



Improving Adoption and permanent placements

Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England

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Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



In my capacity as Children's Rights Director I was approached by Baroness Butler-Sloss, chair to the recently appointed House of Lords Select Committee on Adoption Legislation, to help secure the views of children affected by adoption and foster care. This was achieved through two separate meetings, one with children who had been adopted and another with children who were in care and living either in children's homes or with foster carers. The second group focused on asking children's views about permanence in placements. The views gathered have been used to inform the Committee's thinking when it decides on what recommendations to make to the Government about the current legislation on adoption.

The work of the committee is in advance of the government publishing its Children and Families Bill, which is expected to contain clauses on adoption. The Committee was set up specifically to consider the statute law about adoption and to make recommendations.

This report details the views given directly to the Chair and another Member of the Committee by two groups of children and young people. The first group to meet was made up of eleven adopted children and young people and the second of fifteen care experienced children and young people.

As always in our reports, we have written what the children told us, and not our own views. We have not added our comments or left out any views we, or others, might disagree with. Where we have used a direct quote from what a child or young person said, this is either something that summarises well what many had said, or something that was a clear way of putting a different idea from what others had said.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Dr Roger Morgan OBE
Children's Rights Director for England

Discussion with adopted children young people.

The first group to meet was made up of eleven adopted children and young people. Their ages ranged from 9 to 19 years; seven were girls and four were boys. They were not an existing group with any already established views; we had invited them from different adoption services for this particular meeting.

What are the best and worst things about being an adopted person?

Being taken away from your family – this was seen as both a positive thing and a negative thing.

Good – “because it allows you to move on”; “live with a family who love you and give you opportunities so you can achieve”.

Bad – “because it can destroy bonds with siblings”; “just having to leave your birth family was bad and can mean you have no family history or knowledge”.

The issue of having knowledge of your family history was seen as particularly important in terms of family medical conditions. Another ‘worst thing’ mentioned was disruption to schooling, which was more likely for children who were adopted when they were older.

What were the best and worst things for you about the adoption process?

The one positive thing about the process that was mentioned was the fact that adoption itself allowed the child to move on. The bad things about the process were:

- When children are young they don’t understand what is actually happening
- Being placed with foster carers for long periods of time meant children were in limbo

“I had to live with foster carers for two years before I was adopted. That’s not good because you grow attached to them and then have to start all over again”.

We asked the group if they had been asked for their views as their adoptions were going through.

Some said they had been asked; one young person had been asked by the judge and another by a therapist, but the young person didn't feel people were actually listening to them.

One young person gave an account of what had happened to them:

"I was 11 and was almost at the point of being adopted. I was seeing the people who were adopting me quite a lot. I told my social worker I wasn't sure about them, but they didn't listen. Then at the last moment the family pulled out. Within 3 weeks they had found another family to adopt me, it felt as if it was just a 'process' and it shouldn't be.

"It made me question things – they had found one 'match' for me and that didn't work, and then all of a sudden, just 3 weeks later, another family turned up. It feels like sometimes they are more interested in the process and not always finding the right family".

A concern raised by some in the group was that sometimes a child's age determined whether they were asked their opinion. Some felt that professionals didn't give younger children a chance to say what they wanted because it was presumed they were too young to comment or understand.

How important is it that once it is decided that a child is to be adopted, the adoption happens quickly?

Overall the group felt that adoption should happen at a pace that is right for the individual child. Sometimes that could mean being adopted very quickly but for another child more time might be needed. One child summed this up as follows:

"Speed isn't everything. The first match might not be the right match".

The group gave a number of considerations that could impact on timing:

Not too quick:

- In case the adopters change their mind
- It might not be the right family. It can take time to look at all the options and that should include family members
- Children with complex issues might need more time, but don't drag things out

Not too slow:

- Place children straightaway with adoptive parents; don't waste time with foster carers.
- If a child spends too long with foster carers they'll get too attached and won't want to leave

In a show of hands 6 out of the 11 young people in the group said that at the time of their adoption they had been old enough to have a say but hadn't been given the chance.

How important is it that brothers and sisters are adopted together?

The general opinion of the group was that it was important that brothers and sisters are adopted together. Strongly aligned with this was the issue of contact, so that when siblings couldn't be adopted together contact was maintained.

Some in the group added the proviso that although it was important to keep siblings together it did depend on the family.

"I'm one of four children and we all got split up when we were adopted. We should have been kept with at least one other sibling; they should have tried to at least keep us in pairs".

"I was adopted with my brother because we had a good relationship, but my other brother couldn't be adopted with us because he has disabilities and they couldn't have coped with him as well. We don't know him at all now. If the brothers and sisters are close and the parents can take them then it would be good, but sometimes that's not possible and sometimes it's better that brothers and sisters are split up."

We asked the group to indicate if they felt it was:

1. more important to be adopted even though that would mean being split from other siblings or
2. more important to try and keep siblings together

Five voted for point (1) and six voted for point (2).

"They should try and keep siblings together during the adoption process – we can give each other support and it's important to be able to share that experience with someone. This impacts on your future and it means you can help each other".

The issue of contact with siblings had been raised by the group as being very important. We asked them who makes decisions about contact for them.

Some said that when adoptive parents make the decisions about contact things can be difficult. One young person said that the adoptive parents of his brother have stopped contact but he doesn't know why.

"Ask the child – they need to have a say".

Some members of the group felt that although contact with siblings was important it was less important if you hadn't grown up with them:

"If you knew them before you were adopted then it's important to keep in contact with them".

Not everyone agreed:

"Even though I probably wouldn't connect with them I would like to meet them because we have something important in common".

When we asked about the importance of keeping in contact with birth parents the group said that it depended on a number of things such as the parent's behaviour and the reasons why the children had been removed from them. One particular concern was about parents who had been violent in the past and the impact this behaviour could have on the child.

What was important was to explain why certain decisions about contact had been made, because that information could help the child understand what was happening.

"I used to take my anger out on my adoptive Mum when contact was reduced – because I didn't understand why that was happening. I should have been told".

"Every adopted child has the right to know why they were given up or taken away – it helps you decide whether you want to see them again".

"They [birth parents] should have to write a statement that the child can see that says why they gave you up or had you taken from them".

When asked, not everyone in the group understood what was meant by 'life-story information'. Those who did thought it should be given early so children had a better understanding of things – with the caveat of "if the child's situation is stable".

Do people need any particular sort of help or support after they have been adopted?

The overwhelming view of the group was YES, children and young people do need support after they have been adopted. What type of support and the reason support was needed varied. The most common example of where support was required and could be improved was in schools. The issues and problems young people said they had experienced in a school setting included:

- bullying by other pupils
- bullying (because of being adopted) not taken seriously by staff
- teachers not understanding the issues of adoption and the impact these have on children
- teachers questioning a child's experience of what had happened
- teachers not taking the effect of the adoption into account in terms of its impact on a child's performance and achievement

"More help is needed in schools, my brother didn't get treated properly, and teachers need to help more".

"Bullying in schools isn't taken seriously – it's not normal bullying".

People say "your parents didn't want you and that's why you were adopted".

Many in the group felt that teachers and pupils needed a better understanding of adoption; the process and the impact on children. The issue of bullying wasn't always picked up and often not recognised as a problem by some teachers.

"Children who aren't adopted need to be better educated [about adoption]".

One young person told of a situation in school he had experienced:

"I was told to do family tree work at school by my teacher. I said I couldn't because I was adopted – the teacher didn't believe me and said I was lying because adoption was something different".

Two other examples of support mentioned were more attention for adopted children to make up for the lack of attention they had received from their birth families, and a sum of money which could be accessed later in life.

Government Ideas

We then went on to check out with the group two proposals being put forward by the government:

IDEA 1:

The Government is thinking of changing the law so that usually, a child can go straight to live with the family that wants to adopt them – they would stay there as their foster child while the adoption is being sorted out and then they would become their adopted child

The group felt this was a good idea and supported it because:

- It would allow the children to get to know the family quickly and actually live with them as a trial period to make sure the family was the right one to adopt them
- It might reduce the number of moves a child has to go through – which was good
- When children live with foster carers for too long they get too attached making it difficult to leave them and could affect how they view their new parents
- “Brilliant – a trial run that would give you a chance to work through problems”
- If you did still have to go to a foster carer it should only be for a short time, which is better

One young person in the group, who supported the idea, added a word of caution to this proposal:

“This type of placement would need lots of involvement from the social worker. Social Services might just assume that because the child’s been matched that the placement is good and that things are ‘done and dusted’. They might just think ‘that’s another one out of the way’. This wouldn’t reduce the work for social services because they would still need to check things were OK”

IDEA 2:

At the moment, when decisions are being made about adopting a child, the child's religion, race, culture and language have to be taken into account.

The Government is thinking of changing the law so that these things only have to be taken into account if there is some reason that makes them particularly relevant for that child.

We held a vote on this idea, four young people were in favour, six were against it and 1 was unsure.

One young person in favour said it was a good idea because it would limit the time a child spent in care. Some members of the group thought it was important to consider things like race, but felt what was more important was getting a child placed with the right carers, which meant taking lots of things into account.

"Don't make them too important"

Others disagreed. They felt it was important to consider the issues mentioned above and that placing children with a family who were racially or culturally different would make them prone to bullying and make them stand out from other family members.

Some felt that it was important to consider what the individual child's experiences have been. For example, someone who had followed a certain religion might find it difficult or confusing to be placed with a family of a different religion. "It might be difficult to change your views just because you were being adopted".

Some in the group felt that the level of importance placed on these issues would depend greatly on the age of the child – the younger the child the easier they would find it to adapt to a new religion etc.

Other issues for consideration raised by the group were:

- Age of the adoptive parents, and
- Sexual orientation of the adoptive parents.

Discussion with children and young people in care

The second group was made up of fifteen children and young people, who were in care or care leavers. Their ages ranged from 10 to 18 years; ten were girls and five were boys. They were not an existing group with any already established views; we had invited them from different local authorities for this particular meeting. Most of the young people in the group, 13 of them, were in long term permanent placements.

To start the discussions we asked the group whether their views were generally taken into account when important decisions about their lives were made. Two said yes their views had been considered, twelve said no, this hadn't happened and one young person said it varied, sometimes yes and sometimes no.

"They don't listen to me because I'm a looked after child and they are professionals".

"People only listen to what they want to hear".

Should social care services always try to find somewhere permanent as a placement for each child in care?

Members of the group acknowledged that sometimes, depending on the child's individual circumstances, finding a permanent placement in the first instance might not be possible.

They questioned how you could say a placement was going to be long term when the child and carer didn't know each other. Many felt that labelling the placement as short or long term was wrong. Instead they thought it would be better if a child was, where possible, introduced to the carer over a period of time. When they moved in, it was on the basis that "you see how you settle".

"If a placement is found, you need to get to know the carer first – don't just move us in".

"In a short term placement, you just get to know the carers and then you're moved. It might be the best place for you to stay though".

Many in the group supported the idea of placements not being seen as short or long term. They felt it would be better to view all placements, if properly matched, as 'open ended'. In most circumstances, it wasn't helpful to put a time limit on placements.

Another suggestion made was there should always be a backup placement available.

"This would be supported by a team of professionals that you kept in contact with, including other carers, so if a placement broke down, and there wasn't time to arrange a planned move, you could at least go and stay with someone you already knew".

Some in the group shared experiences of having been placed with a carer on a short term basis but after spending time there wanted to stay longer than was planned.

One young person talked about their frustration at not being listened to about this and how they had to fight to stay. They felt social workers just didn't listen, and had to resort to making a complaint and send emails to senior staff to be heard.

When looking for a placement, how important is it to match young people and carers on the basis of religion, race and culture etc?

We asked the group to vote on this. There was lots of discussion about this point and everyone in the group said no, young people shouldn't be placed with a carer on the basis of race, religion or cultural background. One child, who was living with foster carers of a different ethnicity, was unhappy that the guardian wanted them to move to another placement with a better ethnic match.

"If they love you it doesn't matter what colour they are".

One young person talked about the things she had experienced as a white child placed with a black carer. She felt the placement was great for her, but that she was very conscious that "people talk about us because I'm white and she's black".

Although everyone agreed that a decision to place a child shouldn't be based on race, religion or culture, there were a couple of 'depends' from the group.

One young person who had been placed with a carer from a different cultural background said “I asked to be moved because we just didn’t get on – it didn’t work and I didn’t like the food”.

Another member of the group summed up several comments by saying “Colour isn’t the issue, but you shouldn’t ignore it because it can matter”.

How important is it that brothers and sisters are kept together in the same placement?

The majority of the group said it was very important that brothers and sisters were kept together. This included siblings being placed with different carers and siblings separated through adoption.

One young person didn’t think it was always a good idea to place brothers and sisters together. He explained how he and his sister didn’t always get on:

“My sister always kicks me, sometimes we don’t get on”.

The group accepted that it was sometimes very difficult to place large sibling groups together and if this was not possible then every effort should be made to place children with at least one other sibling and to make sure that contact with the others takes place.

Many examples of the impact of separating siblings were shared in the group:

“Before you go into care that’s all you’ve got [brothers and sisters] and you comfort each other when things are bad. You can support each other because you’re going through the same things and you understand. It’s wrong to split us up”.

“I wanted to stay with my twin sisters. They were only two. I got placed by myself because they said I needed my own space. The twins won’t know the difference between their carer and my Mum now. I had really strong views about this – but it didn’t stop this happening”.

“It’s hard when you are separated from a brother or sister because when contact is rare you stop getting to know each other”.

“It was really difficult to go to my placement without my brother and sister, the loss was too big and it really upset me. My brother and sister were placed with different carers about 40 minutes’ drive away. I didn’t get to see them very much. Once I went for a sleep over and the carers’ own child kept getting involved in stuff I was

doing with them. I felt like she was taking over, replacing me and that they had a new older sister and had forgotten about me. I was angry and wanted to hit her, but I didn't. It was the only sleep-over I ever went to at their house. I feel I have lost my brother and sister, they see her as their new sister and I am alone".

"Separating siblings is never right – for adoption or to be fostered."

Other key messages on this point included:

- The distance between siblings is very important
- A situation shouldn't happen where one child comes into care and the other sibling is left at home
- Young people need to be told why they can't be placed with siblings
- It's very difficult when one sibling out of a group is adopted and others aren't

"My sisters are being adopted and I don't have contact with them. They don't have their Mum or Dad and now they don't have me or my brother"

"I have mixed views about adoption. I think it's a good thing for kids under the age of about 10 years old but for those older I don't think it's a good thing. Separating siblings is never a good thing but now my brother has been adopted I know he will have a normal life. This was hard for me in the past but now I understand this."

"My sister's being considered for adoption on her own so she's made a book for me about herself".

When is fostering best for a child in care?

The majority of the group said that foster care should be the first placement choice for all children, but especially younger children. Some felt that being placed in a family environment was essential and that foster care was the closest thing to a 'home life' they could hope for.

Foster care was supported because:

- It provides care in a home setting – "you've come from a family and you need one"
- Children find it easier to bond with carers - "You can't bond with loads of different staff"

- There is the possibility of staying with foster carers beyond the age of 18 – “You can stay with your carers until you’re older – which is more like a normal family. You can’t do that in a children’s home”
- It’s less confusing to be in a family environment for younger children
- Children are more likely to be treated like the other children in the family – as a family member
- It’s more settled “It’s better than residential care because being with so many kids there’s more potential to clash”

When is a children’s home best for a child in care?

Although there was generally more support for foster placements, some in the group felt that residential care [children’s homes] should always be available for young people who didn’t want to live with foster carers. It was also seen as positive that children living in children’s homes did more for themselves.

What sort of help have people here had from Independent Reviewing Officers?

From a show of hands 10 young people knew they had an IRO (one in the past, before leaving care) and 5 weren’t sure who or what an IRO was. Of the 9 who, at the time of the meeting, knew they had an IRO 4 said theirs were helpful and 5 said theirs were unhelpful.

Criticisms focused around the meetings chaired by IROs not being helpful to young people and the lack of contact young people had with their IRO.

“When things were fine it was OK. I’ve never really had any problems, always done well at school, but this year has been a stressful year and I haven’t seen my IRO from one meeting to the next. They don’t know what’s happening – and a catch up meeting just before my review isn’t good enough”.

“The job could be done by someone else – we see enough people”.

Comments in support for IRO’s were:

"They always make sure my voice is heard, the social worker might not do that".

"They tell you about your care plan".

Have you ever been bullied because you are or have been in care?

Six young people in the group said they had been bullied because they were or had been in care, particularly at school. Some were bullied because they had a different name to their carer's, or to the carer's own children who they called 'brother' or 'sister'.

Nine people in the group said they kept the fact they were in care a secret:

"It can be used against you when you fall out with people".

The other members of the group said they had told people they were in care:

"I tell people myself because I don't want people gossiping".

"I'm open with my friends and people in class and I thought I should tell people. People gossip and make things up otherwise. I do feel really uncomfortable telling people why I've gone into care though".

Some of the members of the group were also critical of teachers in their schools. The young people said the teachers could have been more considerate of their situations and definitely more sensitive about sharing personal information about them.

The group felt that more needed to be done to improve people's understanding about fostering, adoption and the other issues about being in care. One young person suggested that "family diversity" should be taught in schools.

Another young person put it like this:

"It's nothing like Tracy Beaker".