



Department  
for Education

# **Family Routes study: making decisions about their children's care**

**Research report**

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# Executive summary

## Family Routes study

The Family Routes study is a longitudinal, mixed methods study intended to track the needs, experiences and outcomes of children leaving care on an Adoption Order (AO) or Special Guardianship Order (SGO) in England. The study aims to provide a greater understanding of families' experiences as young people growing up in adoptive and special guardianship families reach adolescence and early adulthood, and to support improved long-term outcomes.

This is one of a series of reports drawing on in-depth interviews with 74 families: 40 adoptive families and 34 special guardianship families. The main report on children and young people's needs, experiences and outcomes is forthcoming, alongside further themed reports and practice guidance. Families were eligible to take part if their young person was aged between 12 and 25 years and had been in care in England prior to being placed in their family under a permanence order. In 2024, the first of 2 planned in-depth interview waves focussed on family life, support networks and services, experiences of education, and health and wellbeing.

A strength of the Family Routes study is the ability of families to look back over years to identify how things changed throughout the young person's childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. These long-term retrospective reflections on decisions (in some cases, taken around 20 years ago) are used to highlight the support families feel helped, or might have helped, them with their decisions at 3 points: deciding to adopt or become a special guardian; deciding to seek help; and - among those who were really struggling - deciding that the young person could no longer live in their care.

## Decision to adopt or become a special guardian

This section explores the process of decision-making. The main factors identified as influencing the initial decision to adopt or become a special guardian were:

- wanting to keep children out of local authority care long-term
- family ties (special guardians)
- perceived ability to meet children's needs
- knowledge of, and expectations for, the support that would be available to them; and
- perceived impact on family life and plans.

Special guardians emphasised how far a desire to keep the child(ren) out of the care system influenced their decision to take on parental responsibility and described how the threat of a child going into care was sometimes used to pressure them into making decisions quickly. Families believed that outcomes for children were likely to be worse if they went into care and were often motivated by keeping sibling groups together or maintaining contact with wider family. Families often reported little or no support or understanding from Children's Services about the implications of becoming a special guardian such as having to move home or give up retirement plans. Some families also had to consider other children in the home and how the decision to become a special guardian would affect their ongoing relationship with the children's birth parents, often their son/daughter or other relative.

Both adoptive parents' and special guardians' retrospective reflections provided insights for how families can be better supported through these early decisions. A key theme was the need for more information and guidance about the likely needs of young people in the longer term. Families frequently felt misled or not fully informed about the likely impact of early trauma throughout childhood and adolescence and, as a result, felt under-prepared. The effects on families' ability to work were often not anticipated. Families frequently over-estimated the availability of informal support from friends and family and from formal support services. They tended to disfavourably compare the financial support available with what foster carers received. Families wanted more guidance and information to help them consider what could happen, how to anticipate and manage arising challenges.

## **Deciding to ask for help**

What prompted families to seek help is covered in this section alongside the barriers to help seeking. While some families experienced considerable challenges early on, more commonly, they were able to meet their child's needs when they were younger, physically smaller and more dependent on caregivers. As a result, the initial support that was available to most families ended before the young person reached adolescence. Families frequently reported that difficulties escalated considerably as children grew, moved from primary to secondary school, experienced physical, social and emotional changes during puberty, developed increasing expectations of independence and were developing their sense of identity. Support was then more difficult to access as named contacts were no longer in place.

Barriers included not knowing who/which organisation to contact or how, a lack of information about what types of support were available, and concerns about perceived negative repercussions of asking for help, particularly after poor previous experiences and 'battling' unsuccessfully for support. There was a lack of evidence of clear support plans although support plans were not directly covered in all the interviews. Some key policy changes, including the introduction of regional adoption agencies (RAAs) and the

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) occurred during the period discussed by families, who often remained unaware of these potential routes to support, though in some cases they did provide improved access to help.

## **Decision to return the young person to care**

At the point of interview, several special guardianship families, and a larger minority of adoptive families that were struggling either were considering whether their child could remain with them in the long term or the children had already returned to care. This section explains the 3 key reasons that influenced their decisions: persistent child to parent violence that led to fears for the safety and wellbeing of family members; accusations made by the young person about the adoptive parent or special guardian which led to safeguarding concerns; and a belief that the support the young person required could only be obtained if the local authority assumed parental responsibility.

Families described feelings of guilt and grief around these decisions, and several felt let down, or even 'destroyed' by perceived failings in the system's support for their families. At the same time, there was talk of feeling judged by Children's Services when interviewees reached the point where they no longer felt able to parent the young person in their home. These families said there was little support or understanding when they reached this point.

Once young people returned to care, families continued to feel responsible for them and in some cases maintained a close, supportive relationship with young people while they lived in foster care or in supported accommodation. The respite provided by the young person temporarily moving out of the family home sometimes gave interviewees the space to stabilise and start to rebuild relationships. However, there were reports of young people experiencing a lack of support and unsuitable living conditions while back in local authority care. Even where they retained parental responsibility, families felt that they were not listened to once the young person had left their home and this put some families in further conflict with Children's Services, in certain cases leading them to bring the young person back home.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The report outlines how families can be better supported at these key decision-making points:

- Provide better access to legal advice prior to an Adoption Order or Special Guardianship Order being made to support adoptive parents and special guardians to make informed decisions that take account of their own needs and interests as well as those of the young person and the care system.

- Ensure clear, thorough assessments of need are shared with families at the time of the Order, along with informed advice about the likely implications of these needs for the family in the longer-term.
- Offer better preparation and information for special guardians, in line with the preparation offered to potential adopters and foster parents, including training and information about what support is available and how to access it.
- Provide a consistent contact point for help seeking and an easy way to re-access services if a family have not been accessing support for a period. RAAs should ensure they are aware of adoptive families in their area whose Adoption Order predates their establishment and reach out to ensure families know how they can contact RAAs for support when needed.
- Provide clear information about what support is available in a local area and what can be accessed through the ASGSF.
- Review support plans regularly so that emerging needs are identified, and suitable support put in place as promptly as possible.
- Put in place improved, targeted help for families who are struggling to keep the young person at home, to include respite and provide a supported pathway to rebuild relationships where possible.
- Develop an improved understanding among Children's Services of the long-term effects of early trauma for care-experienced young people to help limit the extent to which families feeling blamed when problems arise.

## Acknowledgements

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# 1. Introduction

In September 2021, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Ecorys UK, in partnership with Professor Julie Selwyn at the Rees Centre, University of Oxford, and Ipsos to deliver the Family Routes study; a longitudinal study intended to track the needs, experiences and outcomes of children leaving care on an Adoption Order (AO) or Special Guardianship Order (SGO), in England. The overall aim is to improve the sectors' understanding of the long-term outcomes of different routes to permanence. The objectives are:

- Assess the long-term outcomes for young people aged 12-25 growing up in adoptive and special guardianship families. If possible, to follow families over time.
- Support improved outcomes for children by enhancing our understanding of what influences the support needs and outcomes for adoptive families and special guardianship families.
- Understand the role of key stakeholders in supporting better outcomes for previously looked after children.
- Understand the long-term outcomes, using administrative data, of young people in long-term foster care.
- Support improved decision-making by local authorities and courts on permanency options for children who cannot return home to live with their birth parents.

This research, the first of its kind in England, required a feasibility and pilot study to test the method because it is not easy to identify and contact eligible families. Following learning from these stages ([Family Routes study](#)) and the advice of the Research Advisory Group and other research and policy stakeholders, the first wave of the national mainstage study was launched in February 2024 involving:

- A family interview, with parents, special guardians, and young people including a short survey. Topics covered: family life, support networks and services, experiences of education, health, wellbeing, financial coping, hopes and concerns for the future.
- An online survey-only option based around these topics which took around 30 minutes for parents/special guardians and up to 20 minutes for young people.
- The linking and analysis of administrative datasets including the Children looked after in England including adoptions data (social care); National Pupil Database; (NPD); Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) datasets. The analysis covers adoption, special guardianship and long-term foster care.



In 2025, a series of reports for different audiences will be published to share findings from each research strand, as well as an overall report focusing on the support needs, experiences and outcomes for young people and the risk and protective factors that influence these outcomes. This report draws on analysis of the qualitative interviews with adoptive parents and special guardians to share their voices and explore what they experienced around 3 common decision-making points as young people grew into and beyond adolescence:

- Section 2 covers the decision to adopt or become a special guardian.
- Section 3 examines deciding to ask for help; and
- Section 4 examines families that were struggling so much, relationships were breaking down and they had to decide whether their child could continue to live at home.

These different decisions are examined within the context of developmental changes that young people and families experienced. Support needs, services and gaps are a focus of the forthcoming overall findings report and practice papers.

## Method

This report draws on in-depth interviews with 74 families: 40 adoptive families and 34 special guardian families. Table 1 outlines their key characteristics. Families were eligible to take part if their young person was aged between 12 and 25 years and had been in care in England prior to being placed in their family under a permanence order.

In-depth interviews were conducted with either one or both adoptive parents or special guardians. They were often 2 hours or more in duration and took place face-to-face or remotely over video call, depending on the interviewees' preference. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full using automatic transcribing software, then checked manually for accuracy and anonymised.

The transcripts were manually coded using NVivo 14, initially mapped to a deductive coding structure aligned with the research questions and early interviews. All the transcribed interview text **in which families described the process of making, or reflecting on, the key decisions that are the focus of this report** were identified through inductive coding which helped to identify key themes that were discussed and refined during team debriefs. As part of the data review and interpretation process, data was manually extracted into a chart with a brief researcher summary of each interviewee's comments in relation to each sub-theme. This data reduction helped to identify recurring patterns and exceptions which supported the interpretations presented here. Quotations were selected to provide illustrative examples, help the reader to

understand how these manifested in the interview data and most importantly to give a voice to the interviewees who shared their lived experiences.

Since these decisions are being discussed retrospectively, they do not attempt to describe the process of decision-making in depth. Instead, they foreground the way families felt later about the assumptions they made and the weighing up of competing factors, influenced by their later experiences – both positive and negative. These later perspectives are a strength of the Family Routes study. They allow families to look back over a longer period, to identify what changed and how this was influenced by emerging challenges and any support received. As a result, families could offer views on what might have been helpful at the time, which may have only become clear to adoptive parents and special guardians years later.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

| <b>Details of the sample</b>                                  | <b>Adoptive families<br/>(n=40)</b> | <b>Special Guardian<br/>families (n=34)</b> |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Region</b>   |                                     |   |
| East Midlands   | 4                                   | 6   |
| East of England   | 5                                   | 1   |
| London  | 6                                   | 3   |
| North East  | 0                                   | 1   |
| North West  | 7                                   | 4   |
| South East  | 5                                   | 8   |
| South West  | 7                                   | 6   |
| West Midlands   | 3                                   | 1   |
| Yorkshire and the Humber                                      | 3                                   | 4   |
| <b>Does YP have a special educational need or disability?</b> |                                     |   |
| Yes   | 31                                  | 20  |
| No  | 6                                   | 10  |
| Unsure  | 3                                   | 4   |
| <b>Where is YP living now?</b>                                |                                     |   |
| Living with interviewee                                       | 25                                  | 32  |
| Living independently (over 18)                                | 5                                   | 0   |
| Currently in care – foster or residential                     | 5                                   | 0   |
| Other   | 5                                   | 2   |

| Details of the sample   | Adoptive families (n=40) | Special Guardian families (n=34) |
|---|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>YP age</b>   |                          |                                  |
| 12-15   | 19                       | 22                               |
| 16-17   | 9                        | 7                                |
| 18-25   | 12                       | 5                                |
| <b>Year of permanence order</b>   |                          |                                  |
| 2001-2009   | 13                       | 5                                |
| 2010-2015   | 17                       | 22                               |
| 2016-2023 <sup>1</sup>  | 6                        | 7                                |
| <b>How is placement faring? (12-17 years)<sup>2</sup></b>   |                          |                                  |
| It's going really well  | 3                        | 4                                |
| There are challenges, but also rewards and overall I/we are managing  | 9                        | 14                               |
| Ongoing challenges and we are struggling to manage – but I/we are totally committed to keeping the young person in the family | 7                        | 10                               |
| Many challenges - it is possible that the young person will not remain in this family   | 3                        | 1                                |
| The young person is temporarily no longer living in this family   | 2                        | 0                                |
| The young person has permanently left this family   | 4                        | 0                                |

<sup>1</sup> One family received a Special Guardianship Order in 2023 but prior to this had been long-term foster carers for their young people; the remaining families in this year bracket all received an Order before 2019. Given the eligibility for this study, the young people who were placed under a Permanence Order after 2016 tended to be older at the time of the Order (between 5 and 15), compared to those placed under an Order before 2010 (all but one were 3 or under at the time of the Order).

<sup>2</sup> Standardised question and response options for how a placement is faring were originally developed as part of the Beyond the Adoption Order study – Selwyn, J. et al. (2014). *Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, interventions and adoption disruption*. Department for Education, London – and adapted and tested in other studies – Neil, E. et al. (2020). *Exploring links between early adversities and later outcomes for children adopted from care: Implications for planning post adoption support*. Developmental Child Welfare. 2(1). 52-71.

| Details of the sample   | Adoptive families<br>(n=40) | Special Guardian<br>families (n=34) |
|---|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Overall experience of placement (18-25 years)</b>                                |                             |                                     |
| Most of the time we had a happy family life   | 1                           | 1                                   |
| There have been a lot of challenges; kept a good relationship with the young person | 3                           | 3                                   |
| There have been a lot of challenges; poor relationship with the young person        | 6                           | 0                                   |
| There were many challenges. The relationship with the young person has broken down  | 2                           | 1                                   |

Source: Family Routes study registration data

## 2. Decision to adopt or become a special guardian

This section explores the process of decision-making and retrospective reflections on decisions to adopt or become a special guardian. In 2024, the first of 2 planned interview waves focussed on family life, support networks and services, experiences of education, and health and wellbeing. The interviews did not specifically ask families how they reached decisions about adoption or special guardianship, nevertheless special guardians often talked about making these decisions, and how they felt about them considering their later experiences. Adoptive parents were less likely to discuss, unprompted, the context in which they decided to adopt, but they did reflect on the decision and what they felt about it now. It was common for both special guardians and adoptive parents to talk about what they might do “if I knew then what I know now” (special guardian). That is not to say that the families would have made different decisions; very often participants would not but they might have felt more prepared for the challenges they later faced.

While there are similarities in some of the issues raised by special guardians and adoptive parents, the context in which they were making decisions to take on the care of a child was, of course, very different. Adoptions are planned and adoptive families actively choose to adopt. From the interviewees’ accounts, the process leading to the decision to adopt generally marked the end of other, often very difficult processes, including IVF attempts. Once the decision to adopt was made, it was months or years before they were matched with a child; a further decision-making process.

In contrast, special guardians did not plan to take on this parenting role and they often described how it disrupted existing plans and expectations. The decision typically took place quickly and at a time of crisis for the wider family. Importantly, the decision could not be separated from the child or children who needed care. Whilst many of the special guardians in the study had existing relationships with the child, not all did. Families described a sense of duty to the child because of their connection, whether through an existing relationship with the child or their birth parent or through biological connection. Without this sense of duty, these families were not seeking to take on new parenting responsibilities. The context in which the decision was made remained important to the experience of special guardianship throughout adolescence and into early adulthood. This section explores what special guardians said about these experiences and contexts then draws on reflections from both adoptive parents and special guardians to provide useful insights for supporting families at early decision-making points.

Throughout this report, the findings differentiate between factors which interviewees described as having been significant at the time of decision-making and those that influenced their reflections on these decisions during the interviews.

## Factors influencing the decision to become a special guardian

### Wanting to keep the child out of the care system

Commonly, special guardians emphasised their desire to prevent the child(ren) entering local authority care long-term expressing a belief that other care arrangements would be harmful to the young person. For one special guardian, this was particularly motivated by their own negative experience of growing up in care. They said:

I wanted the children because they were of that age where they would have gone into [local authority] foster care and they would have been moved around, and that would have been it for them. I've been in care, and I know how much damage it causes [...] I didn't want that for the children. - *special guardian*

Looking back, special guardians said they were highly influenced by social workers' suggestions that children would be taken into care if relatives were unable to step in. Fear of the child becoming looked after often put pressure on them to make very quick decisions. Special guardians recalled being told that if they were not willing to assume care of the child, sometimes within a few hours, the child would be placed in foster care or an AO would be made, as a special guardian explained,

They [social workers] basically said, 'if you don't have her, she's gonna have to go to care'. And I was just like 'over my dead body'. You know, there's no chance of that. So, they knew that I probably would [pursue a Special Guardianship Order]. - *special guardian*

### Feeling pushed and rushed

For relatives receiving such a call, the speed at which they had to make this decision and the immediate disruption to their lives meant they often began caring for the child feeling ill-prepared and under pressure. Unlike foster carers or adoptive parents, there was no preparation or training.

I got a phone call saying could I have them overnight, and they never went back. [...] my husband had never had children before, and they were very, very needy children, so it was a baptism of fire for him. - *special guardian*

We were asked if we could take her, or she'd go into care. And we had 4 hours to go and get all of the stuff you need for a baby. [...] Because we were both working at the time. It was like, 'Oh, my God, what do we do?' - *special guardian*

I had a phone call at work one morning, 8:30 [...] to say that unless I picked [grandson] up immediately, he would go into foster care, and they would look at adopting. So literally by 10, I'd picked him up and then never worked again. That was it. – *special guardian*

In a small number of cases, feeling pushed and rushed to make the decision happened in the presence of the birth parents. One family was critical of the way that Children's Services pushed them to make this decision quickly and in front of the birth parents which damaged their relationships longer-term:

I came back with my husband [...] so that my husband can meet the new baby [...] We're all sitting down and having a talk and general discussions. The parents were both excited [...] And then we [special guardian and birth mother] both saw the police officer with the social worker walking up the path and still today, and we are 12 years on [...] it's devastating. And then they sit in front of you and say, 'will you take this child?' and you've got to say yes in front of your children [...] They've never forgiven us for it. [...] when they do that to people in front of the parents, what are you supposed to say? [...] and we had to leave our son and daughter-in-law, and that was even worse because at that time they really needed support, and they weren't going to have it." - *special guardian*

### **The influence of Children's Services on decision-making**

The influence of Children's Services during decision making was widely discussed by interviewees and was not generally perceived as supportive, instead as being more concerned with moving children out of the care system. Since this study centres on families' experiences, the findings cannot speak to the wider process or professional decision-making. The perceptions that families had, however, are significant because they shaped the relationships that families had with this important source of support.

Frequently, interviewees felt that the process and the influence of Children's Services had a negative impact on them, their wider families and their ongoing relationship with social workers, as highlighted in section 3 of this report. One special guardian felt pushed towards an SGO when they believed an Interim Care Order was more appropriate because of the potential for the child to return to the birth mother (their daughter). Another special guardian would have liked to explore other arrangements, including shared parenting with the birth mother, but did not feel that they were given this option:



Then it was like, 'Well, now you need to make up your mind'. And I'm like I had a job. [...] they didn't say to me. 'Listen, we can help you with childcare' or 'we can give you a choice of you and your daughter could have joint care', which probably would have been a better thing; she would have become a better parent. But they didn't. There was no choice. It's just like, well, you just got to have her, and that's that. So, I lost my job. [...] I was very resentful. I thought I shouldn't be doing this at my age. – *special guardian*

A theme among special guardians interviewed was that they felt Children's Services were influenced more by cost and time pressures than by decisions in the interests of the children, with a common belief that they "just want to shut the case really" (special guardian). It was clear from special guardians' accounts that these views often had a detrimental impact on their relationship with social workers in the longer term.

It's not what's best for the children at all. It's just tick box exercise and really. What they can do cheaper. – *special guardian*

I didn't really register it at the time, it's only retrospectively I feel this, I think I was railroaded into the SGO. I think the local authority wanted rid of [YP]. You know, and if grandma was willing to have him, great. You know, he's off our books because they don't have that [Parental Responsibility], and also, we don't have to pay either. – *special guardian*

Families often found it hard to push back against pressure from Children's Services, having little knowledge about the legal frameworks or what alternative arrangements might be available. Hardly anyone talked about getting independent advice and support during this key decision-making process, which meant they were highly dependent on the steer they received from Children's Services. The interviews did not ask directly about legal support but given that special guardians frequently spoke about how they took on this role, only one person said they had received input from another professional about potential options for care arrangements. In this case, guidance was provided by a Guardian Ad Litem, a role intended to advocate for the child's best interests in court:

They wanted us to get an SGO when it all kicked off back in [year]. [...] if you think about it, the SGO has only just come out in 2004, they didn't even know what they were actually offering us to do. They just wanted to palm us off. But then I think it was the Guardian ad litem [...] I think he was the one that sort of gave us the other side of what social services were trying to feed us so that we can [have a] balanced view of what was being offered so that we actually could make a proper decision as opposed to just being led along by them, which they would have been more than happy to do. – *special guardian*

## Family ties

### Relationship with the child

The nature and extent of relationships within families – with the birth parents, any siblings and wider families - also affected the decisions interviewees made. Not all the special guardians in this study had a close existing relationship with the child when they first came to live with them. For several families, difficult family situations and relationship breakdowns meant that they had had little previous contact. This posed challenges for both the child being taken into care and the special guardians as they had to quickly try and establish relationships.

At 18 months he [grandchild] was pulled away from his parents. And he didn't really know me, so I had to pick up the pieces and try and parent this child. But I didn't know, who was this 18-month-old? , 'cause we'd obviously fallen out with the parents. – *special guardian*

Despite this additional challenge, even where there was little prior involvement with the child, interviewees felt a strong familial commitment to them and a moral imperative to care for them – “You just, as family, that's what you do, don't you?” - *special guardian*.

We took them on SGO because we want them to know they're family and they're loved and there's been so much trauma we wanted to give them a stable home background. – *special guardian*

It's a family member and you do it because you love them and you want to, not save them, but give them that family life within a family. - *special guardian*

### Connections with birth parents

Maintaining contact with birth parents was also a motivation for seeking a SGO for some special guardians. Several interviewees explained that they had originally taken the child(ren) under an Interim Care Order, believing that the child(ren) might later return to the birth parents. Often in these cases, the initial decision was as much about supporting the birth parents as the child, and particularly motivated by a concern that once the child entered care there would be little chance of the child returning to the birth parent.

And it felt really hard [...] because it's my daughter's daughter. So, I was supporting my daughter as well. I was always optimistic that her mental health will get better [...] So in my brain, I was thinking, 'Right, this is just a stopgap. I'll do this to help my daughter. And then when she gets better, then she can have her daughter back.' – *special guardian*

Given the criteria for inclusion in the study, in none of these cases was the child able to return to the birth parents, and so interviewees had to make further decisions about applying for an SGO. By this point, however, they characterised the decision more in terms of making the status quo permanent, once it was clear that returning to the birth family was not an option.

And [grandson] came here to live, [...] with the view that if he [birth father] improved enough, [grandson] would go back and live with him and social services were involved all the time in it during this time. [...] And, you know, we were just sort of seeing how it was going, really. [...] But social services and me decided that perhaps it might be better if [grandson] came actually to live with me permanently, and so, that's when he was officially taken into foster care. – *special guardian*

### Sibling groups

Where families had sibling groups, special guardians and adoptive parents were both influenced by a preference to keep siblings together as far as possible, and a concern that the care system might result in them being separated. Two interviewees changed from being foster carers to become special guardians as they believed that otherwise an AO recommendation would result in the siblings being split.

I came home one night from one of these meetings [...] and I said to my husband 'what are we going to do? They're going to split them. They're gonna move them, they're gonna split them.' I said they can't do that; nobody understands those children, it's going to kill them. – *special guardian*

The initial plan was that they were going to be adopted, but the adoption team wouldn't even entertain keeping the girls together. They wouldn't even try to find an adoptive family for them together [...] in the end, I said to my husband, if we offer to keep them then they can stay together. [...] the people who were making this decision had never met the children, had never even had a conversation with us. [It] was just based on, 'Oh, this child's too damaged; no one will want her.' – *special guardian*

However, according to several of the adoptive families interviewed, professionals did not always see maintaining sibling groups as being in the best interests of the child(ren). One adoptive parent recalled wanting to adopt 2 sisters together but ultimately deciding this was not in their best interests.

We said, 'Well, what about if we adopted both of them?' [...] So, we did all the training, which was quite hard as well and you just saw it all, it was quite sad really. But we knew we couldn't have them both together because it wouldn't have helped [adopted daughter] and the way they split [adopted daughter] up was to give her a chance to have a life. That's how they described it. [She] was separated from her mum and her sister to give [adopted daughter] a start in life. – *adoptive parent*

## **Retrospective reflections on the decision to adopt or become a special guardian**

### **Ability to meet the child's needs**

In interviews with both adoptive parents and special guardians, many families described their perceptions about their ability to meet children's, often multiple and complex, support needs. Looking back, by far the most common reflection from both special guardian and adoptive parents was that they had not fully understood the support needs their children had at the time they made the decision to care for them.

I wouldn't change it now because I love my children, but if we'd known it was going to be this difficult and have such a massive impact on our lives, we wouldn't have adopted. – *adoptive parent*

### **Reality vs expectations**

For adoptive families, their reflections on the decision were often intertwined with expectations about what family life would be like when they chose to pursue adoption. Several adoptive families described themselves as 'naïve' - (*adoptive parent*) about adoption when they started.

I should say we went into the process a bit with naivety, that you could just adopt and the younger they are the less problems you have [...] I wasn't prepared about the impact trauma has. – *adoptive parent*

My perception of adoption when we started was that, you know, just having a warm, supportive home with boundaries sort of makes everything fine, particularly with adopting on the younger end, but I think I've since learnt that [...] I think the trauma that [adopted daughter] will have experienced both from birth family and then from a poor, very poor foster placement for her [...] has lasting impacts - *adoptive parent*

Even those who felt that they were prepared for the challenges of adoption sometimes felt, in hindsight, that they had not foreseen the extent of the difficulties they faced as their young people got older.

I knew that this was gonna be hard. I wasn't under any illusion. I knew that they'd come with baggage. I knew that they would have difficulties. I didn't think I'd be a victim of domestic abuse from all 3 of my children [...] I've heard lots of worse stories than what I've been through, but I think because I've had it off all 3 [...] I'm pretty destroyed by it. – *adoptive parent*

The sense that the reality had not matched up to the expectation was common among adoptive parents but was not mirrored in special guardians' accounts, perhaps because taking on caring responsibilities was not something that they had actively sought.

### Feeling unprepared

In some cases, special guardians had a better understanding of their child's background and knew the children already to some extent. However, like many adoptive parents, special guardians without an existing relationship felt they did not know enough about the level of support their child would need and the quicker speed at which placements were made to special guardians meant that they did not always feel that they had the opportunity to prepare adequately.

So, for me, the special guardianship came out the blue. It was having to establish very quickly a relationship with my grandson again, because I hadn't been allowed to do so. And for him as well. [...] There's not much opportunity to prepare. It's like if you don't do this, this child will be adopted. So obviously you're like, what should I do? – *special guardian*

One interviewee became special guardian to their niece, who had complex medical needs and with whom they had had minimal previous contact. They described the process as 'very intense' and felt that the handover was too quick, given the child's considerable medical needs:

We weren't ready. We had nothing prepared. So, we were like, 'look we need to do a slower transition. She can't come as soon as we get the SGO. We need to do this sensibly.' [...] And actually, within that time she landed herself in hospital with a chest infection and her foster carers were both poorly as well, so I get this call saying 'right, you have PR [parental responsibility], you're going to have to go to the hospital.' So, I arrive at hospital again, not knowing the name of her heart condition [...] what medication she was on or anything. I did not have a clue. – *special guardian*

Many adoptive and special guardianship families thought that they should have been better informed about the likelihood of support needs being very high. There was a commonly held belief that the challenges they later faced were predictable given the high prevalence of long-term trauma effects on young people's development and behaviour.

They know it's coming. They know we're all going to struggle. - *adoptive parent*

You're not told about the problems that you're gonna have [...]. I think if you would adopt or if you foster, you get told this, whereas obviously with the SGO [...] it was saying, 'well, they're family, it'll be all OK'. But now you know that, whether they were family or not, there will be some type of issue. There will be some type of therapy needed for most of these young people. – *special guardian*

In some cases, families believed that the support needs were not only predictable but already known by Children's Services and that they had not been made aware of them, or the potential implications for their family.

We had an inkling there might be a problem there, but until we were actually at the point of contact with birth mum, which was during introductions, that's when we discovered that there was potential for alcohol and substance misuse as well. We weren't really made aware of that until basically you're already in it. You're vetted an awful lot by the time you get to placement, we were halfway through introductions when we discovered that. – *adoptive parent*

But my perception, I think we were just told when we adopted that there'd be uncertainty over educational development. – *adoptive parent*

In retrospect, feeling ill-informed about the extent of the child(ren)'s support needs led families to feel that they had not been able to adequately consider either their ability to meet those needs, or how much they would have to give up to meet them.

## Expectations of available support

This section focuses on how special guardians' and adoptive parents' decisions about whether they could meet children's needs were influenced by their expectations of support. Support needs, services and gaps are a focus of the forthcoming overall findings report and practice papers.

In the context of known and unknown support needs, the perceived availability of formal support services or informal support from wider family was a further factor in interviewees' decision making, as were financial considerations. In retrospect families often said they had been led to believe that more support would be available than was the case.

### Wider family support

A few interviewees talked about the promise of support from wider family when they made the decision to adopt or become a special guardian. One special guardian described it being 'a family decision' (*special guardian*), with the commitment of wider family involvement. However, in practice interviewees found that support was not forthcoming or could not be relied upon and 'fizzled out' (*special guardian*).

That was kind of a family decision, and it was more than just my husband and I that made the decision. It was the wider family as well, although the wider family have not been helpful at all. [...] No, everybody was like - especially because it's my husband's family - everybody was like, 'yeah, they're our family, they can't go into care. We'll help you. We'll support you. We'll do all that.' It doesn't happen. - *special guardian*

[Adoptive parent's son] said, 'But I'll be here to help you', he says. Which is fair enough. He has been, he's been and stayed for several days and worked from home here [...] but that won't be happening now because he's living permanently [abroad]. [...] So, I mean we realised obviously at the time that this help was not going to be 100% forthcoming. - *adoptive parent*

### Specialist support

Interviewees commonly said that in the process of pursuing a permanence order they had been assured they would have ongoing access to formal specialist support. However, nearly all interviewees said that the support available to help them meet the changing needs of their young people as they grew up was less than they had expected or unavailable when it was needed. They felt misled about what support would be available and the ease of access (see further discussion in [section 3](#)).

We were told that you get first access to medical sessions and you're just in the queue with everyone else. – *adoptive parent*

When you adopt, you get told that all the provision is in place and the support is there. And actually, it is, but it's not readily available. You have to fight for it. Justify it. The Adoption Support Fund<sup>3</sup> takes too long to come through. The family assessments to get the help are quite extensive. We've waited 3 years for help to come through before and when we've been at family breakdown, it's just come too late. – *adoptive parent*

In hindsight, interviewees frequently contrasted the support available to them as special guardians and adoptive parents with what they believed to be better support available to foster carers. In addition to financial support, families mentioned a need for caring breaks or respite and access to training. Several concluded that if they had been better informed about these differences at the time, they might not have agreed to a permanence order but instead looked to early permanence and long-term fostering.

If you were fostering a child, you would get certain things. And when you adopt them, it all drops off. The local authorities have sometimes a settling in grant, which is not very much money, and it's not at all consistent. [...] I actually do think it might have been good if we'd have done it in a foster-to-adopt way, just because it's so different, with her age and her background, in terms of how hard it is, and so different from what your expectation of adoption might be. – *adoptive parent*

Three special guardianship families and one adoptive family in our sample initially took the children as foster carers, without a previous connection to the child or birth family. These families subsequently moved to adopt or become a special guardian either at the request of the local authority or because they disagreed with local authority decisions around placements or support. Each of these families reached the conclusion that they could better meet the needs of the children in the long-term if they had full parental responsibility for them (see also the earlier discussion on sibling groups). However, for these families, the decision meant they had to give up the support they received as foster carers, and this was a significant consideration.

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<sup>3</sup> Now known as the Adoption and Special Guardian Support Fund.



I honestly felt that, because [special guardian child] did need quite a lot of support and therapy and input from various services, I felt we were doing a better job for them by keeping them as looked after children so that they could get access to the kinds of support that they are likely to need, because the impression one is given is that you do get quicker access to things or there are special teams or there are, you know, you know, all this kind of stuff. – *special guardian*

Having initially been reluctant to become a special guardian due to concerns about losing support, this family said that access to support actually became easier because they were able to self-fund support without the need for local authority approval.

### Financial support

The loss of financial support was a particular concern for previous foster carers, all of whom sought to agree an allowance to continue some financial support for the young people until they turned 18. Several interviewees spoke about what felt to them like social workers' unfair judgement that they were driven by money.

They were like, 'were you only doing it for the money? You only care about the money.'" – *special guardian*.

These interviewees said they were not motivated by money but decided to change their legal status in their family's best interest. They still wanted to protect their ability to manage their finances and meet their young people's needs.

We were like, 'No, if we're going to do it [move from fostering to special guardianship], you need to pay the same. Because they're already losing the leaving care stuff [...] But at that point, I would happily have paid a large sum of money myself to never, ever speak to a social worker again. [...] But financially, it's essential for us because I can't go to work because [oldest young person] does need a lot of support [...] There's no way I could be going back to work even part-time. – *special guardian*

It made no sense to them that they continued to fulfil the same role, and to meet the ongoing needs of their young people, but without the same level of support. They faced the same barriers to work and costs of raising their child.

I think a lot more foster carers would have SGOs if they had the financial support. Because stopping the financial support and expecting you to raise a child who has been in care is just like, no, why would I do that? I've still got to be there all the time for that child. But with no money, it just doesn't make sense. And you're told: 'Well, you're only doing it for the money.' It's like, I can't live on air, I have to feed them. I have to pay the bills. And I just don't want to worry about money. – *special guardian*

In hindsight, the financial impact of adoption or special guardianship was often more significant than expected, particularly where families had to give up work or take on additional costs to meet their young person's needs. Special guardians, particularly grandparents, had not planned financially to raise a child at this point in their lives, and as a result, the special guardians interviewed often found themselves placed in an unexpected difficult financial situation.

I've got no savings. I've got nothing. I'm 60 and I've got nothing. I've got a little pension pot, but because I've drawn it down because there was work needed doing on the house, I can't afford to do anything now, because I'm bringing up a child. [...] I give her what she needs because she's my main priority. But I do think that one of the things we were told when I was going through the SGO was that you should not be left in a worse financial position, than you would have been if you hadn't taken the child on. And that is definitely not what happened. - *special guardian*

The contrast between the support and payments available for foster carers, adoptive and special guardian families was a common theme in the interviews. There was often a sense among interviewees that local authorities wanted to move children into permanent arrangements because it reduced their responsibility for providing support, and the financial burden was shifted to families.

They want to get people off foster care and in special guardianship. They've appointed a person, so obviously they're paying someone £50-plus grand a year to save money by shifting people from one legal route to another. - *special guardian*

If we'd known from the beginning that we could have had more money for them to have been fostered rather than SGOs, we would have fostered. But we weren't given that opportunity and I feel that's very unfair. And money is more difficult. [...] I suppose as we've come along and realised that other people foster and the money is different, and if we'd done that, it would have been different for us. – *special guardian*

## Impact on family circumstances and plans

In contrast to adoptive families, special guardians were typically not expecting to take on caring responsibilities when they were faced with this decision. Many of these families had already raised children and were focusing on their careers or planning for retirement. Taking on young children, particularly if children had high support needs, often meant 'upending' (*special guardian*) their lives. A few special guardians described mentally weighing up the child's best interest with the impact it would have on their existing family and circumstances but most did so in retrospect. In either case, the loss of personal plans and ambitions – careers, retirement plans, and living arrangements – was difficult for families and even years later was a source of grief.

You choose to adopt; we didn't. We said we only ever wanted 2 children. You know, this wasn't our choice. We were done. [...] We're in our early to mid-40s, mortgage is almost paid off and it's kind of like our life is going to begin at 45 and we'll go and enjoy the world kind of thing. That was our plan. But obviously [special guardian child] came along, who will need us for life, her life. You know, she won't be independent. So, it's a huge impact on our life. - *special guardian*

I would say it's the changes that just suddenly come your way that you're not expecting and you're having to, I suppose, grieve for the life that you thought you were going to have. - *special guardian*

Being unable to continue working was a common theme for both special guardians and adoptive parents, who often had expected to continue, or return to work later, but were unable to because of the child's high support needs. In a small number of cases, families were told at the outset that they would have to stop working to provide the children with the care they needed. More commonly, this proved to be the case as the children approached mid-childhood and adolescence, which at times had serious implications for their personal wellbeing and sense of self as well as their financial circumstances.

When I took the boys on [...] I had a really good career, and I'd got a new house. [...] I've got a 10-year plan. I'm going to work like an idiot, pay off my mortgage, then I'm going to move. [...] Well, of course, a year down the line, I was asked, would I be willing to take my grandchildren on? [...] After a year, it was clear that my mental health was suffering really badly. I was going downhill. I was on my own. I was coping with all the behaviours, and I was told that I had to stop working to be able to support [2 boys on SGOs]. I was told to claim income support. – *special guardian*

There needs to be much better preparation for parents for adoption as well. [Social services] need to be honest and they're not honest at all. [...] there's no way you can both work [...] One of you is going to give up your job and you're not going to be able to go back and that's never told. I know they'll say that'll put people off. People need to know. [...] They're not honest with you at all. – *adoptive parent*

### 3. Deciding to ask for help

As highlighted in section 2, many of the special guardians and adoptive parents interviewed reflected that the support they felt they needed for their young people was not always forthcoming. This section explores how families' willingness to ask for help changed over time and what triggered support seeking. The focus is on requests for help from regional adoption agencies (RAAs) introduced from 2018) and Children's Services, including post-adoption support and the ASGSF. It covers:

- triggers for seeking support including changing needs and perceived ability to cope, and/or linked to major life events; and
- barriers to deciding to ask for support such as lacking information, not knowing who to ask, previous poor experiences affecting expectations, and concerns about negative repercussions if support is sought.

A main theme from the interviews was the considerable effort adoptive parents and special guardians made trying to access any support, including requesting help with access to Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs) and specialist provision. Families often used the term 'battle' highlighting the sense of exhaustion they felt at having to work hard to access support, especially when they were already struggling to meet their young people's needs.

Everything is a battle to get what you want. Don't get me wrong, when we battle with them, they'll oblige you. But it didn't need that. Every process and every gate is there to be unlocked all the time. And it's not, it's not easy. - *special guardian*

I suppose the hardest thing about it is every time you want help, it's a battle - *adoptive parent*

Families' experiences of the many different forms of support that were accessed, and the role these played in young people's outcomes, will be explored in forthcoming reports, including families' experiences of trying to access support in and through education settings.

### Triggers for support seeking

#### Changing needs and perceived ability to cope

Commonly interviewees explained that they found the first few years after the AO or SGO relatively easy to manage, particularly when children were young. While some parents

described early challenges, they generally felt able to manage these when the children were young as they were physically smaller and more dependent on adult help.

Well, it's always been challenging, since it started, but when they're 4 and 5, they're a bit easier to handle. Yeah. And it's as they get to 12 and 13 that it's, yeah... - *special guardian*

In many cases, support felt more accessible in the early period after a permanence order compared with later because they knew who to contact via post-adoption support teams or a named social worker. They were also more likely to have informal support from friends and family in the first few years.

For many families, however, as young people approached adolescence, they faced extra challenges and as families found it more difficult to manage, support was often harder to access. Where families could access consistent support or reconnect with known support services, this was highly valued.

### The younger years

Those families who described issues emerging during the early primary school years often said they were able to access helpful support at that point, though it did not necessarily prevent challenges later. Families were more likely to have a named social worker they could contact if they needed support in the months following the Order. Therapy including Theraplay were mentioned by several interviewees, as were parenting courses, guidance and information. Adoptive parents talked about the training and preparation they had received which meant they understood some of these challenges and how they could adapt their parenting style to respond to them.

When they first came, I was given a social worker called [G]. [...] [G] was amazing, and they closed it. It was supposed to last a year, but it got closed early, I believe by months, because we were all doing so well. – *special guardian*

When he was younger, we had actually quite a bit of input. It was easier then, to get help than it is now. He was seen by [...] a specialist psychology service based here for adopted and foster children. [...] And that really sort of helped. So, from the age of about 7 to 10, he had therapy and Theraplay, they really worked through things with him. And he was then he reached a period of sort of stability until he hit puberty. – *adoptive parent*

When he was smaller, [adopted son] always, his behaviour presented quite difficult, like due to his early life trauma and things like that and him trying to work out who was consistent in his life. [...] And then once we've been able to access training and to understand his life experiences, how they were affecting him, we were able to sort of switch up our parenting style and that settled sort of when he was around 8 or 9. – *special guardian*

For families who did not initially face significant challenges, or who felt equipped to manage these without support services, it was common to lose contact with Children's Services and to have little or no input during these younger childhood years. There were examples where families deliberately tried to limit contact with Children's Services because they were managing or felt their young people were unsettled by visits from social workers.

The first year I had contact with her, then I didn't have contact with her for a few years then [...] because everything was OK. [...] But I did call her recently because of the situation the boys are having at school. And I can honestly say she has been amazing. She's been really supportive. – *special guardian*

Since the adoption order, we haven't had... the children's social workers, had left [...] and the children didn't respond very well to having social workers in and out of the house. Whenever we had social worker visits, it disrupted them a lot. They didn't like us talking to social workers, so we found that their behaviour escalated when social workers were around. So once those 2 social workers left, we didn't talk to anybody else after that and it was only then sort of 5 years later, when things were getting really bad, that we went to post adoption support. – *Adoptive Parent*

## Escalating needs

A main theme was that adolescence brought a range of new challenges and heightened risks which led interviewees to feel the need to reach out again for support, with mixed success. A number of issues coalesced around the ages of 10-13 that were identified as being more challenging and pushing the boundaries of their abilities to cope:

- onset of puberty – which in some cases started much earlier than is typical (e.g. around aged 8), a recognised impact of childhood abuse and trauma.
- transition to secondary schools - which were generally described as less nurturing or understanding of their children's needs than primary schools.
- influence of older peer groups and changing relationships; and

- starting to explore personal identity.

These changes were all seen to contribute to increased risk taking, challenging behaviours and mental health needs and were factors in adoptive parents and special guardians choosing to seek more specialist help. Around this time self-harming, running away from home and increased violence and aggression at home were commonly highlighted.

Primary school was amazing; the teachers knew her [...] and as soon as she started to wobble, they picked her up and nurtured her. Secondary school, you've got too many changes in a day, too many teachers. They don't understand trauma response. They don't understand attachment. They just think that she's being naughty. She's not being naughty. She's scared stiff. She's frightened. She doesn't feel safe. – *special guardian*

Questions around identity emerged in his teens, which I expected, because I remember being a teen and thinking, you're trying to figure out who you are. And for him, those questions are just so much bigger because I'm not mum, and my husband's not dad. - *special guardian*

But there was a period, even before [adopted daughter] went to secondary school, she was really, really struggling. And that came out as verbal and physical aggression in the home. So, we had, I'd say from about age 10 right through to 16-17, a very difficult time. – *adoptive parent*

At the same time, it was harder for adoptive parents and special guardians to manage the balance between protecting their young people and their growing need for independence, and physically many found they were unable to insist on behaviours and boundaries as they had when the child was younger.

The teenage years are definitely the most challenging because when they're little, you can just grab them. If push comes to shove, you're stronger, you're taller. You can just grab them. With a teenager that's no longer possible, and they're out there doing stuff, and you don't even know what they're doing. And then heightened with social media and drugs. It's just an incredibly difficult world to navigate for any teenager. But for traumatised teenagers, it's really murderous. - *adoptive parent*

Families also found that the informal support they had in the early years tended to drop off as friends and family struggled to understand the young people's needs or cope with their behaviours, leaving adoptive parents and special guardians more isolated and with less opportunity for respite.



Several families said that when they decided to reach out to Children's Services, they were able to reconnect with support as their children entered adolescence and new challenges arose. There were examples where adoptive parents and special guardians were able to reach their previous social workers. Some were also able to access additional support through the ASGSF, which they may not have been aware of previously.

I was at my wits end. We went to our social worker, the post adoption services worker that we'd got. We went to her and said we can't cope at the moment. [Adopted son] was completely off the wall at the time. [...] we'd done all the stuff that you do when they're little and none of it was working as he transitioned into being a teenager. [...] So, we approached our social worker who is amazingly good, and they said we can look at getting adoption support funding. – *adoptive parent*

Although there were examples of helpful support accessed in adolescence, often, at the point of escalating needs, support services were harder to access, or families felt what was available was not suitable or was inaccessible for teenagers which was especially challenging for families that had reached crisis points.

When [he hit] puberty, so I think it was about 13, things started to be difficult, really difficult again. He became violent in the sense that he was verbally abusive, and he throws things around and so on. And we then couldn't get any help. We paid privately for a psychotherapist for 18 months and then [things were] a little bit better again. – *adoptive parent*

And then as they grew up it became more difficult with [special guardian grandson] [...]. He was very angry. He hated school. School was just not a place he wanted to be. And that is for me where the help from the system didn't help. It just didn't help. No matter who I reached out to it was a case of 'well, there's not a lot we can do.' – *special guardian*

And they kind of, once you've got teenagers, the support, it's less usually, because most of the support that's offered requires you to attend the session with your child, and if your child's refusing to do anything and telling you to F off and going missing, you can't get to those sessions. So, yeah, it was just pointless, to be honest, yeah. – *adoptive parent*

Given the changing and escalating needs of young people, particularly around adolescence, several families said that regular check-ins or monitoring of needs could support families to overcome the barriers to seeking help.

There needs to be something more defined and a clear mechanism and a clear right to revisit it [...] your own needs might have changed, you might be in a couple relationship, there might only be one of you, you might have quite a health issue yourself. It's not a once and for all scenario. – *special guardian*

Things like behaviour change over time [...] We didn't know that her behaviour was gonna be what it is now. It's very much a case of, well, that's your special guardianship or that's what your support is, see you later. I think it would be good to have almost like a yearly check in to see if there's anything that's changed. - *special guardian*

## Life events

While our data showed a strong pattern towards support needs increasing in adolescence, there were also unforeseen life events that caused families to need urgent help, for example emerging health difficulties and family bereavements especially among special guardianship families.

When [special guardian child] had her epilepsy diagnosis, when she had her first [seizure] it scared the life out of [special guardian child]. [...] That triggered a huge anxiety within [special guardian child]. She couldn't go to school. She couldn't leave her bedroom. She couldn't leave me. She was just terrified of having another seizure. [...] so, I contacted [RAA] and said I need help. I don't know what to do. I emailed both of them at the same time, just saying, please help, you know she's not living, she's not doing anything. And they were both really good. [...] she got seen by CAMHS within 10 days, which is just unheard of [...] the social worker was in daily contact with me to check in and see how I was coping – *special guardian*

[We were asking for grief counselling], you know, straight away because we felt that the children at that point needed, they were just turned 11 [...] eventually we got [counselling service] and we took [special guardian granddaughter] after school, but it was sometime later. And she really wasn't engaged. She did not want to know. – *special guardian*

There was a risk as highlighted by this special guardian that when support needs were triggered by events like bereavement, the long-term needs could be dismissed as short-term disruption or grief making it harder to access appropriate help.

In that one year there was a lot of things that happened, you know, her mum died and then we moved house, she moved to secondary school. So, when things started going a bit tricky for [special guardian child] at first everyone was like, 'oh, well, she's had a lot of stuff going on.' So, it took a lot of unpicking, and she came under CAMHS, she became suicidal. – *special guardian*

For one adoptive family, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown triggered a sudden escalation of challenging behaviours. In these cases, a quick response to requests for help was felt to be particularly important as long delays made it more difficult to address the impact of these events and may have negatively affected young people's willingness to engage with support later.

## Barriers to support seeking

When families faced escalating challenges, they sometimes had a clear idea of what support they wanted to access, for instance around behavioural support or mental health services, but more often, families felt they needed to be able to discuss the challenges with a professional who could advise about what available support might be helpful. Even where families knew what type of support they wanted, unless they were able to fund it privately, they often needed to be assessed by Children's Services or RAAs to access these services. Too often interviewees talked about what stopped them from deciding to ask for help when they really needed it. The main reasons shared across the interviews were:

- not knowing who to ask or how to contact them.
- a lack of information about what support was available.
- concerns around the repercussions of asking for help.
- previous experience of having to 'battle' for support.

## Knowing who to ask

Where families faced escalating needs as their child grew older, they found that they needed to re-engage with support, but if the family was no longer in contact with a social worker assigned to them post-adoption or special guardianship, they often did not know who to contact or how for referral to support.

There were examples where finding a number or email address for a relevant team seemed to be very difficult. Changes in staff and restructures meant that previous contacts had disappeared.

I think if the social worker that I knew and had a relationship with, if she did go on maternity leave, I'd rather they said 'and here's who's going to be your point of contact while she's away'. And I just didn't have that. I didn't know anything. And even though I hadn't had a need for them, I probably would have done had I had a number or a name. But it just seemed too random to try and track anybody down in an organisation. A new organisation that I didn't know that would have been a bit, you know? So, I just sort of muddled through. – *adoptive parent*

RAAs, introduced from 2018, were intended to streamline provision of support services for adopters, while support for special guardians remained largely the responsibility of local authorities.<sup>4</sup> Nearly all the participants in this study received a permanence order before the establishment of RAAs. Some of our families were in contact with a social worker during the transition to RAAs, and remained in contact with them after the RAAs were established. Others found that the transition disrupted their support. One interviewee explained that when RAAs were introduced, the transition meant that they lost contact with the social workers they knew and subsequently could not contact the RAA to seek further support:

When the regional adoption agencies formed, [...] there was absolutely no transition to speak of. A social worker in our local authority was familiar with our case, she sometimes attended meetings with school or social workers. She was brilliant. Then she said OK, you're going to be part of [RAA]. [...] I contacted the [RAA], heard nothing. We only got automated emails back saying this is the [RAA] team, and when you call they never ever picked up the phone, there was just an answering machine saying 'we'll get back to you'. They never did and that took months. – *adoptive parent*

For those who were not in contact with support when RAAs were established, knowing about and navigating RAAs to access support could be tricky. One family were told that their contact details had been dropped in the transition from local authority to RAA meaning they had had no contact from them. They only became aware that support might be available through the RAA when a friend suggested it.

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<sup>4</sup> Ecorys UK and Rees Centre, Oxford University. (2022). *Evaluation of regional adoption agencies: final report*. Department for Education, London.

I spent a good year back and forth trying to get loads of support [...] We were supposed to get post adoption support, but we never. And apparently what happened was when all the local authorities merged and became [RAA], we got dropped off the mailing list. So, I made contact with them again, but they obviously had all the records there, but I couldn't understand why we've never received any communications from them. – *adoptive parent*

Several interviewees said that having a consistent, single point of contact would make it much easier for them to reach out to Children's Services again after a period of not needing this support.

I think everybody should have a dedicated worker. You know, when we were still living in [city], we had a dedicated worker. We never used her because we didn't have any need. I knew there was somebody there, but it didn't matter because I never, we never used her. But when you need one, you need a dedicated worker." – *adoptive parent*

One of the things that I asked for with my complaint is a named contact, because the trouble is, if you've got any issues, you have to go through different departments to find where you speak to. [...] So, it would be really good if there was like, a named contact in the local authority that you could go to with issues. – *special guardian*

Even when interviewees did know who to call, this was no guarantee that they could contact them when needed, particularly if they were returning to support, often following a crisis, having been out of contact for some time.

The SGO team, we're not with them now, but they're still there in the background. I can ring them [but] we can only ring them on a Thursday morning. Which is great, but if you're having a huge crisis or you're feeling completely and utterly distraught, or [he's had] a really huge meltdown and you just want someone to talk to, it's not there. The support is not there and sometimes you just need it. – *special guardian*

## **Lack of information about available support**

Several families said that, once the permanence order was granted, they were quickly left with the impression that they were on their own, in some cases being explicitly told that no support was available. Interviewees described the sense of a cliff edge in support once a permanence order was made, being left with the impression that Children's Services were no longer available to families as a source of support. While this was

described by a small number of adoptive families, it was more often the case for special guardians.

Right at the beginning we got this sort of support, and then once the SGO had been granted, we kind of fell off a cliff. And for a long, long time, I mean, this was years, we got nothing at all. And we didn't even know who the social worker was, who was involved if we needed someone. – *special guardian*

Once you've adopted your children, once you've got the Adoption Order, social workers disappear. The social workers that were assigned to you, they're no longer assigned to you. 'You've got the Adoption Order. They're your children'. – *adoptive parent*

You go to court, you get granted [an SGO], social services stay in your life for what, next 3-6 months? Then they walk away, and you get told you're by yourself. – *special guardian*

### Adoption and special guardianship support plans

The interviews focussed on support needs and experiences and did not ask specifically about use and effectiveness of support plans. When adoptive families were asked about the support they were able to access, they rarely referred to adoption support plans. One adoptive parent said they had requested a full assessment and support plan before they decided whether to adopt their 2 children. They felt that this should be an automatic part of the process since some level of trauma and related need was so likely. This plan allowed them to access appropriate support very early on.

When I first adopted them, I asked for a psychological report of the girls, and I was shocked that it isn't done automatically. [...] why are children who've been through all sorts of stuff and are then moved to an adopter, why is a psychologist not meeting with them and seeing what's going on in their heads? And I was lucky because I asked for it and I had a social worker who agreed it should be done [...] because of that report, they put CAMHS support in place right from the beginning. And I think that's really helped our relationships hugely – *Adoptive Parent*

The Special Guardianship Regulations, published in 2005, made the creation of a Special Guardianship Support Plan (SGSP) a requirement where the local authority proposes to provide support services to the special guardian on more than one occasion.<sup>5</sup> While

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<sup>5</sup> Department for Education. (2017). *Special guardianship guidance*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8202c940f0b62305b92007/Special\\_guardianship\\_statutory\\_guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8202c940f0b62305b92007/Special_guardianship_statutory_guidance.pdf). Accessed 06/04/25

support planning was not a focus of the interviews, families were asked about the support they felt they needed and what they had been able to access. In discussing these, only 2 interviewees referred to having support plans in place. One of these 2, a special guardian to their 13-year-old grandson, described pushing for around 8 years to access the support specified in the plan.

We were trying to get something sorted on the [special] guardian support plan that we'd been promised by the court when the guardianship took place, when [child] was about 3 and a half, bearing in mind he was about 6 or 7 now and it's still not, it's still not in place. So, we were really pushing hard on that. Not successfully I hasten to add. We've literally only had that in place 18 months. So, it's taken all of that time. – *special guardian*

Only one other interviewee referred to having a special guardianship support plan, from 2012, highlighting that the plan focused on the agreed financial support and the requirement for local authority supervision of contact with birth parents. The interviewee pointed out that they had no information to help them shape the support plan.

That is not to say to that special guardianship support plans had not been prepared at the time orders were made, but, despite near universal experiences of having to battle to get support, they were rarely referred to by interviewees to support their asks for help, and there was no suggestion that they were reviewed as children got older. There were cases where special guardians did not know SGO support plans existed until years after they had begun trying to access support:

I was not given an SGO support plan. I didn't know SGO support plans exist. It was perhaps 2 years later that somebody said, 'what does it say in your SGO support plan?' and I said, 'what's an SGO support plan?' [...] I managed to get a copy from [Birth mum]'s. Solicitor. – *special guardian*

Family Rights Group (FRG) recommends that prospective special guardians seek legal advice throughout the process of seeking an SGO, to help them understand the range of options available and to ensure that support plans are thorough and appropriate.<sup>6</sup> Though the interviews did not ask participants explicitly about their access to legal advice on support planning, a small number felt that in retrospect having legal advice would have been helpful. One special guardian said that not having this independent advice made it harder for them to push for involvement in the process or access to the support they needed.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://frg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2c-DIY-SGO\\_care-proceedings.pdf](https://frg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2c-DIY-SGO_care-proceedings.pdf)

It still makes me angry if I think about it, during the whole process of getting the SGO I had no legal advice. [...] Basically, CAFCASS involved, as an independent voice for the child. The local authority [...] had their legal representative. They gave mum a lawyer, a legal representation, and I didn't get any. [...] And I was told I couldn't go to any of the meetings because I wasn't party to proceedings. – *special guardian*

### Knowing what type of support might be available

Whether an individual support plan was in place or explicitly referred to or not when seeking help, many families did expect to be able to access appropriate support, and signposting from Children's Services, their regional or voluntary adoption agency when needed.

I only asked them for the things that I think I'm entitled to ask them for, and they haven't. They just tried to avoid everything. [...] the social workers were meant to pick it up, and then they did nothing. – *adoptive parent*

The whole point is you ask for help, the help should be there, like we were told when we adopted these children. – *adoptive parent*

While some families had specific asks for support interventions, others wanted professional involvement so that they could understand the needs and signpost to appropriate support, including therapies, mentorship, parenting support, respite or other forms of support. Special guardians and adoptive parents wanted better, more accessible information about what support was available and might help them. Even at the time the Orders were made, interviewees did not feel that they had good enough information about the types of support that might be on offer for them or how they could access it. Once they no longer had contact with Children's Services, typically either 3 years after the permanence order or even earlier, families did not get any further updates on the support that was available, either through changes in provision or to meet the changing needs of their young person. Some, particularly those engaged in advocacy or other support work with organisations connected to adoption or special guardianship, felt that they had privileged access to information about available training and support. Others talked about having to do all the work to find and research the types of support that might be helpful and available to them.



Again, I will search for things, and I will seek help because I recognise that we do need help and support. So, I will go looking and I have when needed. So, whether or not it's because they know that we are OK, I don't know, but I don't feel that there's that initial kind of, 'here is what you can do, here is what you need'. – *special guardian*

I had looked into it cause you have to look. I mean, I knew nothing about it, and nobody tells you these things. – *adoptive parent*

We've been talking to high school, and they were suggesting perhaps we needed to go back to talk to the social workers about what other things they might be able to put in place. And we sort of went back for that chat and they were like, 'well, what do you want us to do?' And we were like, 'I don't know, we were hoping we were going to have, like, a chat about this and maybe you might come up with some ideas', but they were very much like 'you tell me what it is you want'. And we were kind of like, 'all right, we don't know'. *adoptive parent*

Interviewees were often frustrated at the lack of signposting and how difficult it was to get information about where support could be found or what support would be appropriate. While families wanted to be listened to about the experiences and challenges, they faced, they often wanted professionals to guide them towards the kind of practical and therapeutic support that could help them to manage these challenges.

I honestly don't know what would happen if I went to the local authority and said, 'what shall we apply for?', how much help I'd get. I anticipate that I'd have to do my own research. I don't want to say that it's not good enough, but I suppose what I would say is, the easier we can make it to tell people where [to find] the sorts of things you might think about, the info you might get, who you could speak to about it, you know, the more signposting that you can get, the better I guess. – *adoptive parent*

Where families felt they had to do their own research into available support, they also hit difficulties getting referrals for that support. This led to additional frustrations as they neither felt guided to suitable support nor permitted to pursue what they found for themselves.

We did ask at one point for equine therapy for [adopted daughter], cause she loves horses. We're told it wasn't covered by the Adoption Support Fund. There was a residential weekend facility close by, and we asked about that, and it was covered by the Adoption Support Fund, but we couldn't refer into it as a parent. You needed a professional to refer you in and they wouldn't refer us in it because it couldn't be paid for even when we said we'd pay for it. So, we found stuff that we thought would be helpful for the kids, but we weren't able to access it. – *Adoptive Parent*

The ASGSF was an important source of funding for support for many families in our study; the use and impact of the ASGSF will be discussed in the forthcoming overall findings report. It was significant for families' decisions to access help, however, several of those interviewed were unaware of the ASGSF or that they could use it to seek assessments or therapies. The Adoption Support Fund was introduced in England in 2015 and was available to children under a Special Guardianship from 2016. It was renamed the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund in 2023 to make this more explicit. The relatively recent introduction of the ASGSF meant that it did not exist when a lot of these families received their Permanence Orders, and many special guardians particularly did not know that this was available to them or how it could be used.

Alright cause I'll just say, could have been that I wasn't even told about it because they're not adopted, they're special guardianship. But I didn't know that was there. – *special guardian*

There was no support at that point and the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund that it is now didn't exist at that point, so that wasn't even something that could be written into a support plan. – *special guardian*

I was told you had 4 grand and that was it, so once you spent it, you spent it, so I was frightened to use it in case the children needed it later on for something. Well, I've now found it replenished every year. [But] I didn't know how to access it. I've tried to get it; it's been very hard to. – *special guardian*

## Concerns about repercussions of help seeking

Several interviewees talked about difficult experiences with social services that put them off reaching out for support again later. For example, interviewees who contacted Children's Services to say that they were struggling said they felt blamed and shamed, as though asking for help was an indication of failed parenting or put them at suspicion of

harming or neglecting their children. This made trusting relationships with social workers very difficult, and in some cases made families reluctant to contact Children's Services in case of negative consequences for their family, including removal of the child.

One of the things I experienced was, 'oh well, you said you've needed to restrain and we're gonna have to come and check you out' and you think, well, hang on. I've just phoned you for help. And I understand why they're doing it because of these very isolated incidents, but that's really going to put people off asking for the help when you're immediately, 'well, the first thing we've gotta do is make sure you're not harming him.' [...] Because of the experiences a lot of adoptive couples won't approach the services after a while. – *adoptive parent*

That was scary because [grandson] was in my care when he got taken into foster care and they sent the police round to take him. So social workers are scary things to me. When I had to approach the social worker to say I need the adoption support fund, they do a full report on you. I'm like, I don't want you to do a full report on me because you're going to be mean and take my child away again. – *special guardian*

Despite concerns about repercussions being a factor that sometimes limited help requests, good relationships with social workers were described and highly valued by interviewees. Many families, even those who reported struggling to access help at times, highlighted one or more social workers who they felt understood their family and their young people's needs. Even where they had not been able to provide access to all the support that was wanted, social workers who listened to what adoptive parents and special guardians told them about their situations and were prepared to advocate on their behalf were highly praised by interviewees.

## Previous negative experiences of support seeking

A common theme was that repeated experiences of asking for support that did not materialise or came months after it was needed, started to put interviewees off asking for help over time. The effect of delaying requests for help meant that families only sought help at a crisis point, when more urgent help was needed.

I haven't always asked for help, when my experience of asking for help is you're put on a waiting list and then nothing happens. Maybe then by the time they contact you, it's too late because the event has passed, and you've had to deal with it in whatever way you can. – *adoptive parent*

Families expressed the view that Children's Services were acting more often as gatekeepers, trying to limit rather than trying to facilitate access to support.

I've struggled all the way along with that [...] on every conversation that we have, whenever it comes to reapplying for the funding, feels like a kind of gatekeeping, not very supportive conversation. – *special guardian*

Several interviewees in our sample who were not living in the local authorities that had placed their children shared a perceived reluctance among local authorities to provide support. Under special guardianship and adoption regulations, the assessment and provision of support services for the child and the special guardian or adoptive parent remain the responsibility of the local authority where the child was last looked after for 3 years after the Order was made.<sup>7</sup> Those that had moved reported that their local authorities were reluctant to fund the provision or to support transition to the new local authority after the 3 years ended.

There was no support from social care. We were to have the children come out of area because they lived in [nearby town] and we are over in [home town] area. So [home town] wouldn't put the money in. But then [LA where children lived before SGO] won't put the money in. So, it was almost like they were pulling apart each other. No one wanted to take responsibility, so we had to battle for that and eventually we did get it. But that's more because of my fight. – *special guardian*

Families described feeling exhausted by 'battling' or 'fighting' for support they believed they or their young people were entitled to receive, either with social services or within education. These families' experiences made them cautious about seeking support if it might lead to prolonged arguments with local authorities or service providers. Some described feeling worn down by fighting and this deterred them from asking for support they ideally wanted, which was a risk factor.

We have thought about it at times to get support, but it's such a lengthy process for guardianship. There's a lot of jumping through hoops and needing social workers to approve it. You don't have a social worker once you've got your guardianship approved, so you don't have a social worker that can put you through these things. So, you have to fight harder. - *special guardian*

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<sup>7</sup> [Special guardianship guidance: Statutory guidance](#), 2017; [Statutory Guidance on Adoption, 2013](#)

## 4. Decision to return the young person to care

This section looks at how a minority of families approached and experienced the often traumatic decisions around whether their child could stay in the family home or would need to return to care permanently or temporarily (on a Section 20<sup>8</sup>). The decision to return their young person to care nearly always followed a prolonged battle to access more help or services.

At the point of interview, several special guardianship families, and a larger minority of adoptive families that were struggling were either considering whether their child could remain with them long-term, or the children had already returned to care. Among families in the study, where they had taken responsibility for more than one child, the decision related to just one child. The situation was changeable, for example one interviewee's adopted child had returned to care temporarily on a Section 20 but was now back living with their adoptive parents.

In contrast to discussions about decisions to adopt or become a special guardian, the decisions outlined in this section were more recent or ongoing. The section first describes what factors led interviewees to consider returning their young person to care and then goes on to examine experiences since the young person re-entered the care system.

### Reasons for deciding children cannot stay at home

The 3 key reasons that led interviewees to consider returning their young people to care, either permanently or temporarily were: child to parent violence leading to fears for the safety and wellbeing of family members; accusations made by the young person about the adoptive parent; and failed attempts to obtain additional support.

Interviewees often talked about feelings of guilt or grief when facing decisions about the young person moving out of their care or feeling that they had failed in their role. They struggled greatly with these decisions.

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<sup>8</sup> Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 requires the local authorities to provide accommodation for a child in need who needs accommodation because no person has parental responsibility for them, they have been lost or abandoned or the person caring for the child is prevented permanently or not from providing him or her with suitable accommodation or care. Section 20 is often offered as an alternative to the Local Authority applying for a Care Order and asking for the parents to consent to the child living in Local Authority care.

We don't feel that there's any alternative at the moment if we want to have a safe relationship ... that's bringing up huge amounts of grief for me, because of course I'm still just seeing a vulnerable little boy who's going. It's like throwing him to the wolves. - *adoptive parent*

## Child to parent violence

The most common issue that interviewees said led them to consider whether to return the young person to care was increasing aggression and violence towards other people in the household that had sometimes been happening for a long time. Around half of the families who experienced their young person being violent towards them or siblings said that this started to be a problem around the onset of adolescence, but several families said that violence and aggressive behaviour started as young as age 4 or 5. In some cases, the violence and aggression abated after some time, particularly where families were able to get support or training to help them respond, whereas for others the violence escalated and became harder to cope with as the young person grew older and stronger. Interviewees described being in real fear of their young people. In several cases, police involvement led to wider concerns about the young person staying with the adoptive parent or special guardian.

There was a lot of aggression towards [adoptive mother]. A lot of property damage. In the end, the police were reluctant to let him go back to [live with] his [adoptive] mother. - *adoptive parent*

We got a safety plan put in place that said we would call the police if he became physically violent in the house. We did that and [about] once a month, I'd say the police would come. [...] so pretty much for 9 months after I first said, 'look, it's dangerous, we can't live like this. It's dangerous for our daughter because of his dangerous behaviours, he's not keeping himself safe. He's dangerous for us to live like this', so we requested that he was moved out. - *adoptive parent*

In some cases, the trigger to act was when siblings were felt to be at threat, either directly of violence or because of the consequences of risky behaviours.

I reached out again to the local authority, and I basically said we can't do this anymore. It's at the point of breakdown. [...] I have to remove him from a room from fear of him hurting the baby. - *special guardian*

It's had a huge impact on [younger sibling]'s well-being. [...] he was saying I just want to kill you every morning. Really, really yelling at us. I just want to kill you. I hate you. I'm just trying to get him out of bed. You'd get ..., banging on the wall and kicking the wall with his feet in his bedroom because, we were trying to get him to go to school, but actually this was really upsetting, [younger sibling], because of how he was treating us. And because [younger sibling] was starting to be more afraid of his own brother. - *special guardian*

## **Safeguarding concerns and allegations**

In 2 cases, the young person was no longer living with the family following Children's Services interventions due to safeguarding concerns. In both examples, the young people had made an accusation against them which the interviewees denied. In these situations, the decision for the young person to move out of their home was not theirs but made by social workers. However, once the accusation had been investigated and closed, families had to decide whether the young person should return to their care. These families were already struggling and relationships between the adoptive parents and their young people were difficult. Where the situation was triggered by an accusation or safeguarding concern, these decisions were strongly influenced by fear of further accusations and a breakdown in trust within the family or between the family and Children's Services. Despite an ongoing emotional commitment to the young person, both these families were concerned that they could not meet the needs of the young person or manage the relationship at home, and neither had been offered support to help with this.

They took [daughter] somewhere else, and we just said, 'We can't have her in our home anymore. We can't cope with this. We can't. We can't fix it.' That is what we said because we didn't know how to make things better. [...] And this is what we said all along about her lies and the things. The story she brings up. We're vulnerable. We're so vulnerable. And that's why we're scared of having her back. [...] She knows we love her. She knows we want her back, but we're scared. - *adoptive parent*

## **Need for additional support**

Interviewees described feeling angry with Children's Services and often believed that if they had had better support, they could have avoided the crisis that led to the young person no longer living with them. These families described a long history of trying to access support and services without success, as described in section 3 of this report. Some families felt worn down by the effort of trying to access support and reached a point where they no longer believed support would be available to help them continue

caring for the young person. Two families described being 'destroyed' – (*adoptive parent*), in part by the constant battle for support.

These children should have had the help and support they should have had, and they haven't, and what they did was they destroyed the one person who had everything ready for them. I wanted to have them all in my life, in my house till they were 18, to 25 even, not bothered. And instead of helping me, they destroyed me. – *adoptive parent*

Interviewees who had been subjected to child-to-parent violence often described reaching out repeatedly for help and support and being signposted to training or other suggestions that they felt were inappropriate and failed to grasp the severity of the situation they were facing. This left families feeling that they had run out of options. As a result some families concluded that there was no alternative to disruption given the threat to their safety or the safety of other siblings.

Once you're at crisis point, if the only recommendation someone can give you is do a fun activity with him once a week and write a positivity diary, which is what we were advised, you know he was running away from home. He was staying out for 10-11 hours at a time. He was being brought home from the police. He was carrying knives, he was threatening to stab us, he was starting fires in the house. - *adoptive parent*

So, then they finally said, 'do you want us to help?' And we said 'you should have helped us years ago; you should have given us the support we needed years ago. You should have made it obvious to us and professionals what was out there to help our daughter. But you didn't? We can't do it now because we're broken. We're all broken, and we don't know how we're going to get back from this.' - *adoptive parent*

In a few cases, families described reaching a point where they believed the only way to get the support their young person needed was by threatening to return the young person to care. This approach was sometimes successful, with Children's Services providing additional support to help maintain the placement:

I didn't know what else to do like, you know, 'send him back where? Back into mainstream foster care, like, that's where he's going.' And the local authority then decided to support with nursery, so they paid for nursery, which kind of gave us a moment of respite. - *special guardian*



I hated doing this. It was awful, but the only way to get social services to do anything was to basically instruct a solicitor to request a Section 20. [...] So that's what we did, and it still breaks my heart that I had to do it. But I did have to do it. I feel like I was forced into it. - *adoptive parent*

There's no social service support [...] until last night [after raising possibility of the young person returning to care]. And no kind of health support, so no mental health support. So, he has nothing. He doesn't even have CAMHS now because he, you know, he won't take his medication, so they won't have anything to do with him. [...] He actually has nothing. And yet they all say he's like one of the region's most complex, like needy kids. He's on their kind of, you know, adolescent at risk register and stuff. But there is nothing. - *adoptive parent*

Sometimes returning their young person to care was felt to be the only way to ensure the young person received support as interviewees believed that looked after children were able to access more support. One adoptive parent described the realisation that their young person – who had high support needs and was aggressive to the family – would not be eligible for supported accommodation as an adult and would not be able to live independently. The interviewee was grappling with the prospect of returning the young person to care in the hope that this would entitle them to access supported accommodation after the age of 18.

I am now aware of this and have to think seriously about what we do over the coming years. To make sure that [young person] does get assisted living or supported living [...] and it seems like the only way you get that is if he's back in care. - *adoptive parent*

While interviewees felt driven to a temporary or permanent disruption to engage Children's Services and access support, families often found their re-engagement very difficult. Families felt blamed for the situation and said they were made to feel that they had failed the young person. In some cases, they felt under additional scrutiny or suspicion.

[Social services say] it's because of our bad parenting that [the child] wouldn't be safe to come back and live with us, because of our bad parenting, based on 9- or 10-minute conversations. And just nobody's listening. - *adoptive parent*

They got back involved, and that was a terrible process in itself [...] A child protection social worker came out to the house checking the cupboards, checking the kids' bedrooms. Like, I didn't call you because we were neglecting our kids. I called you because a placement that you supported to make happen is not working out. So that was quite a terrible ordeal in terms of reaching out for support there and made me wonder why I'd even bothered to do that, because now I was under scrutiny as a parent because I couldn't step up to the mark and deliver what I said I would deliver. - *special guardian*

The sense of being judged for disruptions was not just in relation to Children's Services but also to other forms of support, including peer support groups. One interviewee found support from an online support group specifically for families where the placement was disrupted, but others decided that they were no longer comfortable getting support from other adoptive parents or special guardians.

That's the thing, where there are groups, and I've done a couple, I attended for a bit, but there was nobody in the position we were in, and you can't talk to people about the prospect of handing back your child. [...] the judgment you get is pretty horrific depending on who you speak to [...] I wasn't able to talk openly about the struggles we had. - *adoptive parent*

You get looked down upon, you get blamed, you get judged in order to do this, in order to "disrupt" in quotes, and not just by professionals either, by kind of other people. You feel like you're kind of. 'Oh, my gosh, she's giving up her son'. That is not what I've done. You know, we are still very much supporting him in every way. - *adoptive parent*

## **Experiences since the young person re-entered the care system**

Those families that did decide they had to return their young person to local authority care, either temporarily or permanently, were able to talk about how their situation had changed following that decision. Nearly all the families continued to have a relationship with the young person. Where young people were taken into care temporarily, on a Section 20, they retained parental responsibility and typically remained very engaged with their support.

At the moment he's not actually living with us, but we are very much supporting him in everything he does and that still takes up a lot of my time. The only difference is he doesn't live in that house. – *adoptive parent*

[Adopted daughter]'s in supported accommodation. [...] It's much easier because she's safe and busy, but when she's not there, we spend a lot of time talking to the police, talking to the staff at her flat, talking to social workers. Yeah, trying to keep her safe. – *adoptive parent*

Interviewees described an ongoing commitment to their young people, even though they did not feel able to have them living at home at that time. They wanted to continue to be parents to their children and often hoped that at some point more positive relationships could be established.

We don't want rid of him. We don't want him to be taken into care. We'll never say that. We told the professionals that we love him, and we don't want to add to his trauma. He needs to know he's loved, and we know that this is all trauma response. So, when they suggested that residential [care] it took us 2-3 months before we felt able to say yeah, it's needed. It's needed for [younger sibling] and it's needed for us. – *special guardian*

For some, a Section 20 offered a form of extended respite; the only form of respite available to families in most cases. It allowed some families to move back from a crisis point and gave some space for both the young person and the parents to stabilise and rebuild relationships. There were examples where relationships had started to improve once young people stopped living at home with their adoptive families.

I'm coming to terms with the fact that, potentially, being a parent from a distance, is gonna be amazing because I'll get to enjoy and see them grow and develop without being punched. – *adoptive parent*

And eventually he was taken into care, which is where he is now and we maintained very good relationship, probably better actually than when he was living with us. – *adoptive parent*

When she was here there was violence and aggression, and she completely didn't engage with us. Since she's moved out, the guilt's increased, but we can see her as a person now. Whereas before she was just the kid that used to threaten us with a knife and smash things up [...] now she's moved out but can see how much she's struggling, so we know we love her. We know we want to help her. And the distance makes it easier for us to do that. – *adoptive parent*

Despite legally retaining parental responsibility, families with a Section 20 did not always feel listened to when they expressed concerns about the situations their young people were placed in and the support they were provided. Interviewees felt that the relationships they had with their young people gave them the best understanding of their needs and what caring provision would work best for them. Once children were placed elsewhere, however, both adoptive parents and special guardians felt that they were no longer listened to and were assumed not to have understood the child's needs.

No foster carer, [...] moving around from week to week with different carers, [...] [the care staff in the units where young person was placed were] big, strapping, intimidating guys that just messed up [special guardian child]'s mental health. [...] We were visiting him every day, and he was far away, was in [town]. And I'm in [village] which is about a 40-minute drive. But we were going to him every day to support him and get him in a better place.” – *special guardian*

They moved him from a residential placement to a foster placement against our wishes, even though he was on a voluntary Section 20. [...] He lasted 3 1/2 weeks, and the foster place broke down [...] And if they'd listen to us and allowed us to tell them what the foster carers needed to look out for and what they needed to be careful of, he might not be in this situation. Nobody wants to listen to us. They all go on about how we don't understand [adopted son]'s needs. We do understand [adopted son]'s needs. We're the ones that understand them the best. We're just not qualified to be able to deal with them. – *adoptive parent*

In a small number of cases the Section 20 was rescinded because families were unhappy about the caring situation the young people were then placed in. One young person returned home, while the other remained with a foster carer against the adoptive parent's wishes.

I brought him home again because I just thought he'd go to jail or something, and I couldn't bear the fact that he was going to when I was trying to get him the support that he needed. So, I brought him home again. [...] he's been at home since.” - *special guardian*

Although others saw little prospect of their young person being able to return to live with them again, they did still foresee a role in the young person's future and wanted to continue to support them in other ways.

[Adoptive mother]'s bought a flat, with the half of the divorce settlement and we're hoping that at 18 [adoptive son] can be sort of supported to live there. She can't really see a time when he could live with her again. [...] everybody tells me they can't really." - *adoptive parent*

I just want things to stabilise with [adopted young person] and for him to start getting the support that he clearly needs. And I think if [adopted young person] is in a more stable place and he's getting the support he needs and we're being listened to, then we can start rebuilding our relationship with [adopted young person]. [...] I don't know whether the future looks like [adopted young person] being back living with us, but we love [adopted young person]. And we want to continue being his parents and we want to continue being part of his life. - *adoptive parent*

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

By interviewing 74 families with young people aged 12 to 25, this report offers adoptive parents and special guardians' retrospective reflections on decisions that they made, in some cases, around 20 years ago. In that time, there have been some important changes in the provision of support for adoptive parents and special guardians, including the introduction of RAAs and the ASGSF. Families' experiences may have been different if they were making these decisions in the last few years. Over this period there have also been updates to best practice guidance which already seek to address some of the difficult situations reported by families. These findings reinforce the importance of following best practice and the negative effect on families where that does not happen.

The analysis presented here was undertaken to explore 3 points of decision making – becoming an adopter or special guardian, seeking further help and placement breakdown – separately. Through the analysis, similarities were identified in the themes identified across these decisions. At each point, core factors can be grouped around 3 themes:

- families' perceived ability to meet their young person's needs.
- the level of support families believed was available to them; and
- the wider impact on other people in the family, including adoptive parents or special guardians' and siblings in the household.

The analysis shows how these 3 broad themes interacted, with changes in one of these often impacting on the others. For example, the heightened needs of the young person over time often triggered a reduction in access to informal support networks as families and friends drifted away. Attempts to access support, frequently perceived as a battle, impacted on the health and wellbeing of adoptive parents and special guardians, which in turn negatively impacted their ability to support their young people.

As shown in section 3, families tended to experience the biggest difficulties associated with heightened needs for the young person during adolescence, and the negative impacts this had on the family, coincided with a reduction in access to support. For those families where the placement broke down, it was this culmination of high levels of need, severe impact on the family and inability to access effective support which triggered these situations. Many felt angry and let down by services that they felt had allowed them to reach that stage.

Throughout this report, interviewees alluded to many areas where they would like to see improvements or additional provision. Many of these related to the availability of different forms of support or their experiences of working with professionals. These issues will be explored in more depth in forthcoming study outputs. Here, the focus is on conclusions

and recommendations to support adoptive parents and special guardians at these 3 critical decision-making points.

## **Better access to legal advice prior to an Order being made**

Families, especially special guardianship families, cannot be expected to be fully aware of the legal frameworks or court decisions relating to the permanence order and are not, typically, in a position to understand the long-term implications of these decisions for their families. Families need information about the process, their role in it and the potential for legal advice during this process. Legal advice could help to ensure that they fully understand the implications of decisions and do not unduly pressured. When making decisions about becoming a special guardian, families should, at a minimum, be steered towards information about how legal advice could benefit them.

## **Clear, thorough assessments of need, shared with families, at the time of the Order**

The process of applying for a SGO should include a “full assessment by relevant professionals of the child’s needs including health, development and education, and any specific special needs the child may have in both the short and longer term.”<sup>9</sup> Local authorities are also required to carry out adoption support assessments when children are matched to prospective adoptive parents to ensure they have an understanding of the immediate and longer-term health and developmental needs of those children.<sup>10</sup> This should inform and speed up access to appropriate support.

Families in our study did not feel that their child’s needs had been clearly assessed or communicated to them. While adoptive parents and special guardians recognised that some needs might not have been apparent at the time the Order was made, they wanted honest appraisals of what support their child might need, drawing on what is known about the longer-term effects of abuse, neglect and trauma in vitro or in early childhood and potential changes over time.

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<sup>9</sup> Public Law Working Group (2021) Best Practice Guidance: special guardianship orders. Family Justice Council. [https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Special-guardianship-BPG-report\\_Clickable.pdf](https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Special-guardianship-BPG-report_Clickable.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education. (2015). *Promoting the health and well-being of looked-after children: Statutory guidance for local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and NHS England*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/630623bdd3bf7f3660de63da/Promoting\\_the\\_health\\_and\\_well-being\\_of\\_looked-after\\_children\\_August\\_2022\\_update.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/630623bdd3bf7f3660de63da/Promoting_the_health_and_well-being_of_looked-after_children_August_2022_update.pdf). Accessed 06/04/25.

They also wanted information that would help them consider what their child's needs might mean for themselves, including if the young person would ever be able to live independently, or if the level of support needs might require them to give up work. It is important to recognise that future needs cannot be accurately predicted and that while early exposure to adverse experiences like trauma, abuse and neglect increase risks of negative outcomes for young people, these are not inevitable. Families need guidance and advice to help them make sense of information provided and to consider the potential implications for them into the longer-term.

## **Better preparation and information for special guardians**

Many of the special guardians in this study felt that decisions were rushed and that they had little time to prepare for taking on the care of their young people. Unlike adoptive parents, they often did not have access to training or information which would help them to make decisions about their ability to meet children's needs. In addition to being given a clear and thorough assessment of their child's needs at the time of the Order, special guardians and adoptive parents should be given access to other information and training about the effects of early trauma and attachment and how this might impact their family. Some of those who said they were able to access this kind of training later said that it helped them understand more trauma-informed parenting techniques which they found valuable. More information prior to the child coming to live with them could also help with understanding what support is available to them and how to access this support.

## **A consistent contact point for help seeking**

Not knowing who to approach to access support was a barrier for interviewees, either preventing or delaying help seeking, particularly once initial contact with a social worker following a permanence order had ended. Several interviewees thought that this could be addressed by providing a consistent point of contact for families so that they could reconnect easily when help was needed, while still allowing families to step away from social services during periods when they didn't need additional support. Having some consistency would also help families to trust that Children's Services understood the family's situation over time, rather than seeing the family only at points of crisis.

The reforms laid out in *Adoption: A vision for change* in 2016<sup>11</sup> included a commitment to improving access to support for adoptive families through regionalisation of support provision. However, for some families, it appears that the transition to RAAs resulted in existing adoptive families losing contact with social workers and finding it harder to

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<sup>11</sup> Department for Education. (2016). *Adoption: A vision for change*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-a-vision-for-change>. Accessed 06/04/2025.



access support. Given that this research illustrates how the families often had periods when they coped without support but later faced escalating challenges, RAAs need to ensure they know about families who adopted before regionalisation of support and should consider actively reaching out with a clear offer of support should it be needed. All agencies should consider checking family contact details annually, if they do not already, to touch base, offer an accessible and consistent route in to support and information and to reassure families that support is available.

## **Clear information about what support is available in a local area**

Families highlighted that a lack of awareness of what support is available to them was a barrier to seeking out help. The recent Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill<sup>12</sup> included a measure to require local authorities to publish information about the services in their area for children in kinship care. For families to benefit from this, information should be clear about what is likely to be suitable for families and young people in different situations, recognising that while families may know that they are struggling, they may not know what kind of support could help them. Information should also be clear about what kinds of support could be accessed via the ASGSF. Better signposting to voluntary sector services and support could also help with earlier access.

## **Regularly reviewed support plans**

Practice guidance emphasises that support plans for special guardians<sup>9</sup> and for adoptive parents<sup>13</sup> should be an integral part of making a placement or granting an Order. Very few interviewees mentioned that they had a support plan they could use to help them access the support their child needed, which is in keeping with other research findings. Interviews and a survey with stakeholders in 2013<sup>14</sup> showed that the quality of plans varied considerably at that time, with plans that were vague, incomplete or only place requirements on the special guardians, instead of offering a comprehensive view of the support to be provided, based on an assessment of the young person's needs. The 2023 adoption barometer found that only a third of adoptive parents in England said they had a written adoption support plan in place.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Department for Education. *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: Policy Summary Notes*. March 2025. [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: policy summary notes](#). Accessed 06/04/25.

<sup>13</sup> [Professionals - Adoption Support | Adoption England](#)

<sup>14</sup> Hunt, J. and Waterhouse, S. (2013). *It's just not fair! Support, need and legal status in family and friends care*. (Family Rights Group: London) <https://fostercarerresources.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/its-just-not-fair-support-need-and-legal-status-in-family-and-friends-care-full.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Adoption UK (2023) The Adoption Barometer.

<https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=6501ceec-87a1-4f03-ab7a-a5b2bcd62edb>

Interviewees not only wanted properly implemented support plans, based on robust assessment of need, at the point the AO or SGO was made, they also wanted these to be regularly reviewed to reflect changes over time, with a particular focus on periods of transition, including when children approach the teenage years and the move from primary to secondary school. Regularly revisiting support plans should not only consider the changing needs of the young person but also changes in the support provision available for them to access.

## **Improved, targeted support for families who are struggling to keep the young person at home**

Better packages of support are needed to help families where there is conflict between the young person and their adoptive parent or special guardian. Concerns about child-to-parent violence need to be addressed early with packages of support for the young person and their family that go beyond parenting courses. Addressing the above points would help to ensure earlier intervention. Failure to respond adequately to incidents of child-to-parent violence potentially put adoptive parents, special guardians and others in the household at risk of harm. They also risk breakdowns in permanent placements. Support must consider the wellbeing of all those in the family and should include respite to give families the space to work through challenges away from escalating conflict. Where families reach the point of potential disruption, a clear pathway allowing for temporary return to care, without judgement and with a package of support for whole families, could help some to rebuild positive relationships and maintain placements in the longer-term.

## **Improved understanding of the long-term effects of early trauma for care-experienced young people and their families among ‘front-door’ services and Children’s Services**

A common theme among families was that some of their social workers did not appear to understand how early trauma manifested years later for children in adoptive and special guardianship families. When families sought help, they felt that escalating problems were blamed on their parenting rather than recognised as common challenges for care experienced children, and this acted as a deterrent to help-seeking. Social workers in “front-door” services, who frequently respond to concerns about a child’s safety or welfare, were felt to approach adopters and special guardians who sought help as a safeguarding risk, rather than as trying to respond to a child’s earlier trauma. Additional training for child protection social workers around the long-term presentation of challenges and how these can be supported for adoptive and special guardianship families could help to address this concern.

This paper is the first output from wave one of the mainstage Family Routes study. Further outputs will explore other aspects of families' accounts, including their experiences with a range of interventions and support services, experiences of support in education, and other factors relating to young people's outcomes. These outputs will draw on additional interviews undertaken with adopted and special guardianship young people aged between 12 and 25. Future reports will also draw on data from a survey conducted with adoptive parents, special guardians and young people, and on data from social care and education administrative datasets. A further wave of the longitudinal study is also planned.

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