Strengthening the Safety Net: A Framework for Adoption Support in Scotland

A Policy Briefing on Care Pathways, Support Structures, and Governance Reform

Cross-Party Group on Social Work

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Introduction

The Cross-Party Group on Social Work has heard from Adoption Support Agencies, adoptive parents and people who have been adopted about their experience of the adoption system and post adoption support. This report outlines the challenges facing adoptive families and proposes a set of recommendations to support improved outcomes for adopted children and their families.

The Adoption UK Barometer 2025, the annual survey of adoptive families from Adoption UK presents a stark picture of adoption in Scotland. It indicates a substantial number of adoptive families facing significant challenges, with minimal support and a potentially preventable level of breakdowns in adoptive families. The report presents a landscape of fragmented infrastructure, support that is inadequately resourced and inconsistent in its provision. This is echoed in the experiences of adoptive parents and adoptees who have spoken with the Cross-party group and who have made direct representations to MSPs.

Adoption in Scotland

Approximately 5% of children leave care for adoptive placements. While this represents a small population of children in Scotland, the needs and complexities of adoptive families are often misunderstood by professionals. This results in families coming under significant pressure, without access to the specialist supports that might help them to avoid disruption and adoption breakdown. Recorded statistics for Scotland show 22 adoption breakdowns in the year 2024–25, however, there is no clear definition of adoption breakdown and no requirement for local authorities to record or report it. Representations from adoptive parents suggests a significantly higher level of adoption breakdown, which simply goes unrecorded and unrecognised.

Last year's Barometer report found that families in Scotland have the highest rate of adoption challenges in the UK. The Report tells us that 40% of adoptive families in Scotland describe themselves as facing severe difficulties, with 78% of adoptive families facing significant challenges. While the vast majority of children are placed for adoption before the age of 5 (95%), vulnerabilities for adoptive children peak during adolescence, teenage years and when facing transition to adulthood.

Adoptive families facing **significant** challenges

78%

Adoptive families facing **severe** challenges

40%

Adoption in Scotland

The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 provides a framework for provision of pre- and post-adoption support. Under current rules, local authorities must prepare children and their adoptive families for their new lives post-adoption and provide ongoing support until the adopted child reaches the age of 18. Post-adoption support is initially provided by the placing local authority, with responsibility transferring to the local authority where the adopted child lives after 3 years.

This creates a patchwork of supports and services. While immediate post-adoption support is often provided by the placing local authority via adoption and fostering teams, ongoing support then transfers to local children and families teams who may not have the specialist knowledge and understanding of adoption required to support children and their families.

Families often find themselves caught between local authorities and differing service provision across the country. Current legislation provides for post-adoption support, however, the delivery of this is inconsistent and, in many cases, ineffective.

When families experience crisis in teenage years, referrals are usually made via children and families teams who often view the family through a statutory lens without the understanding of adoption, which should underpin practice with adoptive families. In basic terms, children and families social work will usually look to parenting, household circumstances, and home environment to identify issues that may be causing relational difficulties and concerning or dangerous behaviour in children and adolescents to offer the best available support. However, in adoptive families, there needs to be an understanding of adoption and training to support families and children who have experienced trauma, abuse, neglect or all three before the family was brought together

Adoption in Scotland

A lack of specialist training, the fact that increasingly high levels of need must be identified before support can be provided, and services being further stretched every year creates a system where support can, often, turn to blame. This is exacerbated as social workers need to evidence the underlying reasons for support and intervention. In children's and families services this will usually mean identifying deficits in family support, which, if the needs of adoptive families are not recognised, can create parental blame. Sometimes, an eagerness to evidence the need for support can result a lack of shared understanding between social workers and adoptive families, inadvertently damaging relationships and causing alienation between the adoptive family and the teams trying to help.

In terms of data and understanding adoption breakdown, Dr Polly Cowan's research highlights systematic gaps in data collection, with no clear definition of what constitutes adoption breakdown. Dr Cowan has shown that the data is both incomplete and inaccurate, contributing to an overly idealistic picture of adoption in Scotland.

Recommendations

Improvement to adoption services and post adoption support is needed to support families in Scotland.

Any improvements to provision must recognise:

1) Adoption does not erase the impact of early adversity, abuse, or neglect

2) Children's needs evolve over time. Adolescence represents a particularly vulnerable period

3) Adoptive families require ongoing professional support to navigate complex developmental, emotional, and behavioural challenges

4) The state retains moral responsibility for children it removes from birth families and places for adoption

These recommendations must be developed with adoptive families, adopted people, and frontline practitioners. Standards must reflect lived experience and professional wisdom. Regular reporting to Parliament creates accountability and drives continuous improvement.

A national adoption practice model is required, establishing:

1) Standardised definitions of disruption, breakdown, and other key outcomes

2) Mandatory data collection on placement stability, support provision, and family outcomes

3) Effective adoption support starts with effective assessment and preparation for adoption of both prospective adopters and children awaiting permanence

4) Minimum standards for pre-adoption preparation, assessment, and matching

5) Evidence-based guidelines for post-adoption support services

6) A range of options for adoptive families including intensive family support services, shared care arrangements with the local authority and respite provision

7) Protocols for managing transitions when families experience breakdown

8) A review of adoption allowance to enable application throughout the course of adoption as families' circumstances change and children's changing needs emerge. This would allow flexibility and financial security for families enabling them to adjust their work commitments to meet the needs of their children without introducing the stress of financial hardship

Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill

This Bill includes a proposal to extend corporate parenting provision to adopted children. This is one potential way to strengthen supports available to adoptive families. The Cross-Party Group are also aware of amendments that were lodged at Stage 2 of this Bill which concerned issues related to adoption.

Conclusion

The families who testified about their experiences are clear that it is too late for them, but they do not want others to suffer the trauma and heartbreak they have endured.

Adoptive families deserve a system that recognises the complexity of adoption, provides sustained professional support, responds with compassion during crisis, and maintains accountability for outcomes.

Adopted and fostered children deserve the same rights and protections as other care-experienced young people, without artificial distinctions based on legal status.