



Department
for Education

PLACING CHILDREN IN SIBLING GROUPS FOR ADOPTION: A CALL FOR VIEWS

Foreword

Soon after my appointment as the Government's Adoption Advisor, I attended a meeting at 10 Downing Street where we discussed how the Prime Minister might encourage more families to come forward to adopt the large number of children in care who were in sibling groups.

At that time, it did not occur to me to question the policy of keeping brothers and sisters together. It seemed to me – self-evidently – to be the right thing to do.

But over the last year I have become troubled by the extent to which the strong presumption that sibling groups are kept intact may disadvantage children, at best delaying and sometimes preventing their adoption. Additionally, I have learned, first through visiting the excellent *Family Futures* adoption agency, and then through meeting parents of adopted siblings, that even when there are adopters willing to take on the challenge, keeping siblings together may not always be in the interests of individual children. For example where, through a period of neglect, an older child has been effectively parenting a younger child, it can be vital for them to be separated so that each can develop a positive attachment with their new parents.

Currently, there are too few adopters willing to take on the challenge of sibling groups, particularly those of three or more children. I am very clear that we need to do more on recruitment to close the gap between siblings in care and adopters willing to adopt them. But, as this document explains, the gap is immense and I very much doubt that it can ever be plugged through better marketing and recruitment.

But even if we saw a flood of adopters coming forward there are other reasons to be cautious. The evidence suggests that keeping siblings together may not always be in the interests of each member of a sibling group and younger children, in particular, can be damaged. And sometimes the challenge of adoption and compensating for an early life of neglect and abuse might be considerably easier when parents are coping with just one child and not two, three or four.

Sibling relationships are important and I am not suggesting that we

should not do what we can to keep siblings together. Just yesterday, I was buoyed by a conversation with one adoptive father who spoke entirely positively of his experience of adopting a brother and sister simultaneously. But the presumption that keeping siblings together needs to be tested in each instance and we need to be certain that we do not relegate the interests of one sibling to the interests of another.

But, as with contact, on which Ministers have also asked for views, this is a difficult and often emotive subject and it is vital that the Government gets policy and practice right. So I welcome Ministers' decision to open a debate and I hope that all those involved in adoption: professionals; magistrates and judges; adopters and those who have been adopted will respond.

Martin Narey
Government Advisor on Adoption
July 2012

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1. When the best option for children is adoption we want this to happen swiftly, so that they become part of a loving family without unnecessary delay. Earlier this year we published *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* to make the adoption process more efficient, and the system more user-friendly. For example, we announced that we will legislate to remove the delay caused by excessive emphasis on a perfect or partial ethnic match.

2. This paper considers the placement of siblings for adoption. We recognise that placing siblings together can have advantages and disadvantages. For many looked after children who go on to be adopted, the relationship with their siblings is among the most important. That relationship can provide much needed support, continuity and affirmation of identity at a difficult time in their childhood and for the rest of their life.

3. On the other hand, some siblings have negative or abusive relationships which can hold back the development of one or more of them. Adopting a single sibling will sometimes be the best way for adopters to provide the type and intensity of parenting required to help children overcome negative early experiences. Sibling groups often take longer than other children to be placed for adoption. Almost three quarters of siblings in care said they had been separated in foster care or children's homes. Separate adoption may be much better for some children than living separately in care.

4. Research on the impact of separating or keeping siblings together in adoptive placements is inconclusive. In some cases it is clearly right to separate siblings while in others it is better to keep them together. Professional judgement will always be necessary in understanding the needs of each child as an individual and understanding their relationship with their siblings. Balancing all of these considerations in order to decide what is in the best interests of an individual child is difficult and sensitive. It is an issue that is too important for government to ignore.

5. There are many different sorts of sibling groups. Complex and changing relationships within birth families mean there are many different sibling relationships. Half siblings and full siblings may live together or separately. There are families where some children are taken into care and others are not and cases where some, but not all, children have adoption as their permanence plan. These complex outcomes may be best for the children concerned, but they cause practical challenges for placement and contact, and emotional challenges for children and their adopters.

6. We want to see children in sibling groups in permanent homes sooner, with professionals making decisions based on the best interests of each child as an individual. We want to explore how to find more adopters for sibling groups because it will often be important to keep brothers and sisters together. However, the interests of one child should not be subordinated to the interests of others.

7. We need to be aware that there can be sound reasons for separating siblings. Those making decisions need to be realistic about too much emphasis on keeping siblings together, particularly those in large groups, delaying, and in the worst cases preventing, adoption. We also want to understand the challenges for adopters of taking on two or more children at once, especially where one of the children requires particularly intensive support from parents.

8. We hope to engage a wide range of voices in identifying ways to see siblings adopted more quickly than is currently the case, if this is the best way of finding them a stable and loving home. We are very keen to understand the views and experiences of those who were adopted or in care with, or without, their siblings. We also want to understand the experiences of people who have sought to adopt children who are in a sibling group. Finally, we would welcome the views of those who have worked with children for whom an adoption decision has been made and those who have worked with potential adopters.

The legal framework

9. Local authorities have a range of statutory duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their care. One of these duties is that, if siblings are looked after by the same local authority, it must ensure that where it is reasonably practicable and consistent with its duty to safeguard and promote the child's welfare siblings are placed together. Once an adoption agency is authorised to place a child for adoption, the agency's paramount consideration must be the child's welfare throughout their life. Local authorities must bear in mind the potential harm to the child of any delay in placement for adoption. Agencies must have regard to a range of issues including the relationship the child has with their relatives and the child's wishes. The Department's statutory guidance requires siblings to be placed for adoption together unless there is good reason for them not to be. Decisions must be based on an assessment of their relationship, their individual needs, and the capacity of the prospective adopters to meet their needs.

The evidence on placing sibling groups for adoption

10. In many cases children in sibling groups are looked after separately in care. The Children's Care Monitor 2011 report indicates that 59% of children and young people in care had at least one brother or sister who was also in care. Nearly three quarters (73%) of those children were placed separately from brothers or sisters. 92% of those who had been placed together with their siblings thought this had been right in their case. 41% of those who had been separated from one or more of their siblings thought that this was right in their case.¹ The issue of placement with or without siblings is clearly important, many children told Ofsted that this is a major issue.²

11. The evidence on outcomes for those children who are successfully

¹ *Children's Care Monitor 2011*, Ofsted

² *Ibid*

placed for adoption as part of a sibling group is mixed. Studies, including those considered by Hegar in her summary of international research, point to varying conclusions.³ Some suggest a positive influence on outcomes, others a negative influence and some no influence at all. There is no similar evidence specifically on the outcomes for children in sibling groups who, despite having an adoption decision, do not become adopted.

12. Sibling relationships can frequently bring benefits to children. Schofield and Simmonds note a range of positive effects of sibling relationships demonstrated by research. These include learning life skills, better empathy and sharing, and having a safe relationship in which to play and develop. Whilst recognising that sibling relationships differ between individuals and can have negative aspects they note that sibling relationships can be particularly important through times of adversity.⁴

13. There are however circumstances where placing siblings together in care or for adoption is clearly not in their best interests. Lord highlights a range of such circumstances, including where siblings' relationships are characterised by intense competition, bullying or scapegoating, where they display harmful behaviour towards each other, or where relationships perpetuate entrenched negative patterns of behaviour⁵.

14. Even where relationships between siblings do not display these characteristics, placing them together may reduce the chances that their adoptive placement will support them to thrive and particularly to overcome earlier negative experiences. In their 2007 assessment handbook, Burnell, Vaughan and Williams point out that adopted children who have suffered developmental delay require intensive parenting to help them catch up, and that placing siblings together can inhibit that. Similarly they note that siblings may have different and incompatible needs in terms of parenting approaches, which cannot readily be served within a single adoptive family⁶.

15. The experience of local authorities indicates that it takes far longer to place a sibling group for adoption than it takes to place a single child. Julie Selwyn (2010)⁷ found that sibling groups of three or more children were placed, on average, a year later than most children who are placed for adoption in England.⁸ Analysis of prospective adopters and children on the national Adoption Register shows few adopters willing to consider adopting more than one child at a time. This means that children in sibling groups are less likely to find a secure future home quickly, and may suffer harm as a result. We know that delay in placement for adoption can be damaging for

³ Hegar, R. L.; (2005). *Sibling placement in foster care and adoption: An overview of international research*. Children and Youth Services Review, 27, 717-739.

⁴ Schofield, G.; Simmonds, J.; (2009) *The Child Placement Handbook*. British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London

⁵ Lord, J.; (2001) *Together or apart? Assessing brothers and sisters for permanent placement* Childright, 177 (June): 6-8.

⁶ Burnell, A.; Vaughan, J.; Williams, L.; (2007) *Family Futures Assessment Handbook: Frameworks for Assessing Children Who Have Experienced Developmental Trauma*. Family Futures Consortium

⁷ Saunders, H.; Selwyn, J.; (2010) *Experiences of Agencies and Adopters in Placing Sibling Groups for Adoption from Care*. School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol

⁸ Ibid

children, particularly younger children

16. This is important because, if birth parents cannot provide or develop the capacity to provide good enough care, early separation and timely placement in a permanent home are likely to offer the best hope of a full recovery from early trauma or attachment deficits. For example a review of international evidence on attachment concluded that those who were adopted before they reached 12 months of age were as securely attached as their non-adopted peers, whereas those adopted after their first birthday showed less attachment security than non-adopted children⁹.

17. Once children are in care, delay in moving them into stable, long-term placements continues to be harmful to them, whatever their age. It can make it more likely that they will have to move between several temporary placements and suffer further emotional upheaval. It can also mean that, if and when they are adopted, they are more likely to display behavioural and attachment problems. A study following up a sample of children who were adopted or in long-term foster care, found that the later a child was placed with permanent carers the lower the chances of improvement in relation to their emotional and behavioural difficulties¹⁰. These difficulties, in turn, are associated with an increased risk of the adoptive placement breaking down¹¹.

18. There are a range of reasons why sibling groups take longer to place. At least some of the delay is created by local policies and the beliefs of individual professionals. Social workers can sometimes be pessimistic about the chances of finding an adoptive placement for sibling groups which can lead to weak and indecisive family finding¹².

19. This is only part of the picture. It is also genuinely difficult to find adopters who will take sibling groups of three children or more. The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) has indicated that as demand for potential adopters increases, some are pulling back from the more challenging children, including sibling groups. Data from the Adoption Register in 2011/12 shows that of the 2536 children referred to the Register from England, 1318 (52%) were single children placements; there were 349 groups of two siblings, 71 groups of three siblings, four groups of four siblings, and there was one group of five siblings. There were 270 people on the register able to adopt groups of 2 children and 21 able to consider groups of 3 children. Some adopters do go on to adopt a sibling born later thus achieving placement of siblings.

20. Understanding the characteristics of those who do consider sibling groups could help us recruit more such adopters. Julie Selwyn¹³ found that

⁹ Van den Dries, L.; Juffer, F.; Van Ijzendoorn, M.H.; and Bakermans-Kranenburg, M.J.; (2009) *Fostering Security? A meta-analysis of attachment in adopted children. Children and Youth Services Review, 31*, 410-421

¹⁰ Biehal, N.; Ellison, S.; Baker, C.; and Sinclair, I.; (2010) *Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in long-term foster care and adoption*. British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London

¹¹ Selwyn, J.; Sturgess, W.; Quinton, D.; and Baxter, C.; (2006) *Costs and Outcomes of Non-infant Adoptions*, British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London

¹² *op cit*

¹³ *op cit*

there are prospective adopters who are willing and motivated to take on sibling groups from the outset. Most parents (89%) who adopted sibling groups chose to adopt because they could not have their own children. The adopters' reasons for wanting to adopt a sibling group ranged from believing that a family should consist of more than one child; not wanting to repeat the adoption process; having grown up in a large family; thinking this would give them a better chance of adopting young children or obtaining children more quickly; wanting to prevent siblings from being separated; relishing the challenge of adopting a sibling group; to thinking it would be easier than adopting a single child.

The way forward: options for creating a balanced approach to placing children who are in sibling groups for adoption

21. The issues described above are complex and need sensitive treatment by professionals and by government. We would welcome views on a way forward that will see decisions made based on the best interests of each individual child within a sibling group.

How we can find more adopters willing and able to take on sibling groups, particularly larger groups?

22. We know that a shortage of adopters willing to adopt sibling groups leads to delay for those children. While there are many advantages that can come from adopting a group of siblings, the burden a sibling group places on adopters can reduce the likelihood of success of the adoption. We are committed to improving the support given to those who are willing and able to consider adopting sibling groups of children and would welcome views on how we can do this.

23. We know that some adoption agencies focus successfully on finding adoptive homes for larger sibling groups than others, and at supporting those adoptions. We know that prospective adopters of sibling groups may face financial and other challenges, for example around the size of car needed or the number of bedrooms. We would welcome views on how to find more families for sibling groups – both for adoption and within the care system – and how we can better support those families. We should like to understand more about why this is difficult to achieve and in particular:

- The barriers to children in sibling groups being placed together in the care system;
- The most effective way of attracting and supporting adopters willing and able to adopt sibling groups of children; and
- Whether there are elements of social work practice that support or inhibit the placement of children in sibling groups with adopters.

Making sure that sibling group placement for adoption is only sought for children when it is in each individual child's best interests

24. We believe the legal framework needs to support social workers to

strike an appropriate, child centred balance between the potential advantages of placing children for adoption with their siblings and the potential disadvantages of any delay or negative impacts on the individual child of placement with their siblings.

25. This would mean that siblings are not placed together if the harm from delay in finding a suitable adoptive placement or of being placed with their sibling outweighs the benefit to them of placement with their sibling. Conversely, where it is in the children's best interests to be placed together but no suitable adoptive placement can be found and a long term foster placement for the siblings is available, the decision about whether adoption is in each child's best interests may need to be revisited. For some children separate placement for adoption but with good contact with siblings might be the best way of securing their long term interests.

26. Since sibling groups may feature older child/children whose needs and experiences may make it more difficult to find a group placement, understanding the actual experience in the system through further case analysis and tracking from care proceedings should enable us to identify where earlier intervention opportunities might have been missed and if greater multi-professional input might have enabled earlier decision

27. One approach could be to amend the legal framework for adoption to qualify the current underlying presumption in favour of placing siblings together. At the moment, the primary legislation does not explicitly take into account the issue of sibling group placement for adoption, but statutory guidance says that siblings should be placed with the same adopters, unless there is good reason not to do so. We believe that the law should be explicit that the case for placing siblings together should be considered on the needs of each individual child. We would welcome views on this. We would also welcome views on the features of good arrangements for contact with siblings when children are placed for adoption separately.

Conclusion

28. We understand the natural wish to keep brothers and sisters together and believe that, very often, that will be best for children. It is important that we develop a way forward which, in every case, promotes the interests of the individual child. To help us understand how to achieve this we would value views from professionals involved in supporting children in care and from those involved in adoption as well as adoptive parents.

Summary of Questions

We welcome views on the following points:

How we can find more adopters willing and able to take on sibling groups, particularly larger groups

How we can better support those families

Why this is difficult to achieve at present In particular:

- *The barriers to children in sibling groups being placed together in the care system;*
- *The most effective way of attracting and supporting adopters willing and able to adopt sibling groups of children; and*
- *Whether there are elements of social work practice that support or inhibit the placement of children in sibling groups with adopters.*

Whether the law should be more explicit that the case for placing siblings together should be considered on the merits of the case for each individual child

How we could reframe legislation and guidance to make this clear and set out the features of good arrangements for contact with siblings when children are adopted separately

Please send responses to adoption.reform@education.gsi.gov.uk by Friday 31 August



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