



Edward Timpson MP
Minister of State for Children and Families

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Dear First4Adoption readers,

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Thank you to everyone who took part in my recent webcast with First4Adoption and who contributed with views and comments about the adoption system. I enjoyed answering your questions although, inevitably, there were more questions than there was time to answer them. First4Adoption has sent me the questions and comments that we did not reach and I have looked at all of them. I am pleased to be able to respond to some of the key themes that these questions raised.

Virtual School Heads

Post-adoption support featured prominently throughout these comments. In particular, many contributors wanted to see the role of the Virtual School Head (VSH) extended to cover the needs of adopted children in schools. I covered this point during the webcast and explained that we are still at the early stages of assessing the impact that the VSH is having on improving the outcomes for looked-after children in schools. Importantly, I do not want to discourage VSHs from helping adopted children in their area if this is something that they feel able to do. I know that there are some areas where this is already happening to good effect. As we review the role and the impact of the VSH, we can consider what the future options might be for moving the model in different directions.

Pupil Premium Plus

A number of contributors reported difficulties in having the seriousness of their adopted child's problems recognised by both education and health professionals. I know too that in some cases it is adopters themselves who need to educate professionals about their children's needs. Schools can use the Pupil Premium Plus to help meet the needs of children adopted from care or who have left care under a Special Guardianship Order. This could include purchasing training for school staff, for example in recognising and responding to attachment-related issues.

Eligibility of adopted children from overseas to the Pupil Premium Plus

I know there has been some disappointment that children who were adopted from overseas are not eligible to attract either the Pupil Premium or priority school

admission. At present, only children who have been in local authority care under the terms of the Children Act 1989 immediately prior to adoption attract the Pupil Premium. A looked-after child is defined in the 1989 Act as one who is in the care of, or provided with, accommodation by an English or Welsh local authority.

When a looked-after child is adopted, the government's policy is to maintain support for that child and for their new family. This is in recognition that the child remains vulnerable and may have a high level of need. The Pupil Premium is one example of this. By contrast, the government has not been involved in the care of children who have been adopted from overseas.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

A number of contributors raised concerns about Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Making sure that adopted children receive appropriate and timely CAMHS support remains a key priority for the government. In 2013, the government included the need to plan and commission integrated services for adopted children in the government's mandate letter to the NHS Commissioning Board; in statutory guidance on joint strategic needs assessments and in joint health and well-being strategies. We also commissioned the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) to develop clinical guidance on attachment.

A key opportunity to make further progress in this area is the government's children and young people's mental health and well-being taskforce. This is looking at how to improve the way children's mental health services are organised, commissioned and provided and how to make it easier for young people to access help and support, including in schools, through voluntary organisations and online. The taskforce has set up a group on vulnerable children, which will be looking at the specific concerns of adopted parents. Further information on the taskforce can be found at: www.gov.uk/government/groups/children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-well-being-taskforce.

Statutory pay and leave for self-employed adoptive parents

Some contributors raised concerns about the lack of entitlement to statutory leave and pay as self-employed adopters. The previous government made a commitment to reform the system of maternity and paternity leave and pay, and published the Modern Workplaces consultation in 2012. When these reforms came into effect, adoptive parents had the same rights as birth parents in relation to pay, leave and time off work for introductory appointments to their matched child. Additionally, the reforms removed a requirement for 26 weeks service in the job to make adoption a day-one right.

These changes only applied to employed adopters, and I fully appreciate the disappointment that has been expressed about these reforms not being available to self-employed adopters. I can assure all adopters in this position that this anomaly was not intentional and only came about because of the focus on the workplace and not on a review of benefits more widely. Nevertheless, the government is fully aware of this position and has recently announced a review of

support to self-employed people; details can be found at:
www.gov.uk/government/news/government-examines-support-for-self-employed.

Self-employed adopters may be interested to know that local authorities have the power to make discretionary payments in some circumstances. If they have not already done so, they might wish to discuss their situation with their local authority and request an assessment of need with regards to their particular circumstances.

The Adoption Support Fund

A number of comments were related to adoption support and the availability of help to prevent adoptions from breaking down. Many adopters are aware of the research by Julie Selwyn which has told us that many people struggle to get the support they need, particularly in terms of therapeutic services. Her full report is available to read at:

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/301889/Final_Report_-_3rd_April_2014v2.pdf. Many also struggle to get a nuanced, sensitive consultation by an expert in adoption support. This research has told us that there is a high need for more specialist support and intensive services for many adoptive families.

All of this is why a key part of our reforms to the adoption system has been reforming help for adopters, and particularly, the Adoption Support Fund (ASF). I am pleased that the ASF is now playing a big role in reshaping the provision and availability of local support. The Fund allows local authorities to assess individual support needs and apply to the Fund without the current financial barriers that often preclude them from offering these services.

It might be helpful if I explain how the ASF works. The model is based on the existing statutory framework for the assessment of adoption support needs and the provision of support services. The adoptive family or an eligible individual will discuss the particular issues they are experiencing and explore the most effective form of help with the assessing social worker. These discussions are based on the child's own needs. Once this work has been completed, and the local authority and person assessed have determined that therapeutic adoption support of the type eligible for payments from the Fund is needed, the local authority can then apply to the Fund. There will, at this point, also be a discussion on who may provide that service, dependant on the availability of providers in that area. The local authority will make an application directly to the ASF on behalf of the parent (with no need for the parents to get involved in this process).

On receipt of an application, the Fund will ensure that the services required meet its eligibility criteria, and process payment back to the local authority. This means that the process of securing the resources from the Fund should be quick and straightforward for adoptive families.

Approved prospective adopters waiting longer to be matched

One of the issues causing prospective adopters concern is the number of prospective adopters waiting and the corresponding fall in the number of adoption orders being made.

The Adoption Leadership Board (ALB), chaired by Sir Martin Narey, has been monitoring the situation closely and has taken a number of actions to respond to the fall. As some prospective adopters might know, the ALB published guidance designed to help everyone who deals with these complex issues to be clear and confident about what they need to do in adoption cases. We are hopeful that these actions will clarify the position on adoption for all those involved and give people the guidance and confidence they need to apply the law appropriately. The ALB is monitoring the impact of these actions very closely.

There are around 3,000 children waiting for an adoptive family to be found for them, over half of whom have been waiting for over 18 months. I would therefore urge adopters to continue to work with their adoption agency. If they have not already done so, they may also wish to contact the Adoption Register. This is an online database of children waiting to be adopted and of approved prospective adopters who are waiting to be matched with the right child for them. Approved prospective adopters can either be referred by their agency or they can refer themselves. Further information is available at: www.adoptionregister.org.uk, or by telephone on: 0345 222 9058.

Changes to the provision of intermediary services

I appreciate the disappointment and difficulty that the delay in amending regulations on intermediary services has caused some applicants and have a great deal of sympathy with those who are waiting for this change. Intermediary services provide a valuable service for the purposes of assisting adopted persons aged 18 or over who were adopted before 30 December 2005 to obtain information about their adoption, and facilitating contact between such persons and their birth relatives. The new provisions introduced extended the provision of intermediary services to 'persons with a prescribed relationship' - defined as all relatives of an adopted person (except birth relatives as they already had a right to apply to an intermediary service) including, but not limited to, an adopted person's children and grandchildren.

I want to reassure those new applicants that the government is absolutely committed to amending the regulations as soon as possible to ensure the provision of intermediary services works for them, as well as for birth relatives and adopted adults. The complexity of this legislation has raised a number of unexpected issues which we had not anticipated and which have unfortunately delayed our timescales. Please be assured that we do see this as a priority and are doing all we can to lay the amended regulations in September.

I fully appreciate the difficulty that this delay has caused some applicants and agencies and would like to thank them for their patience.

The adopter user-voice

As I mentioned earlier, I enjoyed this opportunity to engage directly with adoptive parents. The views and experiences of adopters are at the heart of my personal commitment to adoption and help me and my ministerial colleagues determine the future direction for adoption. In line with this thought, and in closing, you might like

to be aware that the department is using funding from the Voluntary and Community Sector grant programme in 2015-16 to support work by Adoption UK to improve the adopter voice across the adoption system. The grant activity will seek to empower adoptive parents to engage with agencies on a range of issues including the user experience. Adoption UK has the largest membership of adopters in the country and further information about how they are engaging with adoptive parents can be found on their website at: www.adoptionuk.org.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Edward'.

Edward Timpson MP
Minister of State for Children and Families