

What does the data tell us about what is happening in the adoption system?

The view of the Adoption Leadership Board

December 2017

Introduction

This report attempts to make sense of what the available data (primarily from the SFR dataset on children looked after and the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) quarterly data collection) tells us about what is happening in the adoption system.

This follows on from a previous [publication](#) covering the same subject by the ALB in April 2017.

Since then, the first set of regional adoption agencies have gone live, with several others due to follow over the coming months. The ALB has been working closely with the Department for Education (DfE) to ensure that the regionalisation programme builds on the successes of the current system to further improve the quality of recruitment, matching and support. We have also been active in adapting our own data collection to take into account the creation of these new organisations.

Over this period, the Adoption Support Fund has continued to transform the service available to adoptive families, and has significantly raised expectations about the accessibility and standard of support families should receive which is essential in order to achieve positive outcomes for adopted children who have additional needs.

In publishing this report, the ALB aims to make a contribution to the sector's understanding of the trends shaping the landscape of adoption and highlight the importance of continued attention to the balance in the system of children needing families and adopter recruitment.

Summary of key trends

The number of adoption orders made each year in the period 2013 to 2017 has been higher than at any other point in the last 20 years. With the exception of this period, numbers since 1994 have fluctuated between 1,830 and 3,770 children adopted a year. Adoptions increased following the policy focus on adoption in the early years of the Blair government, then fell after the Adoption and Children Act 2002 was fully implemented at the end of 2005, before going back up from 2011 onwards.

More recently in 2013, there was a fall in the number of decisions for adoption and placement orders made. This fall is typically seen to have been a response to the Supreme Court Judgement *Re B (Re B (A Child))* [2013] UKSC 33) followed by the Court of Appeal Judgment *Re B-S (Re B-S (Children))* [2013] EWCA Civ 1146).

However, over the four years since these judgments were handed down, the number of decisions for adoption and placement orders made each year has

stabilised. There has been no continued decline in the use of adoption as an option for children – in fact there has been a small upward trend on both these measures.

At the level at which the system has now stabilised, around 4,000 placement orders are being granted each year. This suggests that the use of adoption still remains comparatively higher than it has been in the last two decades.

One of the great successes of the adoption system in recent years has been to significantly reduce the number of children with a plan for adoption waiting to be placed with prospective adopters. As a result of the widespread and successful efforts of the system to recruit more adoptive families for those children, there have been significantly more prospective adoptive families waiting than children.

However, adopter recruitment has more recently been scaled back across the system, with agencies taking a more targeted approach to recruitment. The ALB data now suggests that there are more new placement orders being granted than prospective adoptive families being approved. As a consequence, the ratio of children waiting to available adopters has been steadily increasing, though the latest published data still shows more adopters waiting than children.

In exploring this issue, we should of course remember that the number of children placed in sibling groups, and the complexities of finding families for children, mean that we should be wary of drawing conclusions about the ratio of adopters needed to the children who need to be placed based on a simple numerical comparison.

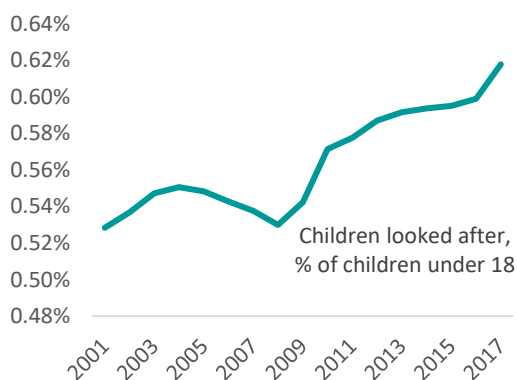
That said, the data clearly tells us that more still needs to be done to ensure the system recruits, approves and supports adopters who can meet the needs of those children who are waiting to be matched with adoptive parents – children with complex health needs or disabilities, children from minority ethnic, cultural, religious and language backgrounds, older children and sibling groups – and that they are then matched with those children waiting.

I. Children looked after

1.1 Children in care

The number of children looked after has increased: 72,670 children were in care at 31 March 2017, compared to 68,070 at 31 March 2013 (an increase of 7%). As a proportion of all children aged under 18 years this represents a small increase from 0.6% to 0.62%.¹

Of children looked after at 31 March 2017: 74% were in foster placements; 3% had been placed for adoption; 6% were in a placement with parents; 11% were in secure units, children's homes, or hostels; and the remainder were living independently or in other placements.



1.2 Children entering care

The number of children coming into care has increased in recent years, from 28,980 in 2012-13, to 32,810 in 2016-17, an increase of 13%.

The age profile of children entering care has changed over the last 5 years. The number of children entering care aged under 5 has remained broadly static. The largest increases have been among children aged over 5. In particular, children

aged 16 and over accounted for 17% of children entering care in 2016-17, compared to 13% 5 years ago.

An increasing portion of these children entering care are doing so under Care Orders. 31% of children who started to be looked after in 2016-17 had a Care Order, compared to 23% in 2015-16. Over the same period there has been a decrease in the number of voluntary agreements under S20 CA 1989, from 19,470 to 17,540.

Of children coming into care during 2016-17: 58% did so because of abuse or neglect; 15% because of family dysfunction; and 11% because of absent parenting.

1.3 Children leaving care

31,250 children ceased to be looked after in 2016-17, 580 fewer than the year before. Of those children: 32% returned home; 15% moved to independent living; 14% were adopted; 12% had a special guardianship order made; 4% had a residence order or child arrangement order granted; 2% were transferred to residential care funded by adult social services; 2% had care taken by another LA; 1% were sentenced to custody; and 18% ceased to be looked after for another reason.

2. Adoption and special guardianship decision-making

2.1 Decisions for adoption

The number of local authority decisions that a child should be placed for adoption have been broadly stable over the last 3

¹ All data on looked after children is taken from the SFR 50/2017 dataset on children looked after in England

years, showing a slight increase over time. 4,570 and 4,660 ADM decisions for adoption were made in 2014-15 and 2015-16 respectively. ALB data for the first two quarters of 2016-17 suggests that a similar number of ADM decisions were made last year as in the two years before.²

This relative stability follows a fall in the number of ADM decisions between Q2 and Q3 2013-14. 26% fewer decisions for adoption were made in 2014-15 compared to 2013-14.

Decisions are being made faster: for children looked after who were adopted in the year, the average time spent between entry into care and adoption decision has decreased from 11 months in 2012-13 to 7 months in 2016-17.

There has also been a more recent improvement in the average time between the decision that a child should be placed for adoption and the matching of that child with adopters. This has gone down from 10 months in 2015-16 to 8 months in 2016-17.

2.2 Placement orders

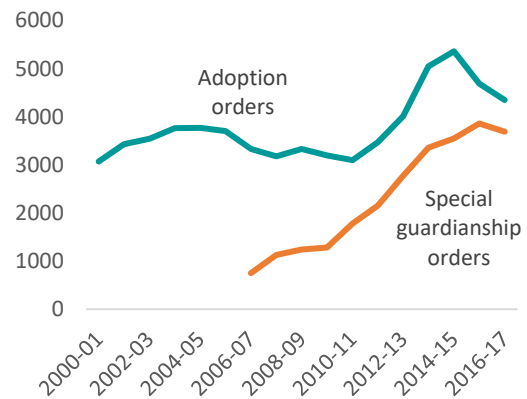
There is a similar picture in the number of placement orders made. 3,590 placement orders were made in 2014-15, and 4,100 in 2015-16. ALB data for the first two quarters of 2016-17 suggests that a similar number of placement orders were made as in the two years before.

Within this overall picture of stability there is significant regional variation. This is reflected in the differences in the number of children adopted between different areas of the country. 360 children from

London were adopted in 2016-17, representing 6% of children who ceased to be looked after in London. This compares with 640 in the West Midlands, equivalent to 19% of children who ceased to be looked after.

2.3 Special guardianship orders

The use of special guardianship orders has increased since 2012, but has been broadly stable over the last 3 years. The most recent figures show a very slight decrease in the number of special guardianship orders granted – 3,690 were made in 2016-17, down from 3,860 in the previous year.



3. Matching and placements

3.1 Children waiting

The number of children waiting with a placement order but not yet placed has decreased significantly over the past 3 years: 5,440 were waiting at 30 June 2013, falling to 2,030 at the end of September 2016.

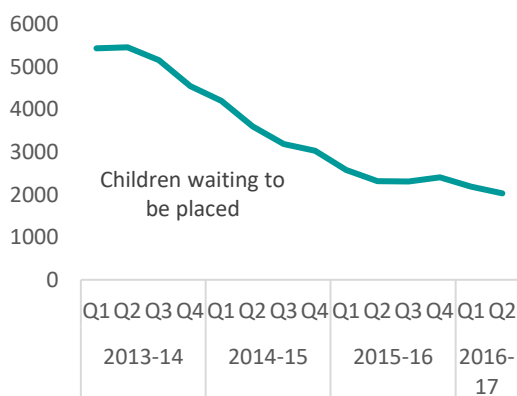
Of the children waiting at 30 September 2016: 28% were aged 5 years or over; 18%

² All data on children in the adoption process and prospective adopters is from the Adoption Leadership Board dataset

were of BME heritage; 6% were disabled; and 56% were part of a sibling group.

590 of those children waiting had been waiting for 18 months or more since entering care. Of those 590 children: 47% were aged 5 years or over; 23% were of BME heritage; 9% were disabled; and 64% were part of a sibling group.

This suggests that the children who wait longest still tend to fall into the categories that have traditionally been associated with being 'harder to place': older children, sibling groups, children from minority ethnic backgrounds, and children with disabilities.



3.2 Timeliness

The average time taken between a child entering care and being placed with a family (adoption scorecard indicator A1) has decreased by 6 months, from 22 months in 2012-13 to 16 months in 2016-17.

The decrease up to 2015-16 was largely down to a reduction in the time taken for the initial stage, the time between entry into care and the decision the child should be placed for adoption, which has fallen by 4 months (from 11 months in 2011-12 to 7 months in 2015-16 and 2016-17).

More recently, there has been an improvement in the average time between

the decision that a child should be placed for adoption and a match being agreed, from 10 months in 2015-16 to 8 months in 2016-17.

In making use of these measures, it should be remembered that since they only include children who have been adopted (which happens on average 9 months after the date of placement), they give a lagged indication of the performance of the system.

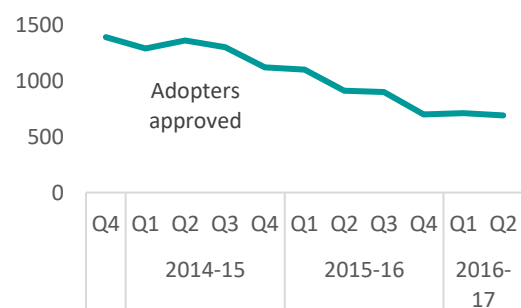
4. Adopter recruitment

4.1 Adopters waiting

As of 30 September 2016, there were 2,800 approved adoptive families waiting to be matched with children, more than the number of children waiting, though this figure represents a decline from 3,510 at 30 June 2015.

4.2 Adopter recruitment

690 prospective adopters were approved in the period July to September 2016. This represents a fall of 24% on the same quarter in the previous year.



The latest published data from agencies shows that the number of adopter approvals is dropping each quarter and has been falling to around 700 adopters being approved each quarter, or approximately 2,800 a year. The latest feedback from agencies is that the situation continues to

get worse with even fewer adopter approvals in recent months. This compares to the now relatively stable figure of approximately 1,000 placement orders granted each quarter, or approximately 4,000 a year.

If this trend continues then the choice of placements for children will reduce and waiting times could increase. This reinforces the importance of increasing adopter recruitment and support, especially for harder to place children. The role of the RAAs in supporting adopter recruitment and placements matches will be critical to the continued success of the adoption programme for the future.