

# Children and Young People Committee

AD03

## Inquiry into Adoption

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#### Consultation on Adoption process

I am adoptive parent. My husband and I adopted two boys, half siblings more than 20 years ago. The children were 5 years and 2 years old when they were placed with us, they had been in care for two years and had been with five different foster carers during that time. Soon we moved to Wales and the adoption hearing took place two years later. The long wait for the adoption hearing was due to staff vacancies in the legal department in the placing local authority.

Since moving to Wales we have been involved in the self help organisation for adoptive parents, Adoption UK, formerly PPIAS. It was hugely important to us to have support advice and information from other adoptive parents. We became coordinators of a local group for a while. It is worrying that the concerns that adopters raise in the support groups reveal that the process of recruitment, selection and post adoption support in some areas have not changed significantly since I was a new adoptive parent. Some people describe good support from St David's Society or Action for Children and from some local authority workers, but many have experienced the same problems that we faced twenty years ago. I will list some areas which I think it would be possible to improve with clearer guidance for adoption agencies.

1. Our initial enquires to adoption teams were met with very different responses, some workers were kind and careful in their explanation of the process and the time we would have wait before there was contact from a social worker. Other teams promised to ring back and didn't, some said we should write in, without being clear what we should write, some said we had to attend an information meeting but didn't say what this was for or what might follow this meeting, or when. Very few sent written information about the process to us. New adopters in South Wales have described exactly these problems to me recently.

We went to a meeting in a local authority that seemed best organised, responded more quickly and had a useful information session. This was not the authority in which we lived.

2. Our approval process was conducted by an experienced worker who was rather cursory in her approach. She did not explain why she would be asking particular questions or why they were important. We were approved after six months. When we met the children's social worker we were relieved to find that he was thorough and careful and wanted to be sure himself that we would be suitable for the children he was placing. We came to trust him and avoided future contact with the adoption team worker who we did not trust. Currently adoptive parents describe their contact with social workers as 'terrible' or 'just great'. This should not be a lottery dependent on who happens to take on the work. The standard of work should be closely supervised and monitored so that good practice in terms of rigorous and transparent assessment is initially clearly explained to prospective adopters and then carefully conducted.

3. We attended a training course run by the local authority that was to assess us. It was unclear whether this was part of the assessment process or information only. It was most helpful to meet others at the same stage of the process. One couple we already knew and we are still in contact with them and one other couple that we met on the course. Once we were approved by the adoption panel the course and the meetings ceased. We continued meeting informally but arranged meetings would have been helpful. We turned to the self help group PPIAS and found group meetings for parents and children together really helpful. The local authority adoption team knew nothing of this group and had not given us the information about them. Sadly this is still the case in some areas in South Wales. Some workers give new adopters information about Adoption UK and pay for membership for three years; others do not mention the self help network!

4. The eldest of our children was a very anxious, fearful and aggressive. He was clingy and rejecting, able to dress himself yet unable to make decisions about whether he wanted a biscuit or a cake. He desperately wanted friends and contacts yet could not share or co-operate. He would easily and indiscriminately make contact with any other adults and expect from them immediate attention. He loved going places and new challenges but could not play on his own without adult involvement for more than 30

seconds. We expected difficult behaviour at first and that as he settled and felt safe we thought he would eventually calm. He never did. It was only through the self help group and reading that we learned that we were coping with a child who had difficulties with attachment. By the time he was nine we were looking for some help from professionals who might enable us to learn how to cope with his frequent temper tantrums, lying, stealing, angry abuse, hitting out at us, arguing with every request. We tried to find a play therapist and the only one we found said that we were anxious parents who were setting up the problems. Things continued to get worse as he entered adolescence and became involved in drugs and criminal behaviour. We were by this time anxious and especially as our younger son seemed fine. He was stubborn, a very selective eater, behaved younger than his years, but he was happy with us and settled well and could accept being looked after and was therefore hugely rewarding.

Now in support groups many adoptive parents report that they are dealing with similar behaviour to that of our eldest son which clearly indicates their children have some attachment difficulties. Yet when they seek help they still find it incredibly difficult and if they do find it their local adoption team cannot find funding, or this process takes ages and ages and lots of battling by the parents to secure any support and help. I now know there are therapists in this area; play therapists, and therapy where the parents and children attend together. Long term attachment work is offered by Family Futures and families report huge benefits from this work, but they are in London and expensive so very few can get funding to attend.

I could go on to describe our later experiences but feel this is enough to give an idea of the difficulties many adopters face and how things really haven't improved over time.

My husband does some work with Children's services. He still finds even some experienced workers who do not understand that post adoption services should be planned and finds often services end when the adoption order is made.

There is now an opportunity for the WG to streamline the process and the way that adoption teams practice; to set clear standards for working on recruitment, selection and post adoption support. It is important that the adoption teams, in whatever structure evolves, improve their practice but also that they work collaboratively and support and advertise the work of Adoption UK and other voluntary agencies.