



Changing adoption – adopted children's views

Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England

December 2012



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Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



As Children's Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers and children and young people living away from home in any type of boarding school, residential special school or further education college.

As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare, to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people in care, getting children's social care support or living away from home. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

The government has proposed a number of changes in the law about adoption, and asked if we could find out what children thought about what they are proposing. This report therefore gives children's views, as far as we could get them, on the ideas of 'fostering for adoption', speeding up the training and approval of adoptive parents, and fast approval for parents who had adopted or fostered before.

We have sent this report to the officials and Ministers in the Department for Education who are working on these changes, and as always, we are making the children's views public on our website and to those who regularly get our reports.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Dr Roger Morgan OBE
Children's Rights Director for England

How we asked young people for their views

We contacted all the voluntary adoption agencies in England, all the adoption support agencies in England, and half the local authority social care adoption services in England (so we contacted 76 local authorities in total). We chose those local authorities at random, and chose to contact half of the local authorities in the country for this survey and the other half for another survey we are doing on adoption (that will be on adoption breakdowns).

We sent secure logins and passwords to the adoption services we contacted, for them to pass on to adopted children to take part in the survey. The children could use these to log on to the survey through our website. The aim of using passwords was to make as sure as possible that all the children who responded to the survey were adopted children – it was not open to the general public. Our survey ran from 20th November 2012 to 11 December 2012.

Some survey questions – like voting on the government’s proposals for new laws about adoption – asked children to choose an answer. Others asked them to write their own views without us suggesting anything. For this second type of question, a member of our team at the Office of the Children’s Rights

Director has analysed the answers sent in to give us the categories of answers we have put in the report.

As always in our reports, we have written in this report what the children told us, and not our own views. We have not added our comments. We have not left out any views we might disagree with, or which the government, councils, professionals or research people might disagree with. Where we have used a direct quote from what a child or young person said, this is either something that summarises well what many had said, or something that was a clear way of putting a different idea from what others had said.

As with all our reports of children’s views, we have done our best to write this report so that it can be easily read by young people themselves, by professionals working with young people and by politicians.

You can find and download copies of all our children’s views reports (including our last report about fostering) on our children’s website: www.rights4me.org.

The children who gave us their views

We had a total of 453 answers to our survey. But out of these, it was clear to us that 24 surveys had been filled in by adoptive parents giving their own views rather than the child’s, so we have not included those survey responses in this report. We contacted those parents where we could, and asked them to send their own views in to the government as parents using the consultation form on the Department for Education website. This report

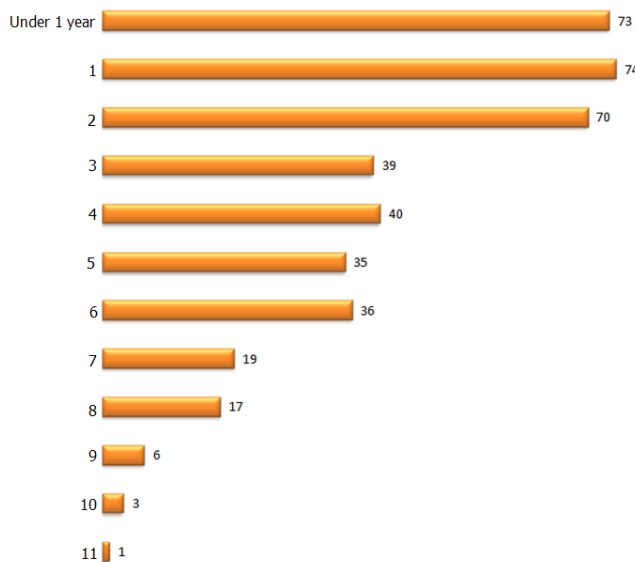
is therefore based on the survey answers from 429 adopted children and young people. We think this probably makes this one of the biggest national surveys there have been of adopted children.

The children ranged in age from 5 to 18. The ‘middle’ age for those who filled in our survey, out of the 427 children who told us their age, was 12. Out of the 420 who told us their gender, 51% were girls and 49% were boys.

Of the 425 who told us their ethnic background, 78% said they were white, 15% said they were of mixed race, 3% that they were Asian, 2% that they were black, and 2% that they were of another background to these. Out of 426 children who answered our question about disability, 14% told us they would describe themselves as disabled.

We asked children how old they had been when they were adopted. Figure one gives the results.

Figure 1 : Age when adopted

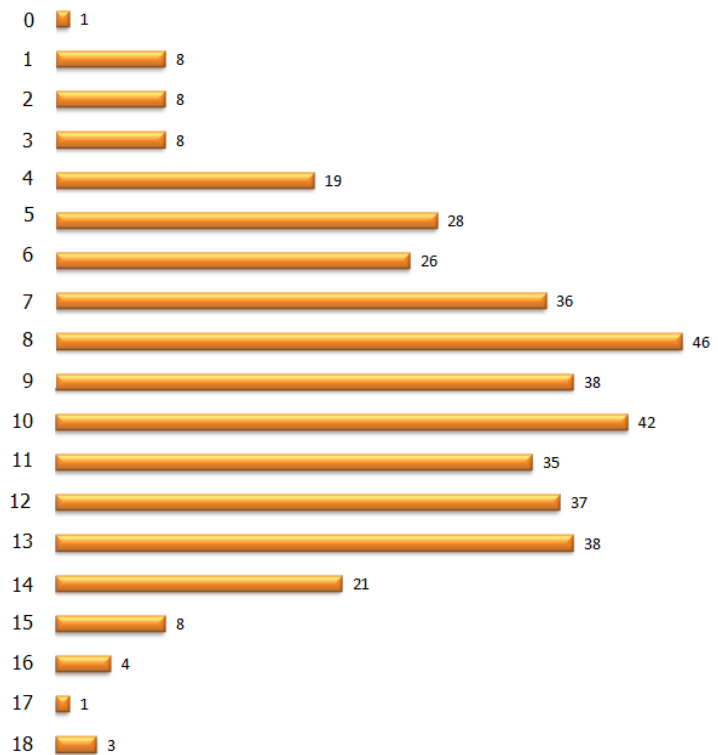


Figures are numbers of children. Answers from 414 children.

Just over half the children (52%) had been adopted when they were aged two or under. One in six (17%) had been adopted before they had reached their first birthday. Just over a quarter (28%) had been adopted when they were aged 5 or over, and 6% when they were aged 8 or over. The 'middle' age for being adopted was therefore two years old.

Figure two sets out how many years ago the children had been adopted. Adding these all together, we were asking them about a grand total of 3,674 years of experience as adopted children.

Figure 2 : Number of years since adoption



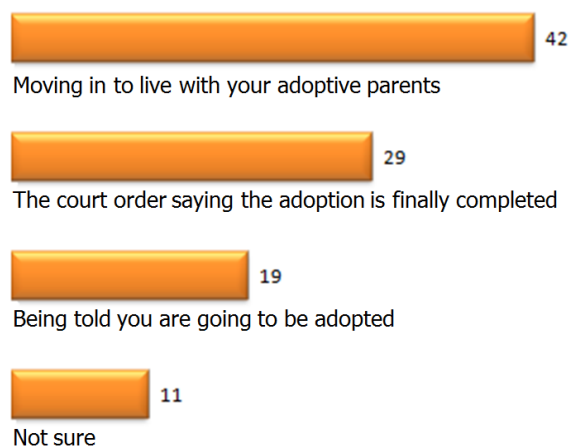
Figures are numbers of children. Answers from 407 children.

From figure two, the middle ('median') number of years of being adopted by the time we carried out our survey was ten years. A quarter of the children had been adopted for six years or less, and a quarter had been adopted for 13 or more years.

The most important stage in getting adopted

We asked the adopted children in our survey which part of getting adopted had been the most important step for them. Figure three shows their answers, chosen from our suggestions.

Figure 3 : The most important bit of getting adopted



Figures are percentages giving each answer out of 428 children answering.

Very clearly, **by far the most important part of the process of getting adopted, according to adopted children, is actually moving in to live with your adoptive parents – followed by hearing that the court order making you adopted has finally been made.**

The idea of 'Fostering for Adoption'

We asked the children to vote for or against the government's proposal to change the law to introduce 'fostering for adoption'. We also gave children the option of saying that they weren't sure which way to vote on this. With 429 adopted children voting, this is a major verdict of children's views on this government proposal.

We explained that at the moment, when it is decided that a child should be adopted, they have to wait (usually in a foster home) until social care services have got permission for the adoption to start, after which they can

move in to live with their adoptive parents. We based our explanation of the fostering for adoption idea on the government's own public consultation document. We also checked out the wording of our survey with officials at the Department for Education.

We explained to children that the government wanted to change the law so that as soon as social care services have decided that a child should be adopted, and possible adoptive parents have been chosen for the child, the child can move in to live with them straight away. The child would not have to wait in a

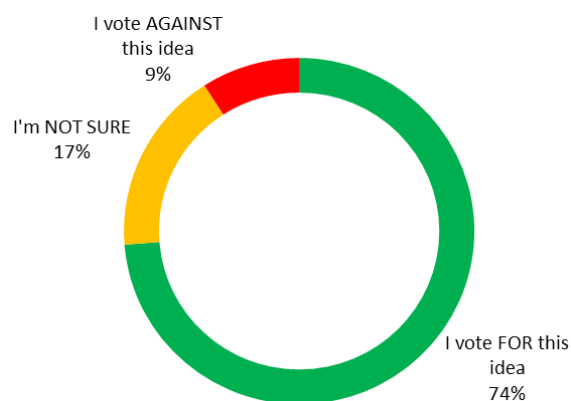
different family as a foster child while social care services get permission for their adoption to start.

The new law would let the family that want to adopt the child become their foster parents for a while until social care services get permission for them to start adopting them. This way, the child could move in with their adoptive parents earlier than now.

We added, as the government's consultation document did, that it is of course just possible that social care services might not be able to get permission for the child's adoption to go ahead after the child has already moved in, but the government don't think this will happen very often.

Figure four gives the results of the children's vote on fostering for adoption.

Figure 4 : Children's votes on fostering for adoption



Answers from 429 children.

The result of this vote is that the **adopted children asked were overall in support of the government's proposed change in the law to introduce fostering for adoption for children once it has been decided that they should be adopted.**

Almost three quarters (74%) of those asked voted for the idea, with just under one in ten

(9%) against and nearly one in six (17%) not sure.

As well as voting on the government's proposal, we also asked the children in our survey to tell us what they thought were the good, and the bad, things about the idea of fostering for adoption. We didn't give them any suggestions at all, so what we have written here is a summary of what the children themselves wrote back to us.

Three good things about fostering for adoption each came from at least one in ten of the 380 children who put forward good things about it. These were getting to know your new family sooner, having fewer moves from one family to another, and saving time in getting adopted. Only three children out of the 380 said they thought there was nothing good at all about fostering for adoption.

Some examples of what children wrote about getting to know your new family sooner and having fewer moves were: 'because I would want to live with my forever Mommy and Daddy as soon as possible', 'because it is tiring for children going round lots of houses', 'because it will speed up the adoption process and less moves for the child and create more of a secure base', 'for me it would have meant that I lived with just one family from the start', 'it's good to go straightaway so you can settle faster'.

I would want to live with my forever Mommy and Daddy as soon as possible



Some children wrote about how fostering for adoption might avoid upsetting moves: 'because the children would get attached and eventually not want to move to the adopting family', 'children would not have to change family - which is scary'. One child wrote that they thought fostering for adoption would free up 'ordinary' foster placements for other children who needed them; 'because if the children move in with their adoptive parents then other people can move into foster care quicker'.

Children would not have to change family – which is scary

Many children wrote that **fostering for adoption would give children and parents a trial run to get to know each other and decide whether they would live well together, before the adoption was finalised.**

Here are some of the **children's views on the idea they came up with themselves of the fostering stage of 'fostering for adoption' being used as a trial period before the adoption decision is made:** 'I would get to know my new parents more ... giving me a better idea of who they were and what they were like', 'to get a taste of what it is like for a bit', 'because then the children get used to their adoptive parents before', 'gives the child and parents an idea of how they will get on'. 'they should give the child a choice if they like the parents before the adoption is confirmed', 'the social care services should have a meeting with the child to see if they are getting on with the possible adoption family', 'they could leave the child with the new mummy and daddy for 2 weeks or a month to try it out', 'I think the government should make the process longer so that the family and the child can get to know each

other and are all comfortable and feel secure around each other'.

To get a taste of what it is like for a bit

There were two bad things about fostering for adoption that each came from at least one in ten of the 329 children who put forward bad things about it. These were that if the adoption doesn't go ahead after all, the child will be moved again and more upset because they thought they were with the parents they would be staying with permanently, and that it was still important for children and carers to get to know each other first, before deciding that it was supposed to be their permanent placement. Almost a third (30%) of the children who answered this question wrote that they thought there was nothing bad at all about the idea of fostering for adoption.

Gives the child and parents an idea of how they will get on

They could leave the child with the new mummy and daddy for 2 weeks or a month to try it out'



Some children wrote that it would be **better to wait until the adoption was certain before moving in with a new family**: 'it's best to move in only when you know it is definitely going to be forever', 'you should not tell the children that they could be your new parents because something may go wrong', 'you wouldn't be sure you could stay with that family and you'd be getting worried that you might have to leave them, or that the family might not like you any more and that they might change their mind. You'd also be worried you might not like them', 'allow time for the court to decide whether or not the adoption is suitable before allowing the child to move in', ensure that the parents that the child moves in with don't make the child think they're going to be there forever until they're really certain'. **If things didn't work out, there would be an upsetting move**; 'you think you will be there forever so if anything goes wrong and you had to go back it would be sad'.

Some told us that they thought the way things happened now, with a stay in a different foster home while the adoption was being sorted out with your new, permanent, family, had worked very well for them. 'Going to court and staying with the foster family is something I will treasure, and it is also the foster parent who is there as back up support for the adoptive parents', 'being in foster care gave me the opportunity to adjust', 'children might be better off to meet a foster parent first, before they get moved onto their new world, this way the new family and the children have more time to find out if they are right for each other'. Two children told us about particular worries they had about fostering for adoption; 'I think that it might be a bad idea, because depending on how old the child is, they may not like them, and if they move in with them straight away instead of being introduced into that family slowly, it might be too much for that child', 'if I didn't feel happy in my new home would it be hard for me to move?'

If I didn't feel happy
in my new home
would it be hard for
me to move?



In our next survey question, we asked whether the children thought there was any way the government should change the idea of fostering for adoption. Altogether, 246 children answered this question, and just over two thirds of them (68%) said they did not think the government should change the idea at all.

From the other children who answered this question, in line with what children had already said, **the two top ideas for changing fostering for adoption were only to start the fostering stage when it was certain that the adoption would be going ahead afterwards, and using the fostering stage as a trial period for the adoption that was going to follow.**

Some children told us that **fostering for adoption may suit some children and families, but not all of them**: 'I think the decision needs to be relevant to each individual case, some are much more complex than others – if it is a more straightforward case then yes, moving in straight away would save a lot of stress for all parties', 'not to make it happen for all children – some might be better with a foster family to start with'.

We also heard from many children that **whether a child is fostered with their**

new parents before the adoption happens should take the child's views into account, if they are old enough: 'ask the child if they want to move in with the family first', 'I think the children's views should be taken into consideration.'

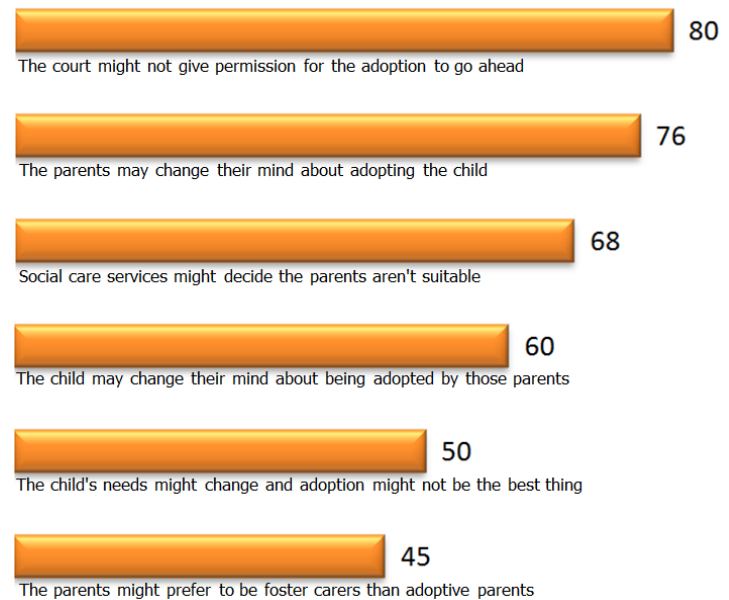
The government had said that there was of course some risk that the adoption might still not go ahead, even if the child had already moved in as a foster child. As we have said, they thought that this would not happen very often though. We asked the children in our survey what they thought the biggest risks were of something still going wrong if a child had moved in to live as a foster child with the parents who wanted to adopt them, before permission had been given for the adoption to go ahead. We listed each of the risks we had read about when preparing for this survey.

I think the decision needs to be relevant to each individual case, some are much more complex than others



Figure five sets out the things they thought were still a risk. The numbers are the percentages who gave each answer, out of the 424 children who answered this question.

Figure 5 : What might go wrong after the child has moved in as a foster child with people who want to adopt them



Figures are percentages giving each answer out of 424 children answering.

Figure five tells us what children think might be the most likely problems to happen after a child has moved in as a foster child with parents who have applied to adopt them later. **Clearly the two biggest worries from the children were that the court might for some reason not give permission for the adoption to happen after all, even though the child was already living with parents who wanted to adopt them, or the parents themselves may change their minds about going ahead and adopting the children once they were living with them. Sixty percent of the children thought that they might themselves change their minds about wanting to be adopted by those parents once they were living with them.** Just under half the children thought it possible that the parents might decide to stay as foster parents for the children, rather than move on to adopt the

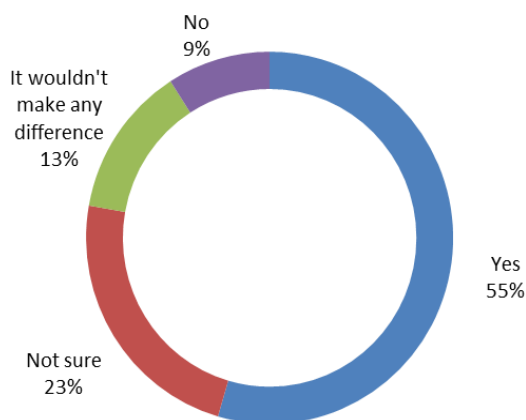
children. We asked children what they thought should happen if a child had been placed as a foster child with a family that had wanted to adopt them, but the adoption was then not approved. We had answers to this from 375 children. **The top answer was that if the adoption wasn't approved after all, the child should if at all possible carry on staying with the family as a long term foster child. The next most common answer was that if possible, the problem that had led to the adoption being refused should be sorted out – either by an appeal, or by providing enough support to make it possible for the adoption to go ahead. The most common answer after that was that the parents and child should decide between them what they wanted to happen next.** After that came the answer that the child should move back to another foster home.

From our survey, we also wanted to find out whether children thought that children going to live with their adoptive parents as foster children first, while the adoption was being sorted out, would end up helping to make sure each child got the right adoptive parents. Figure six gives the children's answer to this question.

From these answers, the majority (54%) of adopted children in our survey thought that moving in to live as foster children with parents who wanted to adopt you, while the adoption was being sorted out, would help make sure that each child did get the right adoptive parents for them. Fewer than a quarter (22%) thought that it would definitely not help, or would make no difference at all.

Overall therefore, almost three quarters of the adopted children in the survey were in favour of the idea of fostering for adoption, and over half thought that it would help make sure that children got the right adoptive parents for them.

Figure 6 : Would 'fostering for adoption' help children to get the right adoptive parents for them?



Answers from 426 children.

The idea of faster training and approval for parents who want to adopt

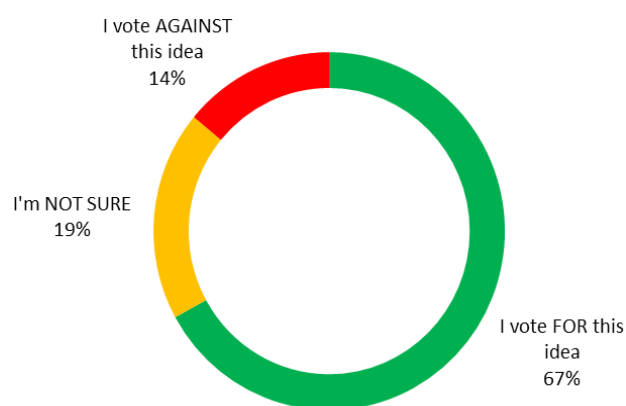
Another of the government's proposals was to make it quicker for parents to be trained and approved to adopt a child. The government said it was worried that it can take as long as two years for parents to be trained and approved before adopting a child, and thought that this meant that some children who needed adoptive parents may not get adopted soon enough.

The government had given some details of what training and assessment should happen before someone can adopt a child. Their idea was that people who wanted to adopt should have two periods of training and assessment. They would have two months of starter training, then a break of up to six months, then another four months of final training and assessment. The training could still be a bit longer for some people if it needed to be. We explained this to the children in our survey, then asked the children to vote for or against the proposal for faster training and approval. Again, we gave children the option of saying they weren't sure how to vote on this one – the numbers saying they weren't sure wasn't generally higher than in our other questions in the survey.

There is a problem with answers to this question though. **From what was said in many of the answers, it is clear that many of the answers to this question were not children's views at all, but were adoptive parents giving their own adult views.** We have left out surveys we are sure were not filled in by children at all, but on this question we still think many of the answers do not give children's views. This was the one question in the survey where this came through as a particular problem.

Rather than leave out this question altogether, we have put in Figure seven what answers came back on this one – but **we think these need to be seen as answers given by families, and not seen as children's views.**

Figure 7 : Family votes on faster training and approval for adoption



Answers from 425 survey responses.

Overall, from a mixture of adoptive parents and children themselves, there was clear support for shortening the time of up to two years it can take to get adopted at present. The top two good points given by families about this idea were that children get adopted quicker, and that parents are ready to adopt. The most common bad points about this idea were that training could get too rushed and not be enough, and that even with shorter training, six months training could be off-putting to some parents, and that parents might forget too much during the six month break.

Two quotes summarised what families said about shorter training speeding up adoption:

'making forever families faster meaning the kid would have family sooner', 'the parents can have their child quicker'. Most thought training for adoption to be important, though a few didn't. One parent wrote 'although training is important, there is no training for being a biological mother – the training can be off putting and time consuming for parents who just want a child to love'. Many saw the training course as vital to ensure that parents were ready to adopt. One quote summarised the worries of some families about making checking and training too short; 'the tests might be rushed and the people might be

unfit'. One child wrote 'might not know how to be a good mommy and daddy'.

We did ask whether any changes should be made to the idea of shortening checking and training if this was going to happen. Just over half (52%) of the answers said that no changes were needed. Over a third (37%) thought the training could be shortened further still, for example by not taking a break during the training programme.

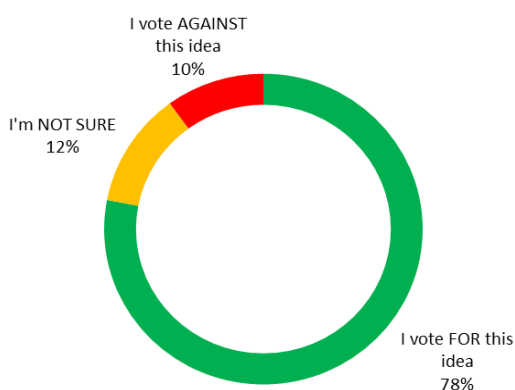
The idea of fast approval for adoption if parents have already adopted a child or been approved as foster parents

The government had made a second proposal about approving parents to adopt children, which we also asked the adopted children in our survey to vote for or against. This proposal was that people who had adopted a child before, or who had already been approved as foster carers, should be very quickly approved to adopt a child. Figure eight shows the results when we put this proposal to the children's vote.

Again, the children in our survey voted strongly in favour of this proposal. **Over three quarters voted for parents who had adopted a child before, or been approved as foster carers, being given fast approval to adopt a child, with only one in ten voting against.**

The most usual good things children told us about this idea were that the adoptive parents would already have been checked as OK, they would have experience of looking after a child, and the idea would speed adoption up and mean more children can be adopted. Many children wrote that this idea would mean they could have an adopted brother or sister sooner. One child wrote; 'my mom and dad adopted me and my brother when I was 2. They decided they wanted another baby but it has taken 3 and half years so far! It should only have taken us 4 months because its silly it took so long just for social workers to agree'.

Figure 8 : Children's votes on fast approval to adopt for parents who have already adopted a child or been approved as foster carers



Answers from 419 children.

Here are some examples of what children wrote about the idea of faster approval for people who have already adopted or fostered in the past; 'so long as the important checks are carried out still then perhaps a fast track

would be a good idea - must be careful though as situations and needs change', 'so children can get new brothers and sisters quicker', 'because they have already done it and they know what they are doing so they shouldn't have to start all over again. That's just mad', 'the parents have the experience of adopting a child or fostering so automatically the process should be quicker', 'because they are already a mum or dad', 'because they have already been trained but as long as the child that they already have agrees'.

On the negative side, some thought that for fairness, everyone who was going to adopt a

child should have the same checks and training, and some were clear that having experience as a foster parent was very different from adopting a child. Some wrote that just because someone has fostered or adopted before does not mean they are automatically good adoptive or foster parents – different children have different needs, they may have been bad adoptive or foster parents, and they may have forgotten the training they needed to take a new child into their family.

Appendix

I am grateful as always to the children and staff of the local authority adoption services, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies that took part in this survey.

Children and young people from the following services gave their views to help shape the future of adoption in England:-

Local Authorities

Birmingham City Council
Blackpool Council
Bournemouth Borough Council
Brighton and Hove City Council
Cheshire West and Chester Council
Derbyshire County Council
Herefordshire Council
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Lewisham London Borough
Liverpool City Council
London Borough Hackney
London Borough Haringey
London Borough of Islington
Milton Keynes Council
Northumberland County Council
Nottinghamshire County Council
Plymouth City Council
Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council
Shropshire Council
South Gloucestershire Council
Southwark Council
Suffolk County Council
Surrey County Council
Telford and Wrekin Council
Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Worcestershire County Council

Adoption Support Agencies

Adoption UK
Chrysalis Associates
Post-Adoption Centre
Sue Goulding Associates
The Consultancy

Voluntary Adoption Agencies

Action for Children - Adoption Black Families
After Adoption - London
Families for Children Adoption Agency
Parents and Children Together - Reading
St Francis Children's Society

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