



Adoption Rates Briefing Westminster Hall Debate

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Introduction

1. TACT Fostering and Adoption is the U.K's largest fostering and adoption charity. TACT is a registered adoption charity and voluntary adoption agency that specialises in hard to place children including those with special needs, older children, sibling groups and black and minority ethnic. We provide support, guidance and assessment for prospective parents, working with local authorities to match children with adoptive families, and support families post adoption.
2. TACT adoption services provide access to a team of highly qualified, experienced social workers seven days a week. Should a more complicated matter arise, TACT ensures access to advice and guidance from medical, legal, educational and psychological specialists.
3. Additionally, TACT offers extensive support that may include
 - Therapy
 - Home visits
 - Links with other families
 - Social events
 - Training
 - Support groups
 - Assessment for post adoption support
 - Short breaks/ outreach/ respite
 - Annual contact post adoption
4. TACT welcomes current advances for adoption, including the change in admissions- an issues TACT campaigned for in our Manifesto for Children in Care. However, TACT has several principle concerns, set out below.

Interagency fees

5. There are two main types of adoption agencies: local authorities (LA) and voluntary adoption agencies (VAA). TACT is a voluntary agency.
6. Local authorities place children with adoptive families within their local authority as a preference, turning to families within other local authorities and voluntary agencies when this is not possible. If this occurs, the local authority pays an interagency fee to cover the cost of adoption.
7. In TACT's experience, local authorities charge each other, through consortia arrangements, reduce interagency rates, thus suggesting that voluntary agency rates are more expensive than local authorities. In truth, the interagency fee rarely covers the full cost of the adoption process, the real cost of which is lost within the bureaucratic accounting systems of local authorities.

8. TACT charges £25,497¹ which must cover the full adoption process from finding an adoptive family to maintaining the placement prior to the adoption order. This is excluding London weighting and post adoption support. Research conducted by Selwyn and Sempik (2010) calculates the real cost is approximately between £35, 000 and £37,000². Any shortfall must be met by TACT, which means out fostering services effectively subsidise our adoption services.
9. Signs of voluntary adoption agencies struggling are presented in the number that have folded or merged. TACT has already merged with two separate struggling VAAs (Independent Adoption Service and Parents for Children) due to their financial difficulties and the well known Manchester Adoption Society was forced into closure. These financial difficulties can be linked to the cavernous gap between fees and the real cost of adoption.
10. TACT's principle concern is to do what is in the best interest of each child. Therefore we believe it is important to maintain an adoptive service, as adoption can provide the best outcome for a child in care. However, given the lack of financial incentive to provide an adoption service, many independent agencies simply can not provide adoption and keep their head above water. Selwyn and Sempik argue that the interagency fee has resulted in a crisis within VAA with 'older, disabled and minority ethnic' children most likely to suffer³.

Post adoption support fees

11. The majority of adopted children have been subject to care orders and are most likely to have a background of neglect, abuse, contested hearings and several foster care homes and families. An adoption order does not eradicate this history and, as such, ongoing support is necessary and TACT the duty of care⁴ should be for longer than the current three years.
12. Within TACT, around a sixth of the fees are allocated to post adoption costs covering a range of services for adoptive parents and children including: social events for adoptive families, access to training, access to specialist training if necessary and access to TACT's post adoption service which offers telephone advice, visits, advocacy, signposting, and direct work. The amount reserved for these services is £4,250 until the child is 18 years of age.
13. Additionally, adoptive families, as with foster families, can benefit from a weekly allowance payable until the child turns 18 (or, if preferred, a one-off lump sum on completion of the adoption order). However, unlike foster carers' allowances, this is means tested. TACT can provide evidence that suggest this acts as a disincentive to foster carers becoming adoptive

¹ Rates for 2010-11

² J. Selwyn and J. Sempik (2010) 'Recruiting Adoptive Families: The Cost of Family Finding and the Failure of the Interagency Fee'. British Journal of Social Work, Vol. 41, Issue 3 pg 424

³ Ibid. pg 430

⁴ Adoption and Children Act 2002

parents as fostering, and the guaranteed allowances, are the more viable financial option.

14. The assignment of post adoption support is at the discretion of the adoption agency. There is no statutory guidance on how much support should be assigned or how it should be spend. TACT argues that post adoption support and services should be ratified within statutory guidelines, thus demonstrating commitment to the on going support necessary for adopted children.
15. Allocations for post adoption services are often too little and for too short a period- often due to insufficient adoption fees. Selwyn et al suggest that the average cost per child per year for post adoption support is approximately £2, 820⁵. This annual figure is almost the full amount TACT is able to allocate from adoption until the young person turns 18.
16. Any increased adoption support could be well funded by the reduction in care costs. Currently, a looked after child can cost a local authority up to an average £56,226 per year⁶. Long term, the money spent on providing looked after services far outweighs that of providing post adoption support to a child in a secure adoption. With this in mind, TACT believes that vital post adoption support can only continue, and improve, with a rise in adoption fees. TACT also recommends that the provision period be increased until the child is 18 years of age.

Low Adoption Rates 2011:

Complex Needs

17. TACT welcomes the attention adoption had gained since the poor adoption rates were published in September this year. However, TACT is concerned that much of the debate has tried to simplify complex issues. The slow process and the matching of ethnic backgrounds fail to address some of the larger issues.
18. To have a good understanding of adoption figures and the current rates, it is useful to have a clear understanding of the figures within the context of the wider care system. At present, there are approximately 65,000 in care within England, with 74% of these in foster care families⁷. Of these, nearly 28,000 ceased to be looked after during that period- the most common reason for this being that they returned to their parents or relatives⁸. That children are 'languishing' in the care system is an unhelpful stance. Many enter into the care system for a short period and, as noted, are returned back to their birth families.

⁵ Selwyn, J et al (2009) *Adoption and the Interagency Fee*. DCSF, Research report DCSF-RR149

⁶ Demos (2010) *In Loco Parentis*

⁷ DfE: *Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England- year ending 31 March 2011*

⁸ *ibid*

19. The majority of children taken into care have suffered abuse and neglect which can lead to ongoing development problems, both social and emotionally. Of those currently in care, 76% have some form of special educational needs (SEN). In particular, the current figures suggest that the highest percentage for SEN is for 'behavioural, emotional and social difficulty'⁹.
20. Many consider adoption to be a 'magic wand' for the children. However, in TACT's experience, children adopted at birth make up only a small proportion of adoptees. The majority are adopted out of the care system and often carry with them a wide range of complex issues, as noted above and disabilities including, but not limited to, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). That FASD permanent brain damaged caused by a mother drinking during pregnancy. As alcohol is often associated with chaotic lifestyles and other associated problems, these children are more likely to end up in the care system.
21. Disabled children are vulnerable to entering the care system, either due to their disability (approximately three – four percent) or due to being vulnerable to neglect because of their disability. Additionally, they can enter the system due to a mixture of both factors. As such, it is worth remembering that, within the context of adoption rates, many of the children awaiting adoption have complex needs. These require adopters who are able to support their complex needs and, as we have established, be able to meet any shortfall, financially, that this support might demand.

Delays

22. Likewise, the negative press regarding adoption is misleading. Racial matching, assessments and the court process have all been cited in terms of delaying- or, in the case of racial matching, refusing- adoption orders. TACT would argue that, whilst race is a consideration in matching, social workers are more attuned to the fact that children are more likely to have multiple heritages and perfect cultural matches are unlikely. The bigger issue is not, per se, the number of black children awaiting adoption but the number of older black children- and those of all ethnic backgrounds.
23. There are, currently, 1850 children on the adoption register and only 420 adoptive families¹⁰. As such, the age at which children are now considered 'hard to place' has dropped to three or four years of age. In addition to this, siblings groups delay the process. If a two year old child is in the system, it would normally be assumed that an adoptive family might be easily found. However, if that child has two older siblings in the care system, the decision to place the child might be delayed in order to try and keep the siblings together. As a sibling relationship is likely to be the longest relationship in most people's lives, it seems right that such considerations are undertaken. However, sibling groups are hard to place and duly affect adoption rates.

⁹ DfE: Children with Special Educational Needs: An Analysis 2010 (October 2011)

¹⁰ BAAF figures, October 2011

24. TACT would agree that assessments and the court processes have contributed to delays. It is important to strike a balance regarding assessment; adoption should not be entered lightly and the assessments seek to establish suitability and how well matched a family will be- crucial in avoiding adoption breakdowns. There is a national average timescale of eight months which is reasonable given the amount of training and preparation needed for such an important family step.
25. Regarding court processes, TACT welcomes the new Family Justice Review that places the onus on social workers to make the detailed decisions. This is important as social workers are far better placed than the courts to make the best decision for the needs of the child. Likewise, TACT believes that judges should be charged with better court management; reducing the number of experts and being able to grant an interim order until final hearing rather than needing to grant an order every 4 weeks, as is currently required.
26. Additionally, TACT does not believe that introducing targets is a useful suggestion. It would simply divert resources away from frontline services which should always be avoided. Similarly, naming and shaming of poor practice can be misleading and demoralising. TACT firmly believes that good practice should be promoted and shared, rather than poor practice.

Permanence Orders

27. Whilst all that has been noted above has contributed to the low adoption rates, TACT would argue that the national debate needs to alter its focus to the issue of permanence. Certainly, adoption- if well supported and funded- is a good example of permanence, evidence shows that positive long term outcomes can also be gained through permanence achieved in stable foster homes, special guardianships and kinship care¹¹.
28. A Permanence order, such as that recently introduced in Scotland, has several advantages. Many looked after children have attachments and a sense of identity with their birth parents. Permanence orders allow the young people to remain in contact with their parents whilst benefiting from a more stable foster care. The foster carers, in turn, have more parental rights, thus allowing the situation to be 'normalised' for the young people involved.

Summary

29. TACT welcomes the ongoing debates regarding adoption and fostering and the progress being made. However, TACT strongly believes that an emphasis on stable long term family environments, regardless of the legal order, is crucial to producing the best results for children in care and on the edges of care.

¹¹ Schofield et al (2010) Care Planning for Permanence in Foster Care and Schofield and Beek (2008) Growing up in Foster Care: Providing a Secure Base Through Adolescence

30. TACT would suggest that improvements can be made and call for:

- An increase in interagency fees, reflecting the additional service VAAs are able providing in terms of finding families for hard to place children
- An increase in post adoption support services for the varied and complex needs of the children and young people. In the current economic climate allowances are important but the real need is for support services
- A proactive, national campaign regarding adoption based on the realities of the children involved and the challenges faced
- The length of court processes be reduced through better court management by judges

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