increased steadily since 2018. More than three quarters of respondents were aware that their agency was now part of the NAS (up from 59% in 2018) and website services were particularly well-used by early-stage adopters. One third of all respondents had used the NAS website for information about assessment, approvals and matching (19% in 2018), and a similar proportion had used it to find information about adoption support (up from 27% in 2018).

Half of respondents from Wales contacted their agency for specific adoption support or advice in 2020 and the majority of these (54%) described themselves as experiencing significant difficulties or at crisis point at the time of contacting their agency.

Of those who were experiencing significant difficulties or at crisis point, 61% were offered enhanced adoption support – a bespoke package of support tailored to the presenting needs of the family which could include specialist training, therapeutic interventions, short breaks and counselling. The remaining 39% were offered universal services, such as support groups, general training and signposting to statutory services.

Respondents' level of satisfaction after contacting their agency for specific advice and support has increased on all indicators since 2019. In particular, satisfaction with the quality of support received rose from 58% in 2019 to 65% in 2020.

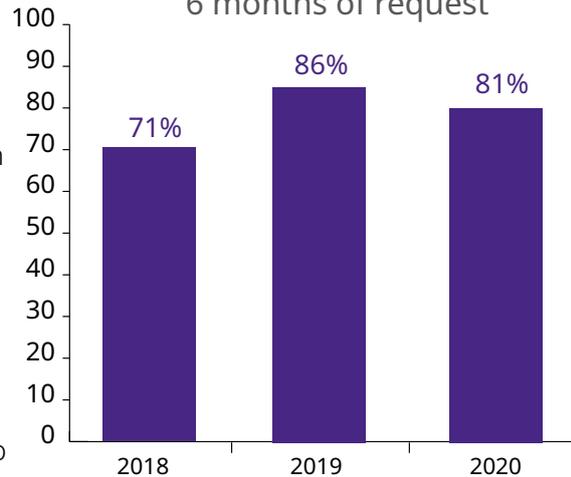


Timeliness of provision of adoption support remains high in Wales, with 55% receiving support within one month of requesting it, and 81% receiving support within six months.

87% of those who received adoption support felt that it would be worthwhile asking for support again in the future – an increase from 77% in 2018.

Of those who did not contact their agency for specific advice or support, 63% said this was because they had no need of it (48% UK-wide) and a further 10% were already receiving support. Relatively few were put off asking for support due to actual or perceived barriers, and the proportion who cited perceived barriers (such as lack of availability, lack of funding) was lower in 2020 than in 2019.

Proportion receiving support within 6 months of request



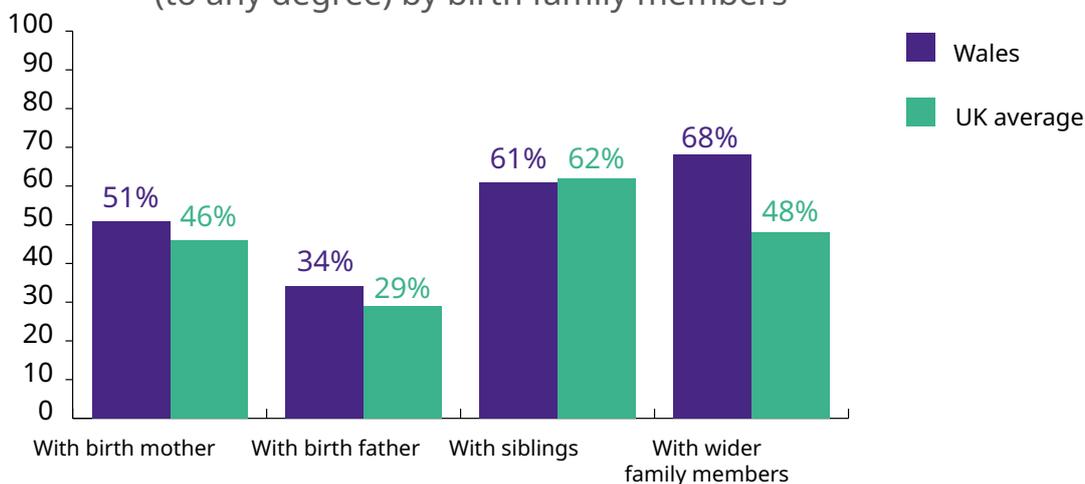
Continuing contact

Among established adoptive families, 83% of respondents had at least one agreement for indirect contact with a member of their child or children's birth family. These indirect agreements were most likely to be with birth mothers (63%), with a smaller proportion with birth fathers (37%), siblings (29%) and other birth family members (16%). This distribution is very similar to UK averages.

The majority of indirect agreements were being maintained to some extent by adoptive families. Participation had ceased in 18% of agreements with birth mothers, 19% with birth fathers, 17% with siblings and 5% with wider family members. However, 22% of agreements with siblings were described as continuing at a level that was 'more than required' by the original agreement, suggesting that for sibling relationships, initial indirect contact agreements can be a springboard to developing stronger contact arrangements.

As in other UK nations, there was a disparity between the continuing participation of adoptive families and that of birth families in these indirect agreements. However, adoptive families in Wales reported higher levels of birth family participation than in other nations of the UK.

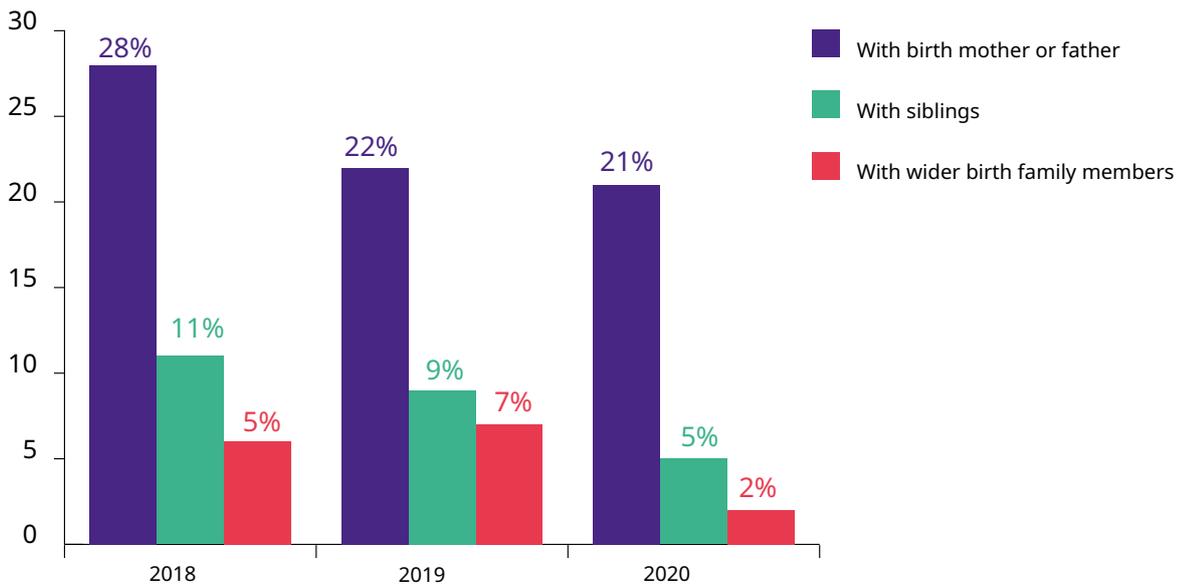
Continuing participation in indirect contact agreements (to any degree) by birth family members



In 2020, 16% of respondents from Wales indicated that they and/or their child had direct contact with any member of their child/children's birth family. This is below the UK average for 2020 of 22%. The majority of these direct contacts were informal arrangements with siblings (70%) and a further 20% were formal direct contact arrangements with siblings.

Not only do rates of direct contact appear to be lower in Wales than UK averages, but there appears to be more reluctance among adopters in Wales to consider it. 72% of respondents said that they do not have direct contact and are not considering it, compared to 60% UK-wide. The proportion who would consider future direct contact has decreased across the three years of the *Adoption Barometer*.

Proportion of adopters who would consider future direct contact with birth family



Respondents' satisfaction with the way all contact arrangements are managed by their agencies has increased significantly on all indicators across the three years of the *Adoption Barometer*.



Education

There were 166 respondents from Wales whose children attended school, pre-school or college during 2020, representing a total of 259 adopted children.

The majority of parents in Wales find that their children experience challenges in education, with 71% of adopted children reported to need more support in school than their peers (compared to 67% in 2018).



Trends over time

My child's adverse experiences have impacted negatively on their ability to cope academically in education

2018 **62%** 2020 **71%**

↑ 3%

My child's adverse experiences have impacted negatively on their ability to cope socially and emotionally in education

2018 **71%** 2020 **79%**

↑ 8%

While 67% agree that their child's teachers work with them to find the best ways to support their child, parents are less confident that teachers have the training and resourcing needed to enable them to do this effectively. Just 48% feel that their child's teachers have a good understanding of the needs of care-experienced children, and 62% agree that it feels like a battle to get the support their child needs.

Data from the *Adoption Barometer 2021* suggests that adopted children are more likely than others to be excluded from school. The latest data available for Wales (2018/19) shows a rate of 0.05% for permanent exclusions, 3.91% for fixed-term exclusions (5 days or fewer) and 0.17% for fixed term exclusions of over 5 days from maintained schools.

The Welsh national data for 2019/20 is not yet available, but 2019/20 data from England shows a significant drop in both fixed term and permanent exclusions in that period due to the widescale school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is likely that national exclusion rates for Wales in 2019/20 will also be lower than the figures above.

However, respondents to the *Adoption Barometer 2021* recorded much higher rates of exclusions among their adopted children in the calendar year 2020, with 1.98% of children being permanently excluded, and 8% recording at least one fixed term exclusion. While this represents a reduction in the rate of fixed term exclusions (from 13% in 2019), the rate of permanent exclusions has slightly increased on the previous year, suggesting that adopted children in Wales remain at significantly higher risk of exclusion.

In addition, 12% of respondents reported that they had made the decision to change one or more of their children's schools during 2020 in order to find a school that would better be able to meet their child's needs.

These challenges result in significant concerns about the long-term outcomes of adopted children. 58% of parents said that they were worried that their child would leave school with few or no qualifications.

However, there are some slight positive indicators in the *Adoption Barometer 2021*. The overwhelming majority of adoptive parents have made their child's adoptive status known to the education setting (98%) and there is increasing awareness among parents of the support that is made available, although overall awareness of some support mechanisms is still low.

89% of respondents were aware that priority access legislation was in place to ensure their adopted child a school of their choice – an increase from 87% in 2018. Awareness of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) has also increased, from 56% of respondents in 2018 to 59% of respondents in 2020. However, only one in ten respondents are aware of how the PDG is being spent in their region or local authority. While this represents an increase in awareness from 6% in 2018, it suggests that more needs to be done to ensure that parents and carers of previously looked after children are aware of the funding that could be used to support them, and how this funding is being used.



Families with older adopted children

Assessment of current adopter experiences, based on survey results	Score
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	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
OVERALL	FAIR
Assessment of current adopter experiences, based on survey results	Score
Adopters feel well prepared for the possibility of planned or unsolicited direct contact with birth families during teen years	GOOD
Adoptive families with older children can access support that is tailored to the specific needs of adopted adolescents and young adults	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	FAIR
OVERALL	FAIR

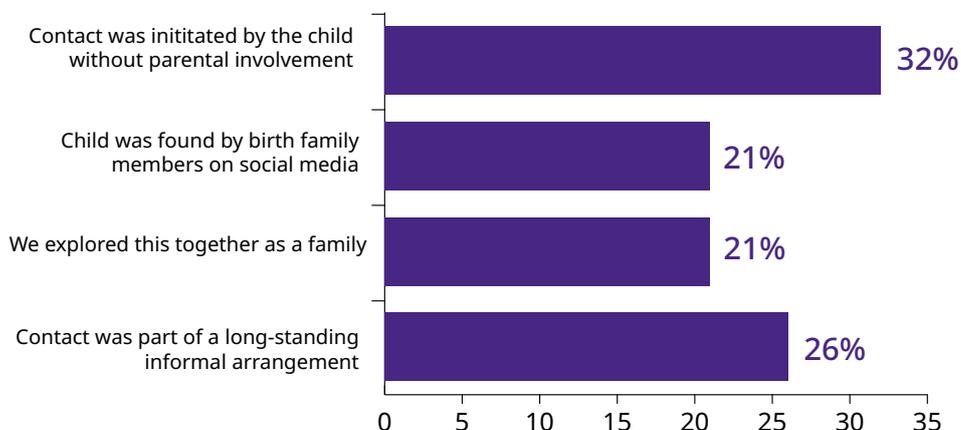
There were 49 respondents to the *Adoption Barometer 2021* who had at least one child aged 13-18 (representing 62 children), and 26 respondents who had a least one child aged 16-25 (representing 33 children).

Continuing contact

During the teen years, many adopted young people are increasingly exploring their identity and coming to terms with their history in a deeper way. This can sometimes be a time when increasing independence and the use of social media can lead to adopted young people experiencing direct contact with birth family members outside of any pre-existing agreement for direct contact, either at their own initiative or due to being traced by birth family members. Sometimes these new direct contact relationships can arise from pre-existing arrangements for indirect contact but they can also be new connections with previously unknown birth family members.

During 2020, 31% of children aged 13-18 represented in survey responses had direct contact with a birth family member outside of any existing formal agreement for direct contact (22% of respondents, with some respondents recording more than one child involved in direct contact).

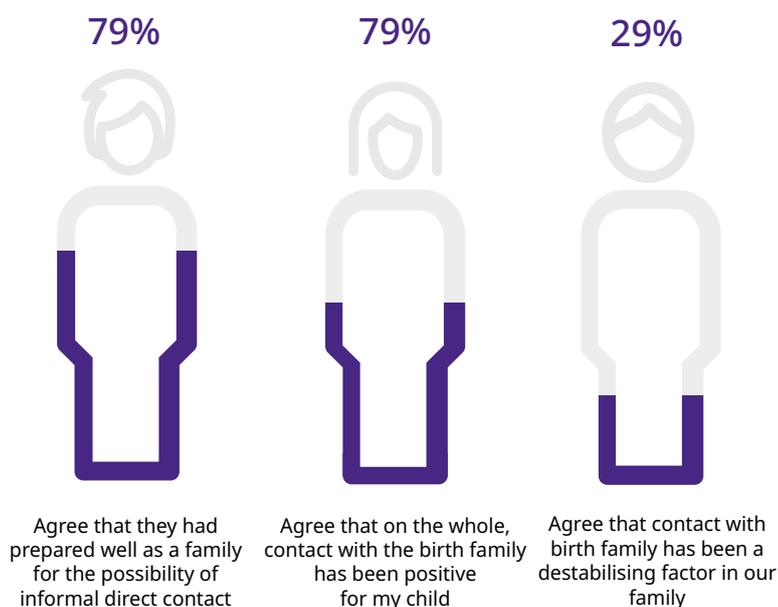
Nature of informal direct contact (13-18-year-olds)



In 2020, no respondents reported informal direct contact being initiated by birth family members contacting parents, or by birth family members contacting adopted young people outside of social media.

The majority of the informal direct contacts between adopted children and birth family members were initiated either by the child or by the birth family members without the involvement of the adoptive parents. Among all respondents from Wales, just under one in ten of the 13-18-year-olds represented initiated direct contact with a birth family member in 2020 without the involvement of their parents.

However, it is encouraging that 47% of these informal direct contact relationships were either part of longstanding arrangements or were explored as a family. This is perhaps reflected in respondents' assessments of the impact of informal direct contact which were largely positive.



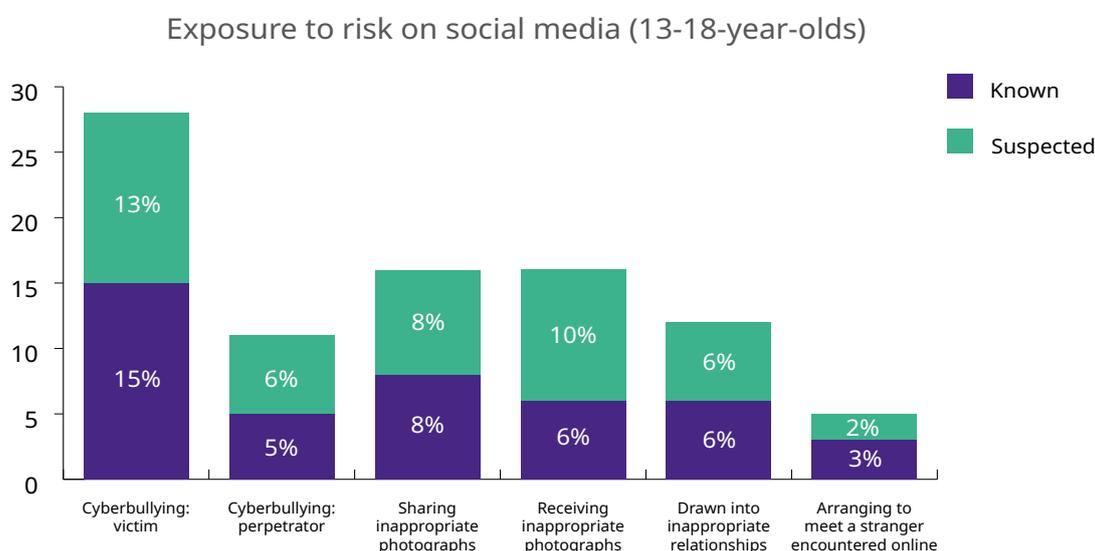
Comparing results year on year is difficult as respondent numbers are relatively low which makes the data volatile, but there does appear to be a tentative trend of increasingly positive responses when considering preparedness for informal direct contact during the teen years, and the impact of it.

Among adopted young people aged 16-25, 31% were reported as having ongoing contact (direct or indirect) with birth family members during 2020. This was an increase on the previous two years. Over half of these continuing contact relationships were described by respondents (adoptive parents) as 'difficult but ongoing'.

Managing risk

As young people grow and move towards independence, their exposure to risk, and their parents' ability to support them to assess and manage risk becomes an increasingly important feature of life.

In Wales, 82% of 13-18-year-olds represented had access to social media yet, of these, only 69% were considered by their parents to have the knowledge about how to stay safe on social media and be able to do so in practice.



Levels of exposure to risk on social media were lower in all categories in 2020 than they had been in 2019. This was replicated across the UK. The proportion of parents in Wales who felt that social media had a negative impact on their family life fell from 65% in 2019 to 59% in 2020.

Outside of social media just 4% of respondents knew or suspected that one or more of their children aged 13-18 had been involved in criminally exploitative activity during 2020 (including county lines activity and child sexual exploitation). This was considerably lower than in 2019 (24%) and mirrored a national reduction, perhaps in part due to the restrictions imposed by Covid-19, with 88% of parents stating that their 13-18-year-old children had spent less time with their peers outside of school than usual during 2020.

Among 16-25-year-olds in Wales, rates of involvement in the criminal justice system (11%) and with drug and alcohol misuse (11%) were also lower in 2020 than in 2019. This, however, was not mirrored across the UK, where there has been a slow but steady rise across all three years of *The Adoption Barometer*, suggesting that Covid-19 restrictions were not necessarily the main factor in this

reduction. 72% of adoptive parents in Wales felt that they were able to support their 16-25-year-old adopted child to manage risk and stay safe, representing an increasing trend since 2018.

Outcomes for adopted young adults

There were 33 adopted young adults aged 16-25 represented by 26 respondents in Wales. Of these, 79% were living at home (or away at higher education but returning home during holidays) during 2020 and a further 18% were living independently. The remainder were living in supported accommodation.

At the end of 2020, 24% of the adopted young people represented were not in education, employment or training (NEET), a figure which has remained steady since 2019. Data from the Office for National Statistics (2021) showed that 11.6% of young people aged 16-24 in the UK were NEET between October-December 2020. Adopted young people in Wales who were represented in the survey were more than twice as likely to be NEET compared to UK averages.

The majority of respondents (68%) felt that their older child needed, or would need considerably ongoing support as they moved towards independent living and fewer than half (48%) felt that their child was getting the support they needed. Despite this, 72% said that they felt optimistic about their child's future.

In Focus: Transitions to Adulthood

Successive Barometer reports have highlighted the significant challenges facing many adoptive families as their older children transition to adulthood. This year's survey again showed that adopted young people are much more likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET), and are likely to need considerable support as they move towards independence.

The *Adoption Barometer 2021* survey included additional questions for parents of children aged 16-25 to establish a clearer picture of the challenges, and a better understanding of what would help. A further survey for adopted adults and young people aged 16 or over gathered the views of 159 adopted people who are living, or who have lived, through the transition to adulthood.

For the analysis in this report, all data from adoptive parents includes respondents from Wales only. Data from adopted young people and adults is UK-wide.

Childhood foundations

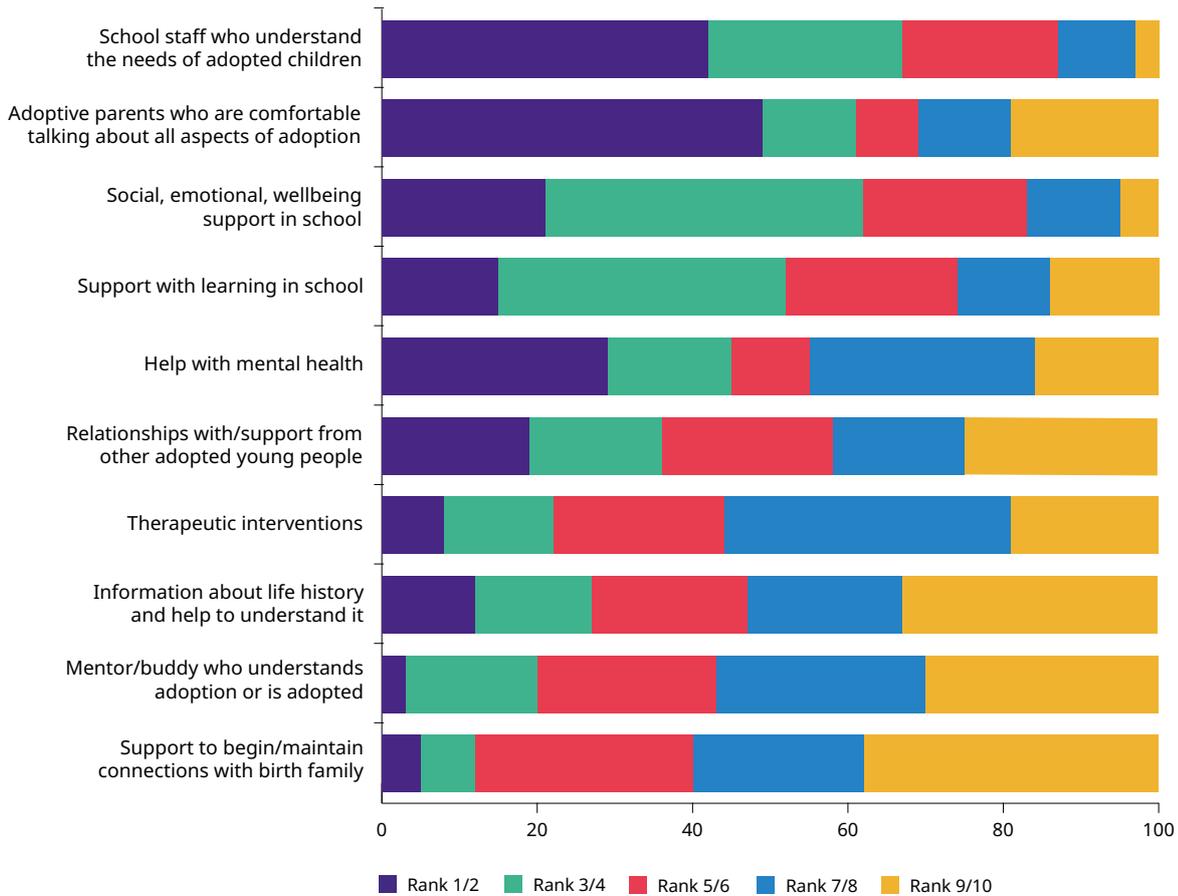
The transition to adulthood for any young person will be built on the foundations of their childhood. In modern adoption, the majority of adopted children are removed from their families due to abuse and neglect. All adopted people have experienced the loss of their birth families and associated trauma, regardless of their individual early life circumstances.

Effective and flexible support for families and adopted children is essential to ensure adopted young people reach the threshold of adulthood in the best possible circumstances. However, only 24% of adoptive parent respondents in Wales felt that the support they had received when their child was younger had meant that they were well-placed to cope with the transition to adulthood.

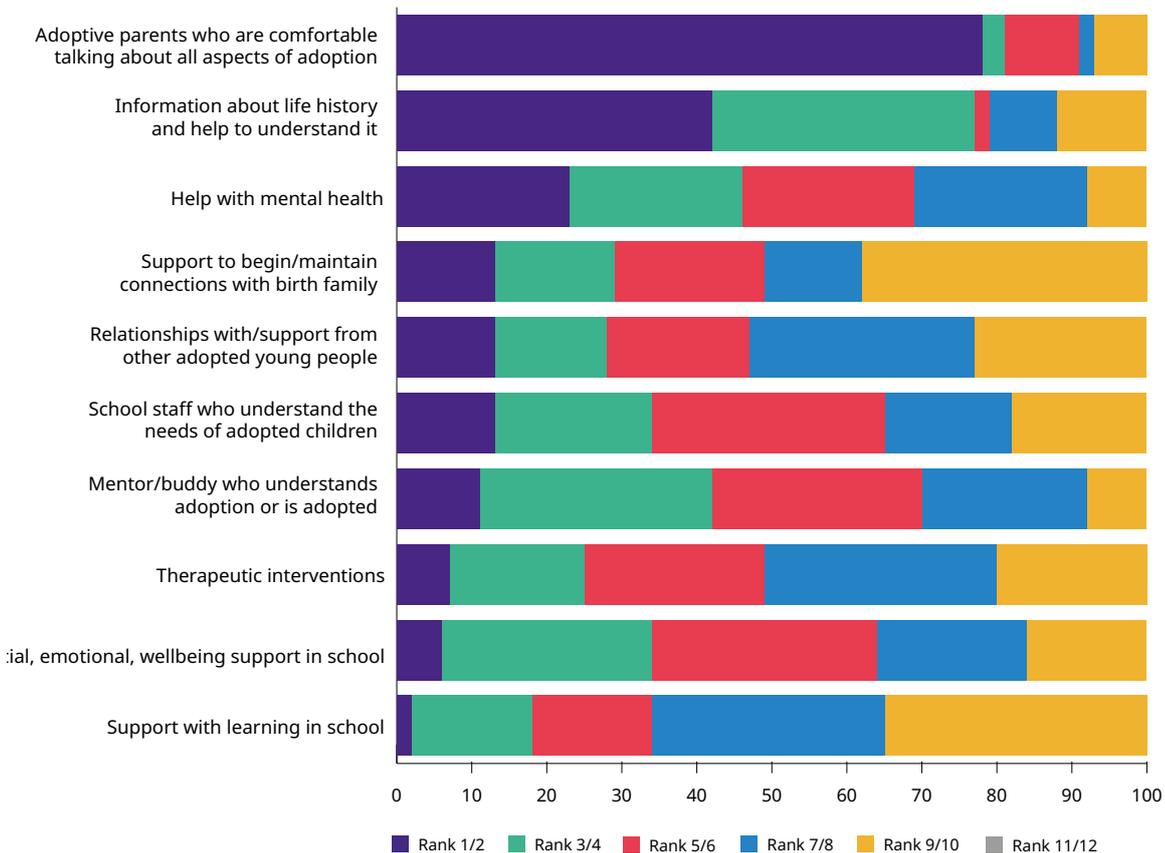
Adopted young people and adults, and adoptive parents, were asked to think about protective and supportive factors that they considered most important for families with younger children. Each group of respondents was offered a list of supportive factors and asked to arrange them in order from most important (rank 1) to least important.

Adopted young people (16-25) and adults (over 25) considered the same list of ten protective and supportive factors. The results of these two groups are presented separately to highlight any differences in view between older adopted people and those who are currently living through the transition to adulthood and who may have benefitted from increasing awareness of the support needs of adopted children and young people in recent years.

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



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

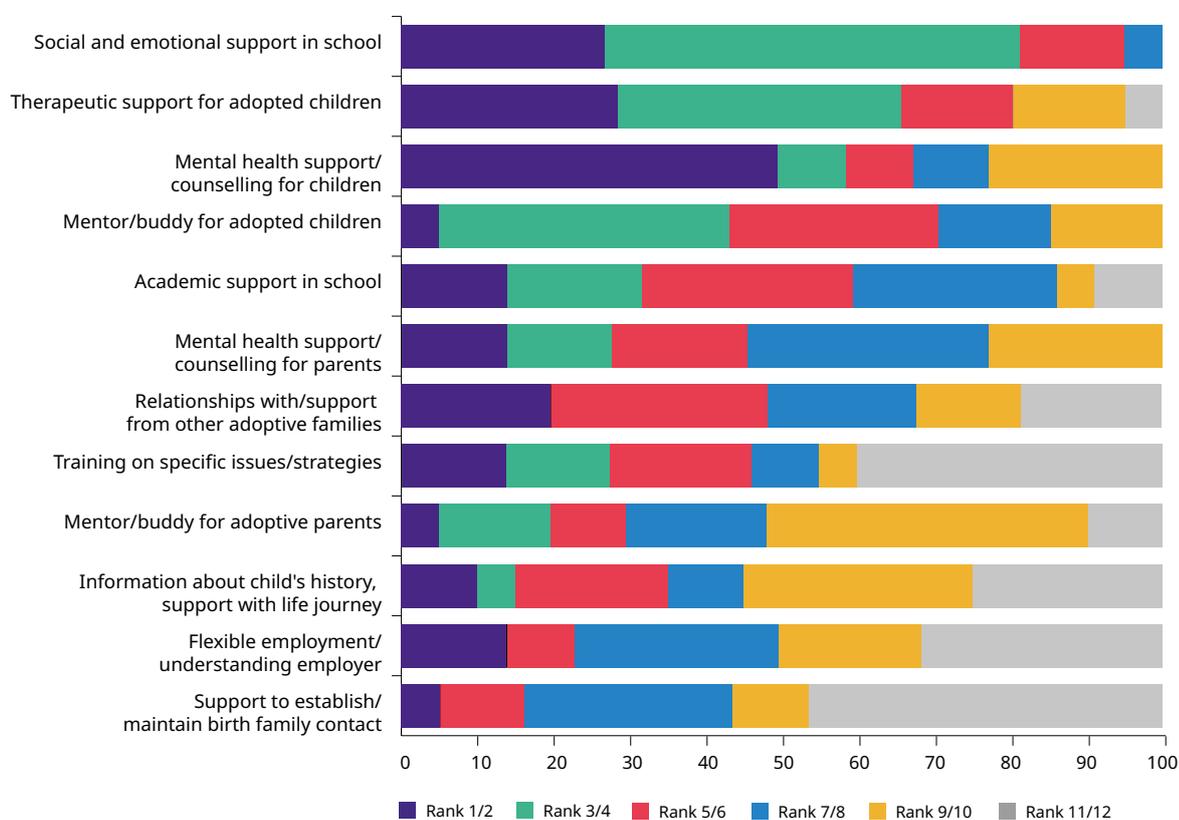


Adopted young people placed a high level of importance on factors relating to education. It is perhaps not surprising that adopted adults placed less emphasis on education factors as their school days are further in the past. Older respondents placed more emphasis on factors relating to understanding their life history and identity.

All adopted respondents indicated that support with mental health was an important protective/supportive factor during childhood, and all agreed that having adoptive parents who were comfortable talking about all aspects of adoption was of high importance. Looking at the range of responses, the importance of relationships – whether they be with parents, teachers, mentors or buddies – is clearly expressed, and valued much more highly than therapeutic interventions.

The list of protective and supportive factors which adoptive parents was asked to consider was slightly different from that offered to adopted respondents, as it included some factors specific to the experience of adoptive parenting.

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



Like adopted young people, adoptive parents placed a high value on education-based factors and mental health support. However, they were much more likely to value the provision of therapeutic interventions for their children than adopted people of any age.

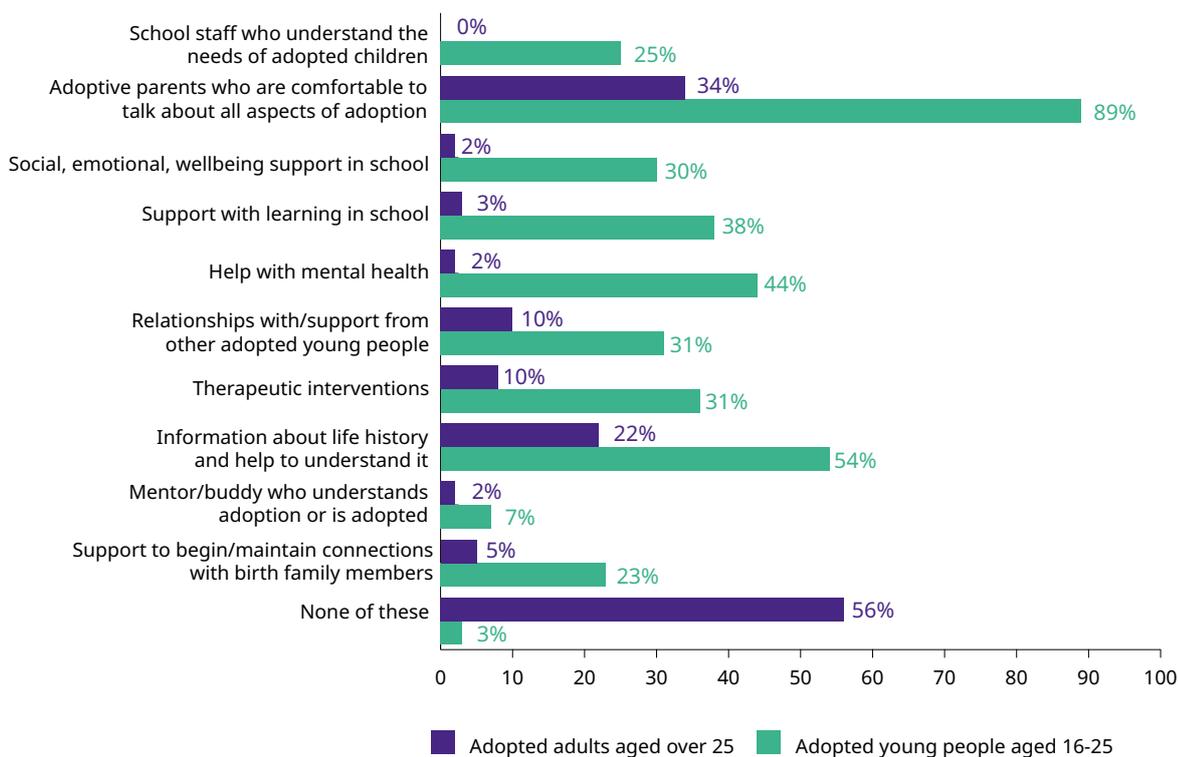
The graph above shows the factors in order of overall rank average scoring, which places 'social and emotional support in school' at the top of the list as all respondents ranked this factor at 8 or higher. However, 27% of respondents placed 'mental health support/counselling for adopted children' at rank 1 and 24% placed it at rank 2, making this the factor that was seen as most important by most respondents.

Adoptive parents considered support for their children of higher importance than support for themselves, but ranked mental health or counselling for themselves, and support from other adoptive families most highly among supportive factors for adoptive parents.

Having ranked the lists of protective and supportive factors in order of relative importance, respondents were then asked which of the factors on the list they had actually been able to access during childhood.

There were clear differences in the availability of childhood support between younger adopted respondents and adopted adults. Across every factor, younger respondents reported much higher levels of access to protective and supportive factors. Only 3% reported having access to none of the supports, compared to 56% of respondents aged over 25.

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



Considering the childhood factors ranked most highly by adopted respondents, it is encouraging that 89% of younger respondents felt that they had parents who were comfortable to talk about all aspects of adoption. However, only 34% of adopted adults felt they had this in their childhood. It is possible that there is an increasing openness about adoption in more recently formed families, compared to adoptions that took place decades ago.

However, it is also possible that evaluations of what constitutes being 'comfortable to talk' and 'all aspects of adoption' shift as an adopted person grows older and reflects on their early lives as part of their own process of uncovering the impact of adoption. The experiences and insights of adopted adults should be invaluable in supporting adoptive parents to understand how to create an environment that is conducive to openness and meets the needs of their adopted child to know and understand important aspects of their history and identity.

In more recent years, there has been a considerable movement towards recognising the long-term impacts of early trauma, care-experience and adoption, resulting in efforts across the UK to recognise

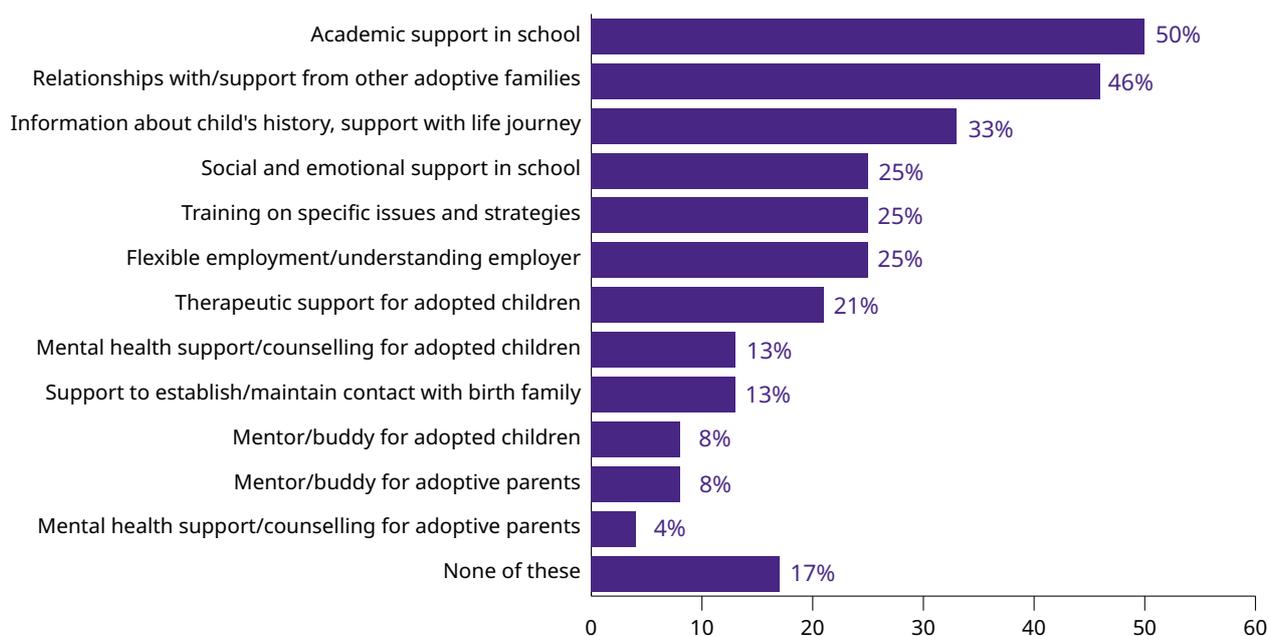
the need for more sustained support for adopted children and their families after the adoption order. In Wales, this has been reflected in the creation of the National Adoption Service, and significant funding for adoption including adoption support.

It is therefore to be expected that younger adopted respondents reported higher levels of access to childhood protective and supportive factors than those aged over 25. Younger respondents were considerably more likely to have accessed support in education, support for mental health, life history support and therapeutic interventions.

However, despite being ranked as of highest importance among young people, only one quarter of younger respondents felt that their school staff had understood the needs of adopted children, and 30% had accessed social, emotional and wellbeing support in school. While the apparent improvement to access is encouraging, the support available still seems to fall short of what is needed.

Among parents of 16-25-year-olds in Wales, relatively few felt that they had been able to access those protective and supportive childhood factors that they deemed most important: social and emotional support in school, therapeutic support for their children, and mental health support for their children.

Access to childhood protective and supportive factors: adoptive parents



While half of adoptive parent respondents considered that their child had been supported academically in school, only one quarter had accessed social and emotional support. The high proportion accessing support from other adoptive families indicates the importance of a strong and well-connected adoptive parent community.

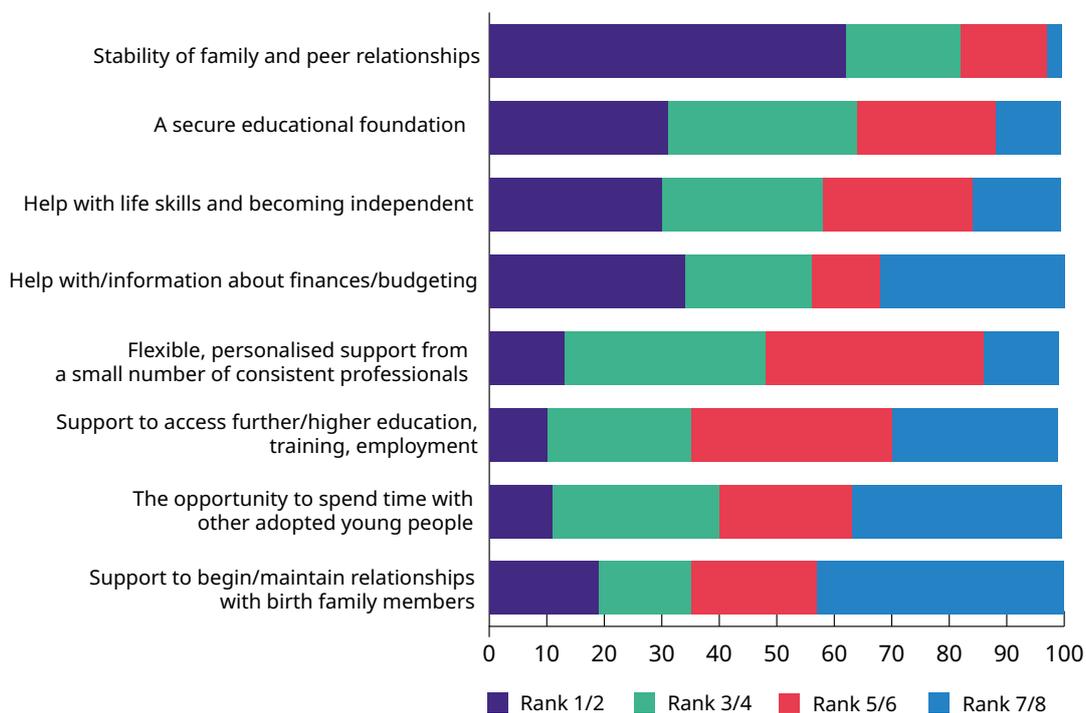
Although there were differences in perspective between adopted respondents of different ages and adoptive parents, views of respondents as a whole highlight the importance of strengthening relationships, both within and outside of the adoptive family, providing social, emotional and mental health support generally and within education, information about life story and support to understand it, and access to therapeutic support where needed. Despite apparent recent improvements in access to these childhood supportive and protective factors, there are still many families who are finding themselves without these essential early supports.

Becoming a young adult

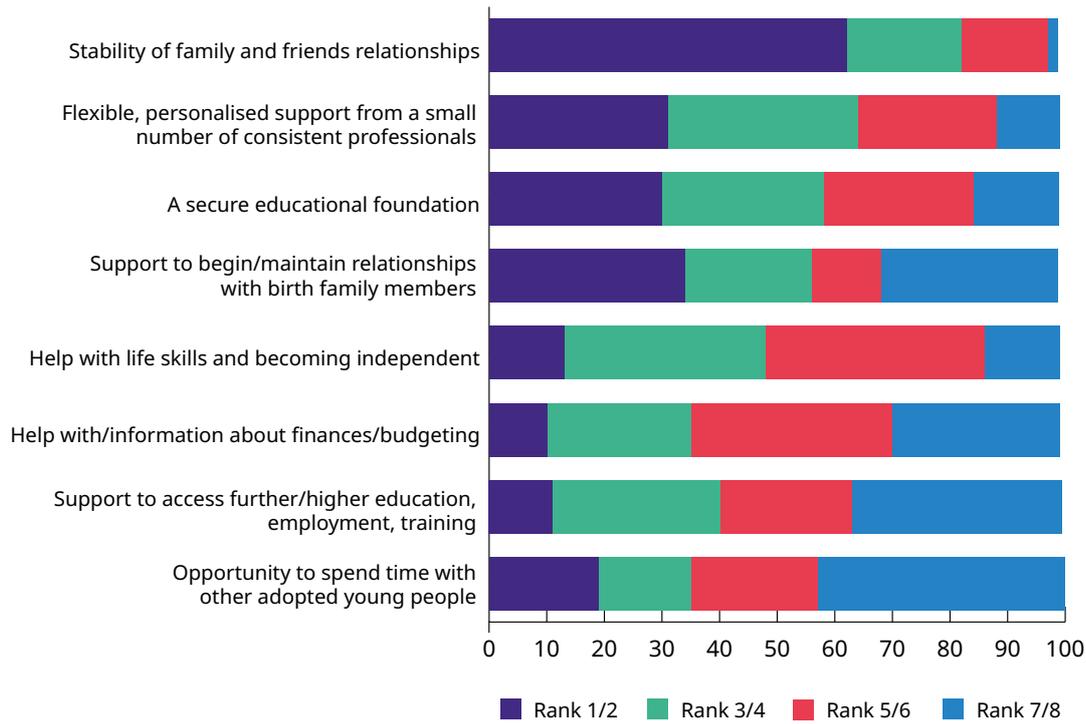
As adopted children and their families move towards the transition to adulthood, aged 16-25, a range of complicating factors can combine to create challenges. Nearly one third of adopted people who responded to the survey said that they were NEET at some point between the ages of 16-25, and more than half had visited a health professional because of concerns about their mental health. Adolescence and young adulthood is a time when support needs to be maintained and even increased.

In order to assess the types of support most valued by respondents, adopted adults, adopted young people and adoptive parents were given the same list of eight protective and supportive factors that might be considered important during the transitional years (16-25) and asked to rank these in order from most important (rank 1) to least important.

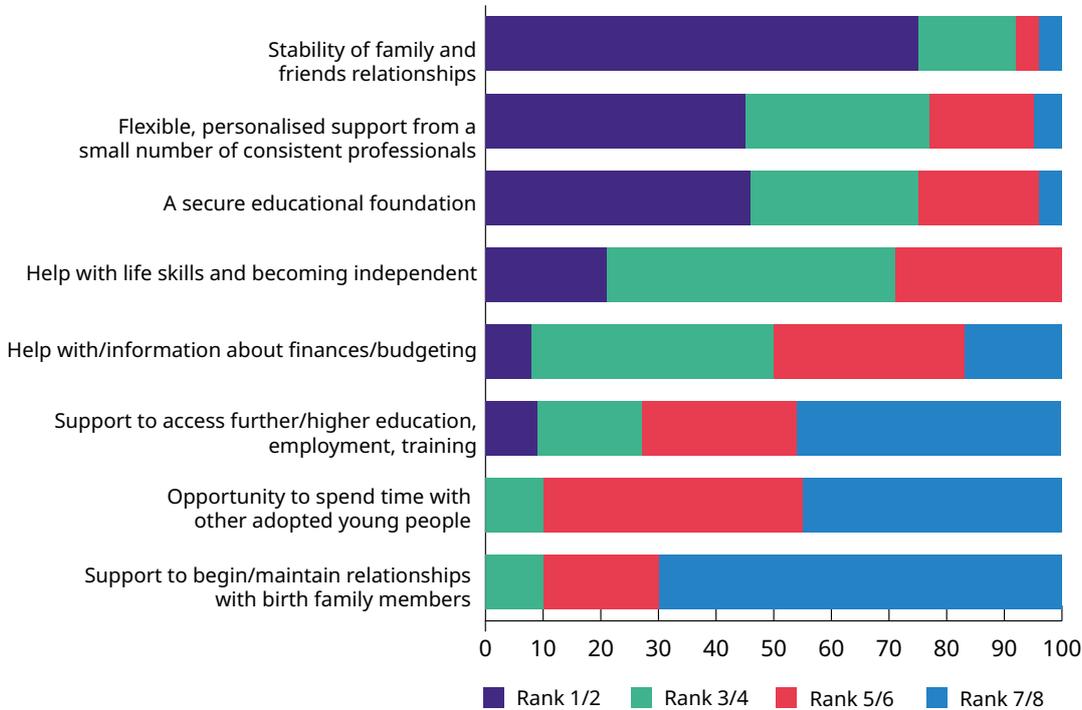
Rank order of protective and supportive factors for young people aged 16-25: adopted young people responses



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



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



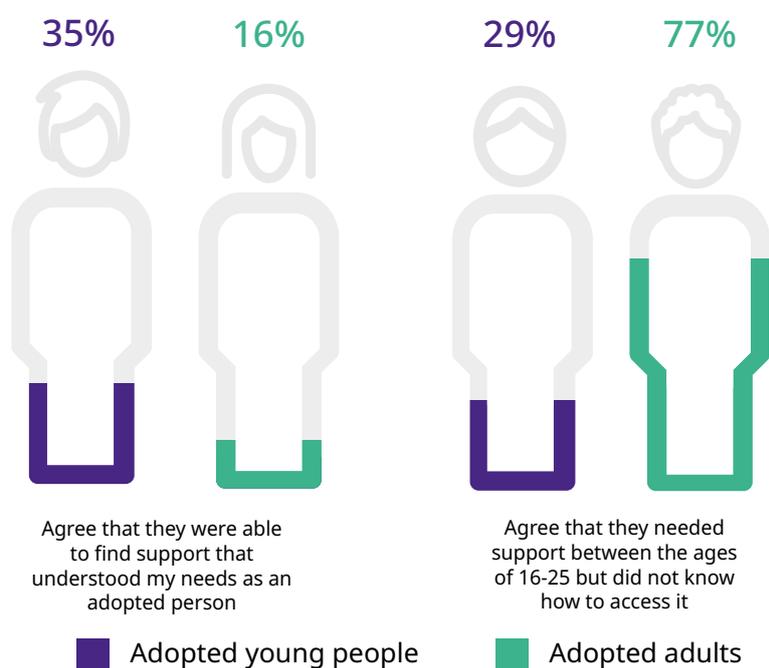
During the transition to adulthood, the importance of relationships was even more apparent among all respondents than in childhood. Stability of relationships with family and friends was ranked most highly by all respondent groups, and adoptive parents and adopted adults also ranked stability of professional relationships highly.

Younger adopted respondents and adoptive parents valued practical support (e.g. with life skills, financial management etc.) slightly higher than older adopted respondents. The opportunity to spend time with other adopted young people was not ranked as a high priority by any group but, in comments, adopted young people and adults often referred positively to time spent with adopted peers suggesting that while this factor was not seen as most important, it should not be considered unimportant.

There were differences of opinion about the importance of support to begin and/or maintain relationships with family members. While none of the respondent groups rated this in the top three, adopted adults were more likely to rate this as of high importance than either adopted young people or adoptive parents. However, this was a polarising issue, with similar proportion of adopted adults rating this at rank 1 (most important) and rank 8 (least important).

Accessing support

Adopted young people and adults consistently felt that they needed more support than their peers during the transition to adulthood (71%) yet adopted respondents of all ages reported difficulties accessing support that understood their needs as an adopted young person.



Although adopted young people fared considerably better than older adopted respondents, more than half reported not knowing how to access support during the transition years and two thirds were unable to find support that understood their needs as an adopted person.

Adoptive parents in Wales reported high levels of support needs among their 16-25-year-old children, with only 15% of children described as having no additional support needs. Support for training, education or employment was needed for two thirds of children, and 61% were reported to need support to manage risks and stay safe.

Young people and parents were accessing support from a range of sources including adoption support, other social work teams, mental health services, education services and housing services. Many families were working with several different agencies and also negotiating the transition from services designed for children and adolescents to those designed for adults.

Parents whose children had experienced this transition to adult services found the experience extremely challenging, with 91% saying that they had needed to learn new skills and carry out significant research to support their child to navigate the transition, and 73% feeling unsupported as a parent during the transition.

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. Considering the number of services involved and the challenges inherent in managing the transition to adult services, it is perhaps not surprising that 88% of adopted young people said that their parents were their main source of support.

Finding effective support

Adopted respondents of all ages emphasised the need for support from agencies that understood their specific needs as adopted young people. Just one quarter of all adopted respondents felt that they could find such tailored support 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 barriers to accessing support have led to many funding services for themselves. Nearly half of adopted adults (over 25) and 23% of 16-25-year-olds had paid for therapy or counselling since turning 16. A further 23% of 16-25-year-olds said that they or their parents would pay for such support if they could find something suitable. Respondents had support needs specific to their experiences as an adopted person that lasted well beyond childhood.

However, the need for effective support goes beyond the provision of counsellors and therapists with expertise in adoption. As young people's support networks widened from adoption support services that

might have been available during childhood, they and their families were frequently working with professionals from different agencies who did not have a background of expertise in adoption or an understanding of the issues. Training on the specific needs of care-experienced and adopted children and young people is essential for all those involved in education, social work, mental health, criminal justice, and the myriad of other services that intersect with the lives of adoptive families.

Strengthening relationships

During childhood and during the transition to adulthood, all respondents highlighted the importance of relationships with family, peers, and supportive professionals. Whether it was having teachers who understood their needs, adoptive parents who were comfortable talking about adoption, consistent and supportive professionals, or a stable family and peer network, relationships were at the heart of much of what adopted respondents saw as important.

Effective support for adopted people, whether it is practical support, help with learning about and understanding life journey and history, support with relationships with birth family members or support with education, employment and training, must therefore be provided in a way that builds on and strengthens adopted young people's existing relationships.

Among the majority of adopted young people who responded to the survey, their primary supportive relationships were with their parents. Almost nine out of ten adopted young people said that their parents were their main source of support, and 83% said that they were comfortable with having their parents' help in finding and accessing support. When given opportunity to comment, some adopted young people who no longer lived in the family home expressed a desire to maintain their relationships with their adoptive parents and have their help in accessing support.

If adoptive parents are to be the parents their children need them to be then they, too, will need support. Parents are more likely to be able to fulfil their children's needs to be open and comfortable talking about all aspects of adoption if they themselves have received information, guidance and training from supportive professionals. They are more likely to be able to be consistently present and available for their young adult children if they themselves are emotionally, mentally and physically supported.

Yet adoptive parents frequently reported feeling unsupported. More than half felt that they had received little or no support as a parent when their child was younger. Once their child turned 16, half said that they received no support whatsoever as a parent, and a further 18% said that they received some support but less than before.

In Wales, during 2020 alone, 70% of parents of 16-25-year-olds reported receiving no support and, of those who had, 57% had turned to groups such as Adoption UK and other peer support organisations and 26% had paid for counselling or therapy for themselves.

While any increase in the availability of adoption support is welcome, support that solely focuses on the adopted child or young person is only addressing part of the picture. Adopted young people need their family members and the professionals around them to be consistent, stable, supportive and highly effective. If this is to be achieved, then support and training for parents and professionals is essential.

As young people become increasingly independent, it is likely that many will still view their parents as

their main source of support, whether living at home or not. It is therefore important that, where the young person wishes it, their parents are informed and involved in support plans that are being put in place for the young person.

Adopted respondents also placed a high value on the importance of stable peer relationships as they transitioned to adulthood. Although the opportunity to meet and spend time with other adopted young people was not highly ranked by either young adults or adults, respondents' comments revealed that such opportunities were, in fact, still valued. One respondent commented that "Having someone (ideally adopted) to buddy up through my search/discovery journey would have been priceless", while another suggested "a centre where adopted children from the age of 16-25 can meet up and talk about everything and get support".

The type of support needed, and the relative importance of different support structures can vary across the lifespan of an adopted person but it is clear that peer relationships and specifically the opportunity to form relationships with other adopted people can be a valuable part of creating stable foundations during the transition to adulthood and beyond.

Into adulthood

Adopted adults who responded to the survey highlighted a lack of support for them both during childhood and the transition to adulthood. However, they also made a convincing case for the provision of 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 suitable support during childhood to act as a foundation, and then finding that the support services being developed 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". While *The Adoption Barometer 2021* focuses on the experiences of families with children aged 0-25 and particularly on the experiences of adopted young people aged 16-25, it is evident that, while excellent support during childhood and adolescence can form a firmer foundation for adulthood, flexible, responsive supportive services need to be made available to adopted people across their lifespan.



Teulu gyda'n gilydd
Together we're family

Mae ein gweledigaeth yn gyfle cyfartal i ddyfodol disglair i bob plentyn sy'n methu byw gyda'u rhieni biolegol. Rydym yn gweithio i sicrhau'r cymorth cywir ar yr adeg iawn i'r plant sydd wrth wraidd pob teulu gofal mabwysiadol a pherthnasau.

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.

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