



Policy Evaluation and Direct Birth Family
Contact in Special Guardianship and Adoption
– survey findings

April 2022

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Summary

This report outlines the findings of a pilot survey of adopters and special guardians, which ascertained their views about the Department for Education's (DfE) data monitoring and about policy evaluation. Views and experiences of adopters and special guardians about direct birth family contact were also explored.

42 (21 adopters and 21 special guardians) took part in the survey, which ran for two weeks in January 2022.

Respondents were concerned about the high level of missing data in the returns provided to the DfE by local authorities regarding the legal status of children entering and re-entering care. Adopter respondents valued the Adoption UK's annual Barometer, now in its fourth year, as a means to have a voice. The Barometer, although useful, was also felt to have limitations, which might be overcome by modifying the questionnaire.

For many adoptive and special guardianship families direct birth family contact can present a significant challenge. For special guardians one of the key challenges is supporting children when contact is emotionally distressing for the child. Special guardians reported that they were expected to deal with the emotional fall out of contact without support. For adopters, the loss of contact in the early years of an adoption that often resulted in estrangement was concerning. Respondents raised concerns about the children being more vulnerable in adolescence and young adulthood particularly when contact that was unplanned and unsupported via social media had occurred. Respondents regarded sibling contact as vitally important for children and the family. Differences in contact was observed dependent on the caregivers of siblings, which might be birth families, the state, other adopters, special guardians, and family carers.

Respondents felt that better support is needed, so that they in turn can support their children to maintain a healthy and positive relationship with their birth family, especially and including sibling contact. Better support could include pre-empting problems and concerns, addressing them as they arise, and considering them on a case-by-case basis. Further knowledge is needed about birth family contact in special guardianship; sibling contact, and the impact on adopted and special guardianship children that re-enter care.

Introduction

In January 2022 Adoption UK launched its fourth Adoption Barometer. It was evident, as the Barometer was shared and discussed, that opinion was divided about it. The authors of the report, felt it was important to systematically explore the views of both adopters and special guardians about the government's approach to policy evaluation more widely and to begin to explore what is arguably one of the most challenging aspects of modern adoption – direct birth family contact.

This report is based on findings within the *SG&AT pilot survey - on policy evaluation and direct birth family contact* that was posted in SG&AT (Special Guardians and Adopters Together), POTATO (Parents Of Traumatized Adopted Teenagers Organisation), Uplift Together and More Than Grandparents online groups in January 2022.

In total 21 adopters and 21 special guardians responded to the pilot survey between January 11, 2022 and January 24, 2022 when the survey was closed.

The report findings offer further insight into the very challenging and sometimes positive experiences of adoption and special guardianship for the children and their families.

Background and context

The need for policy evaluation

As key stakeholders, policy evaluation of the effectiveness of infrastructure change, of legislation and of new policy initiatives are of fundamental importance to those affected by policies and legislation reform. Government and stakeholders (professionals and service users), have a vested interest in ethical policy and legislation that supports children and families when parental responsibility is conferred onto others by the state.

Open dialogue about the challenges that adopters and special guardians, as stakeholders' experience, is one of the primary objectives of Special Guardians and Adopters Together (SG&AT) 'lived experience' research programme. Since 2018 SG&AT research programme has explored the health and wellbeing of parents and caregivers; school exclusions; building trust with special guardians and adopted children; partnership working with other adoption and special guardian organisations; family contact; accessing and receiving support ("SG&AT Research Reports – Special Guardians and Adopters Together" n.d.). By gathering information, sharing evidence and learning

more with each report, it is from this lived experience perspective that SG&AT are able to provide a powerful and authentic voice that offers unique insights that can contribute to research and policy change within the field of adoption and special guardianship.

You can read SG&AT's reports [here](#).

Modern adoption: an ethically challenging social policy?

Whilst adoption can be transformative for many children, it is not without controversy - adoption orders, which potentially sever all birth family contact. In 2018, ethical, and human rights concerns were raised by the BASW (British Association of Social Workers) Enquiry, 2018 (P. B. Featherstone, Gupta, and Mills, n.d.) about UK adoption due to austerity, poverty, deprivation, and social inequality of birth families from whom children are removed. As a result of the enquiry, BASW also pointed to the “dearth of information and meaningful longitudinal research to inform policy and social work practice on adoption”(BASW 2018) and called for more data on the number of children who are returned to care from adoption and for more outcomes research, especially for adult adoptees.

More recently, in February 2022, the Parents Families and Allies Network (PFAN) *Children's Social Care the Way Forward* report cited the BASW Enquiry, has called for an end to adoption altogether, except for orphans. PFAN have described adoption as “archaic” and recommend that it should be replaced by special guardianship. PFAN explained, “Where permanent alternative care is needed, it should be legally possible to use special guardianship for children in care and this would leave open a flexible approach to contact and the possibility of changing levels and approaches to parental and wider family involvement” (PFAN 2022, 21).

How adoption and special guardianship are governed

The way adoption is governed in the UK changed in 2014 when the government created the Adoption Leadership Board. The board was set up to advise ministers on adoption policy and reform. Currently the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board's (ASGLB) remit excludes all special guardians whose children were not previously looked after before the order was made (Coram n.d.). Moreover, adoption, (but not special guardianship), falls under the remit of the government's New Adoption Strategy (July 2021), which aims to ensure “the voices of adopters and their children are at the heart of local policy decision making” (Department for Education 2021a, 8). This new strategy looks to the Adoption UK Barometer, now in its fourth year, as one of the main methods by which government will measure its own progress and cites data from the Barometer in the New Adoption Strategy report (Department for Education 2021b).

The Adoption Barometer has become an important part of the adoption landscape. Adoption UK point to importance of the information collected by the Barometer, “The picture we’re building over multiple years is what makes decision makers really listen” (Adoption UK 2022). Elaborating further, Adoption UK stated, “The Barometer was cited several times in the new National Adoption Strategy in England, and its statistics and recommendations are frequently referenced by politicians and professionals in all four nations of the UK” (Adoption UK 2022). The responses to the barometer provide an important voice in informing and shaping adoption policy.

What data are monitored and used by policy makers

Missing data in the returns provided by local authorities about a child’s legal status and whether they were re-entering care under an adoption or special guardianship order has amounted to well over 3,000 cases/children each year since 2015 when it sharply increased from 1,170 in 2014. In the year ending 31st March 2021 the figure dropped to 2,900, whilst in the previous year the figure was 3,680. When data on thousands of children is missing it is not possible to rely on the accuracy of the statistics provided by the DfE. To put the missing data on 2,900 children into perspective, this is a larger figure than the total number of adoption orders made in the year ending 31st March 2021, which was 2,870. SSDA 903 statistics are published by the DfE each year and the latest statistics for year ending March 31st 2021 (National Statistics 2021).

Direct birth family contact

Maintaining some level of contact post adoption between the child and their birth family is not without challenges – many challenges exacerbated by social and digital media technologies (Neil and Howe, n.d.; Samuels 2018; Oakwater 2012). Whilst direct and indirect contact arrangements for many adopted children continues to support connection with their birth family, where possible, “Placement with relatives, by definition, ensures that children remain in touch with at least one member of their family” (Hunt, Waterhouse, and Lutman 2011, 5). Even though there are many documented benefits to placing a child within their wider family through special guardianship and kinship care, adoption continues to be promoted by government policy in England. Whether this policy is right continues to divide opinions.

The 2016 UK government *Adoption – vision for change* report emphasised the importance of family. The writers of the foreword of the report, Nicky Morgan MP and Edward Timpson MP stated, “The family is the first and most important building block in a child’s life and any government serious about delivering social justice must seek to strengthen families” (Department for Education 2016). Still, in 2020 Featherstone and Gupta amongst many others continue to raise concerns about the lack of birth family contact for children that are adopted. Featherstone and Gupta believe that

adoption “is too stark in its severance of the legal relationship between those adopted and their birth family, and out of line with the emotional realities for most involved”(B. Featherstone and Gupta 2020). Featherstone and Gupta (2020) explained, “Adoption is not a risk-free panacea, as government policy seems to suggest. It is highly complex, with implications for all concerned that endure for decades”.

Research into special guardianship family contact is limited (Wade et al. 2014; Nuffield Foundation 2019; Hunt, Waterhouse, and Lutman 2011). Currently there is no comparative research to investigate what aspects of contact arrangements are working well in special guardianship compared with adoption. Hunt, Waterhouse and Lutman have noted, “The policy thrust towards increased use of kinship care is at least partly based on its anticipated benefits for children. One of these is that children are more likely to remain in touch with their birth families than those placed with stranger carers”(2011, 5). Whilst birth family contact can be positive, issues about the safety of the child remains.

Finding out what stakeholders think about policy evaluation, monitoring and direct birth family contact

Using Survey Monkey, the *SG&AT survey – on policy evaluation and direct birth family contact* (January 2022) pilot survey was designed to take five-ten minutes to complete. Respondents were asked to share their views about the Department for Education’s data collection, and about policy research in general in adoption and special guardianship. Adopters were also asked about their views of the Adoption UK Barometer and their views and experiences of direct birth family contact.

Comprising mostly open-ended questions, the questions were designed to allow the respondents to say as much or as little as they wished and to prioritise their own concerns. The survey was designed for the respondents to remain anonymous, to promote greater disclosure, particularly when they might be known personally as members of a group. The authors of the report were primarily interested in views and experiences and did not any collect personal identifiable information (PII) from the respondents in what was essentially a pilot survey, intended to guide further research.

Findings

The SG&AT survey has provided stakeholders with an opportunity to share their views about policy evaluation, monitoring, and data collection by the Department for Education; to reflect on the Adoption UK Barometer, and to describe their views and experiences pertaining to direct birth family contact.

Respondents' views about data monitoring and policy research

Stakeholders expressed serious concerns about the missing data regarding the legal status of children who enter or re-enter care. Respondents regarded this missing data as indicative of a failing system where compassion for children was often felt to be lacking

"Funding desperately needs to be applied to support all areas of SGO and adoption, but children should not be used as 'creatures of the state'" (Special guardian).

"I think it a shame on every member of a civilised society that some of our most vulnerable children are essentially 'missing'" (Adoptive parent).

Many respondents felt that the missing data has contributed to the lack of distinguishment between children who have entered care and children who are re-entering care and are still being parented by adopters and special guardians. Respondents thought this data would potentially help policy makers understand whether orders were working

"This knowledge (about legal status of children entering and re-entering care) is necessary for professionals to be able to understand a child looked after's circumstances and needs and to distinguish between negligent or abusive parents and those struggling with behaviours of children who suffered Adverse Childhood Experiences" (Adoptive parent).

"It is very important that children are tracked. We need to know if these orders are working or if the children would be better in other arrangements. Data should not be lost, all local authorities have a duty of care to each child" (Special guardian).

Respondents also raised concerns about how inaccurate information about their children might be kept on record and used to determine the outcome for the child

“The whole system is a mess and there are ongoing inaccuracies with both of their files, and I did an FOI (Freedom of Information request) and took complaint to ombudsman who said the files need to be updated which they never were. We then had a subsequent court case where again various mistakes have been made and currently both of my daughters have lots of information on file that is factually incorrect and will probably never be corrected” (Adoptive parent).

There was broad consensus amongst respondents that policy research was important for government to invest in - to guide and inform current and future policy. At the same time, other respondents expressed views about political and economic priorities over taking social priorities

“I don't think the research itself is necessarily the issue. The root of the problem, in my opinion, is the reorientation of state invention from social to economic priorities. Such neoliberalism systems, operating across all areas of the public sector, pose challenges for the most vulnerable” (Adoptive parent).

The responses revealed that many respondents were not just concerned about data monitoring and policy research, which is what they were asked about. The open-ended survey questions were used as an opportunity to voice concerns about problems in adoption and special guardianship in general. One respondent described how they had little or no support and were not able to participate in decisions that impacted on them

“Children and families are being fed into a system that in many regards is not fit for purpose, at a huge human cost” (Adoptive parent).

One special guardian felt that parliamentarians favoured adopters and overlooked special guardians

“SGO families are not really thought about and are left to just get on, adoptive parents were publicly thanked in the House of Commons given extra money to help them out. During the start of the pandemic a lot of SGO parents had to rely on food banks and charity” (Special guardian).

Special guardians questioned whether the Special Guardianship Order (SGO) was designed for long-term family care. Many of the respondents felt it did not work when relationships with birth parents were strained and there was continual conflict

“The SGO (Special Guardianship Order) is no longer fit for purpose, it was not created for long-term kinship care. SGO should be replaced with family adoption to ensure permanence (Special guardian).

“There is not enough research into the benefits of SGOs and I think they are being improperly used. I believe SGOs were designed for families where the relationship between the special guardian and birth parent was positive and amicable. In my experience of supporting many kinship families it is rarely positive or amicable. Often the relationship is extremely strained and there is no support with special guardians experiencing difficulties with birth parents. They are often denied support from children's social care once the SGO is in place. There is also not enough research into the effect of contact. Often children are forced to have contact with their abuser, and they are re traumatised making recovery impossible” (Special guardian).

Views about the Adoption UK Barometer

Adopter respondent's views about the Adoption UK Barometer within the *SG&AT survey* varied, broadly falling into three categories:

1. Respondents who felt it was a good and important survey, at least in parts, and whilst not perfect, it had provided them with a voice.
2. Respondents who felt it was too limited in scope and geared more towards adopters early on in their journey, giving positive views about adoption – not tackling the real issues as they saw them.
3. Respondents who had issues with the questionnaire design and who felt the questions did not allow them to provide the correct answer or did not allow for explanations.

The following responses are illustrative of all three categories

“It is useful to demonstrate what is happening in adoption”.

“Far from perfect but I do feel it gives me a voice”.

“It was skewed towards gathering the experiences of adopters early in their journey. However, I was pleased to see the opportunity for some forms of open-ended

questions. Considering the aim was to be a 'snapshot Barometer' I wasn't expecting that".

"Good in parts, but not a very good questionnaire in places as there was limited choice on some answers, and I found not one answer was relevant, but there was no choice to enter what we really wanted to put".

Many adopters felt the questions on birth family contact was problematic within the Barometer. This quote illustrates the some of the reasons, which were echoed in other respondent's views

"The section on birth family contact was limited and asked for views on contact with all birth family members in one go. I always find it hard when asked about views on this, when questions lump all birth family contact together e.g. the healthy ongoing relationship we have with sibling is very different to the anxiety and fear towards their birth mother who they want no contact with; and different again to the complete unknown's regarding other birth family members. Also, direct contact with adopted siblings is often expected and set up, compared to contact to birth parents which is discouraged. Also, adoptive families often must fight for contact with siblings who still live with their birth family or are in care. So, I think the agree / disagree statements on the topic should be separate for adopted siblings, siblings within foster care, siblings within birth family, birth parents, other family members...as they offer very different challenges and benefits. And I would like relationships to be explored rather than 'contact'. And, additional questions on maintaining contact if child or sibling re-enters care or lives in a residential setting".

To summarise, whilst adopters acknowledge the use of the barometer in providing them with a voice, the *SG&AT survey* highlighted the need to ensure that future questions within the Barometer

1. Provide the opportunity to address sibling contact and birth parent contact separately.
2. Ensure that the questions allow for responses that relate to more than one child.
3. Ensure that questions about contact include adoptive family contact and birth family contact when children leave the family home prematurely.
4. Review the framing of the questions to ensure that both positive and negative experiences can be recorded.

5. Ensure that questions about contact with the birth family include contact arrangements that are pre-arranged and extend beyond childhood and include the role of social and digital media technologies in contact.

Finally, respondents were asked if they had adult children, whether they had completed the Barometer or would be likely to do so. Thirteen out of 21 respondents reported that their adult children would not complete the Barometer. The reasons given were that

1. Adult adoptees felt let down by the system and by the loss of sibling relationship.
2. There were problems with accessibility for some adoptees due to learning difficulties.
3. Adoptees had no interest in any survey.

“No, they don’t feel positive about a system that withheld siblings, so unlikely to contribute views”.

“No. She tried but couldn't understand most of it. Far too wordy and did not use simple enough language. Also - as above - no relevant answer. She gave up and was very, very, very cross that it seemed no-one really cared and - in her view - it wasn't really wanting her opinion”.

“My son, now 24, has moderate learning difficulties - he would not be able to complete it”.

Our survey findings suggest there may be considerable barriers to survey participation for adult adoptees. It is imperative that researchers address this to ensure adult adoptee voice is represented in policy evaluation surveys.

Arguably it is those who are most hard to reach and who feel let down by systemic failure that they disengage, that policy makers and legislators need to hear from most

“This is one major concern of mine that we need to get the voices of the most complex adult adoptees heard directly rather than via their parents”.

Respondents’ views and experiences of birth family contact

Our respondent’s views and experiences regarding direct birth family contact were considered thematically according to the emergent themes of

- Contact not meeting the needs of the child.
- Sibling contact – its importance and the barriers to it taking place.

- Potential danger and risk to children and families.
- Separation, loss, and estrangement.
- The impact of social media leading to contact that is not managed and planned.

The SG&AT survey has identified some of the complexities of direct family contact, which was regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of adoptive and special guardianship family life. At the same time there was strong consensus across both respondent groups that direct birth family contact was extremely important and beneficial to a child's identity development.

The following responses are illustrative of some of the positive benefits of contact for the child, particularly the development of a child's identity and their sense of belonging

"My SGO children have a realistic view of their birth parents, warts and all, which may help during adolescence as they know the grass is not greener and are less likely to want to return to the birth parents. This, in my opinion, is a major positive. Forming a relationship with the birth parents has also made my life easier as they are aware of my parenting style and support it when they have contact" (Special guardian).

"Was very important to remove fantasies about what birth family could and couldn't offer. Some help from knowing they had been loved, some help from seeing depression as a hereditary risk and therefore not their fault" (Adoptive parent).

For some special guardians one of the challenges has been striking the balance between contact being beneficial to the child and direct exposure to the individuals whose actions had culminated in the special guardianship order. Whilst the special guardians acknowledged the importance of promoting and supporting family contact as a right of the child, it was, in some instances, described as the most stressful aspect of special guardianship

"Contact with birth parents and wider family is a right for the child unless there are major safeguarding issues. Difficulties arise when the adults forget it's for the benefit of the child and not something to dismiss because it creates more work for the adults. Social services should provide real support for contact, be it by providing a supervised contact centre or by giving birth parents access to mental health support to help them come to terms with their child's removal" (Special guardian).

It is the most challenging part of the whole process. My personal experiences have been awful due to dealing with chaotic people who are challenging difficult and threatening with complex issues. That's why they don't have children in their care" (Special guardian).

Many special guardians explained about the difficulty in trying to deal with the emotional impact of contact. However, when it worked the benefits for the child was positive

'He knows his parents well and kind of understands they're unreliable and I see this as a benefit as he's not going to be upset when they let him down. He loves his parents, and they love him, and I encourage this as he's a happier little boy not feeling like he's missing anything" (Special guardian).

"Having contact has enabled the children to stay connected to the family and has allowed us to all have days out together. As I am aunty to the children, my own children also needed to be able to have a relationship with all members of the family. The children enjoy the contact sessions but often regress a bit with their behaviour in the following days" (Special guardian).

Special guardians also expressed concerns about the distress, confusion, and disappointment experienced by the child regarding direct contact with the birth family. The following quotes are illustrative of these concerns

"Retraumatizing children, stressful, masking feelings and emotions. It should be child based but it's more based on what the adult wants. Upsetting for the children" (Special guardian).

"My birth mother has court ordered contact. Problem is the little one does not want to sleep over and birth mother does not care as long as she gets her contact" (Special guardian).

"Very hard to do contact with birth family. The mother and grandmother think that I have the child because I would not give her back!! Same as second child. I am not related so find it easy to step back from them. Mother only talks about herself even when I am speaking of girl's achievements. Contact is once a month for one and a half hours" (Special guardian).

“Generally, our thoughts and experience were that contact was about everyone else and not the children’s. Birth family always talked about their needs but never mentioned the children’s needs”

One special guardian viewed having the support of agencies to stop the contact arrangement with the birth mother as beneficial to the children

“In our case the courts initially made a mistake of ordering weekly contact for both our girls with their birth mother. Their mother has not grieved the loss of her children and one of the girls has high functioning trauma disorders as she is reminded subconsciously and regularly about her time with mum- she cannot control or make sense of her big feelings. Unfortunately (not through lack of trying) we have been unable to get our granddaughter the help she needs. Both CAHMS and other therapy providers underlined the importance of ceasing contact for any therapy to take place. However due to being in a lengthy court case where the children’s mother made malicious allegations against us in a quest to get 'her girls' back the court has ordered no therapy for the child until at least five months down the line when full psychological assessments will be carried out on all involved. Meanwhile both at school and home this little girl now eight years old is not coping, has been sent home from school twice in the last week for disruptive behaviour, lying, stealing, damaging books, upsetting staff and children, smashing pens, and drawing on herself etc. We are worried for her future and as special guardians always made to feel that someone else knows best.

Respondents also raised concerns relating to sibling contact, particularly about other family members or adopters that parented the child’s siblings restricting contact

I allow his parents to visit when they want as all my children can visit whenever they want, they know to come within reason of his bedtime it has both good and bad points. He sees his sister once a year when we take her Xmas presents to her. His sister lives with maternal grandparents who are hard to please hence the yearly visit and we go to them they won’t come to us. (Special guardian).

“Contact is sporadic with birth mum. Sometimes is useful but more often a fleeting visit that leaves little one frustrated and upset she was not prepared to stay longer. Although we have requested some sort of contact with siblings the adopted family has not responded despite repeated requests” (Special guardian).

The following adopter respondents explained the anguish of their children trying to maintain contact with their siblings

“My views are that adoption should not automatically erase sibling relationships, or any positive birth family relationships. Adopters should be told if they do not support sibling contact that they should not be allowed to adopt children with siblings. My child spent 10 years desperate to see siblings, this has damaged his ability to trust, and impacted on his relationships with our family. It is cruel to remove older children and not allow them to see each other for the rest of their childhood. It feeds into fantasy about birth parent contact” (Adoptive parent).

For many adopters one of the main barriers to sibling contact can be other adopters not willing to engage in contact

“During childhood - direct with sibling (also adopted) went OK, although it only happened when I chased it. And the other parents stopped it as soon as my child had contact with her other birth family. I always felt as if they didn't want it, which made things difficult” (Adoptive parent).

“My other daughter should have had contact with her siblings, but this was rejected by the other adoptive family, so she never was able to meet them. However, later on she did directly contact siblings, which again did not go well due to lack of support” (Adoptive parent).

One adopter described how sibling contact had been mutually beneficial for the adopted children and for older siblings who had remained with their birth parents. In this case it had helped adopted children gain a realistic view of their birth parents

“Huge benefits (from direct contact. Both our adopted children have had the opportunity to ask questions about their preadoption years as their questions have arisen. As their siblings are older, they remember more than our children. Also, we

have not needed to return to social care to access information....Both our children care deeply about their siblings and this feeling is reciprocated. Siblings were very keen to stay in touch and we hope that their (very difficult) childhoods have been a bit easier knowing that their siblings were loved and cared for. They had feelings of guilt that they couldn't care for their younger siblings. There was no way that they could have, and we've been able to reassure them of that. Neither of our children reached 18 wondering whether to contact birth parents or having 'rose tinted glasses' of what might await them" (Adoptive parent).

Respondents acknowledged the positive benefits of lifelong connections that can exist between an adopted child and an older sibling, particularly if the older sibling has looked after the younger sibling before their removal from the birth family. This adopter response points to the protective influence that has helped their make child make sense of their removal from their birth family

"The contact my youngest had with one of her siblings was really positive for her he gave her a sense of perspective and was the child looked after her when she was very small. Contact has continued and I think it's helped as she's got older to understand the issues they had as a family. Maintaining this one contact is the only positive we've seen" (Adoptive parent).

For some children that have been adopted, contact with siblings can be confusing when they see their sibling living within another adoptive family

"The challenges are from making sense of why the sibling was adopted separately, and why she seems to be doing well, living in a lovely house with parents that work and a lovely extended family, while we don't have that due to the complex needs of the children. They find that hard, and also would have liked to have been separately adopted with her rather than current sibling" (Adoptive parent).

Other adopters reported on the challenges of keeping the support for contact in place between adopted and unadopted siblings

"Once siblings turned 18 the placing LA tried to stop the supervision and financial support for the contact. Both siblings are living on very low incomes, and they were very grateful (for the adopter's financial support of the contact). Although we

adopted two children, at times it has felt like we have been advocating for five, our two and the three siblings” (Adoptive parent).

The challenges following contact between the child and birth family via social and digital media technologies that was not managed or planned was a concern raised by adoptive parents. Whilst contact that followed due to reunification via these modes of communication can be positive, that was not the experience of the respondents

“We maintained letterbox contact throughout our children ‘s childhood. Our daughter started direct contact with siblings and birth father from age 18. She and they have always wanted to involve us and welcomed us. It has been a humbling, joyful and at times hilarious experience. Our son had unsolicited birth family contact at 17 and it was and remains to be, 10 years later, a far less positive experience. Our daughter was open to support from social services to facilitate direct contact. Our son was unable to do that” (Adoptive parent).

“Social media....NIGHTMARE!! Contact with birth father and birth mother made by both my girls aged 12 & 13, with no support at all...because of direct contact through social media. Girls ran away to their birth father who kept them for six days in a caravan (travellers) with a man and his wife. Not good. Birth father gave them alcohol and drugs. Birth father visited them and gave them fake £50 notes to buy him weed and cocaine. Offered them money often. Not much interest in Birth mother as she had nothing to offer them. More recently sends them vile texts” (Adoptive parent).

The damaging consequences of contact between the child and their birth family that was not managed or planned via social and digital media technologies are evident in the following responses

“Fast forward 10 years, our adopted daughter (then 16) made social media contact with birth father. A few months later she contacted birth mother too. Then she ran away from home with her birth father. He had a recent criminal record for drug dealing and was on sex offender’s register.Daughter met wider birth family members during visits to birth mother including a cousin who sexually assaulted her..... Our adopted son (full sibling) and was traumatised by the idea that birth

father or birth mother knew where he lived, were suddenly too close, or might come and kidnap him, hurt us etc” (Adoptive parent).

“In teen years - direct contact instigated via FB, without my knowledge, led to my teenager being re-abused, re-traumatised, and almost broke the family permanently. Unregulated contact via social media is a real - and serious – problem” (Adoptive parent).

One adopter explained that her daughters’ sexual assault was a direct consequence of the estrangement that followed a court order that would not allow her daughter contact with her birth family until she was 18

“Our kids were not allowed by court order to have contact direct until 18. This in my view was wrong as it led to my daughter seeking them out via Facebook and disappearing with them. So, I think ongoing contact say quarterly may have prevented her disappearing and being sexually abused again” (Adoptive parent).

Narratives of estrangement, loss and separation featured prominently in the survey responses, more so within the adoptive parent responses

“‘Our’ children have had no direct contact with their first family - this saddens me and has not been helpful to them in their development” (Adoptive parent).

“My child was distraught to be placed for adoption without sibling contact. They are now trying to have a relationship as young adults who don't know each other” (Adoptive parent).

As well as grieving the loss of relationship with living relatives, adopters also reported on the additional grief that their children experienced following the death of birth parent deaths. Seven deaths were reported. One family, with two unrelated adopted children reported three birth parent deaths within their response.

Other examples of the loss of relationship were reported following incident that occurred during the contact itself. One special guardian described how a child was bitten by the grandparents' dog and required two surgeries. Following the incident both the education and social care professionals agreed that it was not in the best interest of the child to maintain contact

“Birth family could not understand why we would no longer support contact at the grandparents when they chose to keep the dog. We then had lots of issues around other siblings (quite a bit older) telling the boys that they didn’t have to listen to us. After contacts the children really struggled with emotions and when they started school the school raised concerns that it may not be in their best interests. With school support and special guardian social worker support it was suggested that contact was suspended” (Special guardian).

Another special guardian described how contact arrangements transferring to letterbox contact had resulted in the birth parents walking away and observed that once contact had ceased there were noticeable behavioural improvements

“Initially we had difficulties with contact. Not great quality, little interaction and no consistency. The children were becoming distressed before and after contact which manifested in challenging behaviour. We moved to letter box contact and the birth parents walked away. That was nearly five years ago. Maternal extended family have never been interested in maintaining contact. The children's behaviour improved once we stopped contact” (Special guardian).

Discussion

The parental responsibility for children from the care system can be complex and often challenging. Parents and family carers continually seek and require commitment on the part of government to getting it right for them in terms of support. Seeing the commitment and the prioritising of the needs of families where children have experienced trauma and relational loss will help with recruitment of adopters, which is an ongoing priority for government. Meaningful policy evaluation to help policy makers improve the lives of children and families should be part of government’s commitment.

Missing data remains a problem that is ubiquitous regarding the legal status of children who enter or re-enter care under an adoption or special guardianship order. For those with parental responsibility the missing data is of serious concern especially as the children missing in the data could be theirs. The missing data continues to raise questions. How can government policy promote the welfare of

children and protect children from risk if they don't know what data they are missing? Importantly, there appears to be a lack of transparency about what is being done to rectify the missing data.

Giving adopters the opportunity to reflect on the Adoption Barometer, which is used as an instrument to measure change by government, has provided insights about some of its strengths and limitations. Whilst there are limitations to the Barometer it remains an important way to ensure voices are heard.

For special guardians the challenges of direct birth family contact related to how best to support children with contact that might be distressing for them, which they had no choice about. Adoption remains contentious due to the severance of contact with the child's birth family. Often the child is too young to express their own opinion when an adoption order is granted. As the child matures, it is paramount that they are given the opportunity for their voices to be heard, especially when changes to adoption policy affect them directly. The SG&AT Survey has highlighted some of the challenges to hear the voices of children and young people for researchers to overcome.

The findings of the survey indicate that outcomes for these children and young people raised in adoption and special guardianship are dependent on the provision of services available to support families. Unfortunately, with birth family contact, especially unplanned unsupported social media contact, this does not always ensure safety for the child. Children can be seriously harmed, and families destabilised. Adopters within the survey associated the child's seeking re-connection in adolescence and young adulthood with earlier loss and estrangement from their birth family. The outcome of re-connection was a positive experience for some, for others detrimental. There were also young people who did not want to engage in contact.

Improvement in the integrated use of multi-agency approaches to assess and support children and families could make a significant difference. Better support from professionals is needed, to support adopters and special guardians so that they in turn can support their children to maintain a healthy and positive relationship with their birth family, by addressing problems and concerns as they arise.

Contact arrangements between the child and their birth family present an ongoing challenge for adoptive parents and special guardian care givers. Assessing the risks that birth family members could pose to their child must be on a case-by-case basis. It is important to consider the birth family's history as well as the current situation when determining the type of contact order. Greater emphasis should be placed on maintaining children's relationships with birth families from a more child focused perspective, particularly on supporting siblings and sibling relationships.

The SG&AT survey has indicated that better support for families is needed, especially when contact occurs via social and digital media technologies, or when direct contact is no longer in the best interest of the child. All contact should be trauma centred - supporting the children and young people with the loss and grief of separation from their birth family – the loss of contact is traumatic for the child. Changes to legislation, policy and its implementation need to be given proper consideration by government and policy makers with accurate data and robust policy research that involves stakeholders. The *SG&AT survey* report demonstrates the importance of sharing evidence-based findings seen through the eyes of lived experience, contributing to the authentic voice that can inform and shape adoption and special guardianship policy.

Strengths and limitations of the pilot survey

Data analysis was conducted by both authors who explored the respondent's views and experiences thematically, going backwards and forwards between each other to make sure there was consensus about the reported findings as being balanced, fair and accurately summarising and describing respondent's views. Both positive and negative views and experiences of adoption and special guardianship were given consideration. A strength of the study is that attention has been paid to unusual cases, highlighting these in the findings. The survey weakness is that this was a small population sample with limitations regarding the representativeness of the self-selecting survey population. Although the response rate was less than 10% of the total membership of the groups to whom the survey was publicized group members are not always active, which may explain the low number of participants during a two-week period in January 2022.

Further considerations

The authors of this report understand the importance of listening to and understanding the views of those with 'lived experience' of adoption and special guardianship to evaluate legislation, policy guidance and policy implementation. They recognise where there may be barriers to participation by stakeholders due to personal factors that can often be difficult to manage and are often beyond their control. The survey was intended to guide future research. Three areas stand out as requiring further research: birth family contact in special guardianship; how to better support sibling contact, and what impact it might have when adopted and special guardianship children re-enter care. Care separation in adolescence may mean that vulnerable children and young people gravitate towards unsafe people who could potentially put them in harm's way because of a need for family connection.

The inclusion of ‘lived experience’ research into the wider research about adoption and special guardianship will ensure that the children and young people, adopters, special guardians and birth families are supported in the best way possible.

About the authors of the report

Sylvia Schroer (co-founder and chair) and Julie Samuels are both members of SG&AT. They are interested in learning about the lived experiences of adopters and special guardians who are more usually the subjects of policy research.

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