

Written submission to BASW's Adoption Enquiry

Introduction

This paper explores the trends in adoption of children from the care system using information from government statistics. It analyses this government data on children's social care particularly focussing on whether promoting adoption leads to reductions in long stays in care and on the trends in the number of children in adoptive and special guardianship placements. Government data provides annual snapshots of children in care and those leaving to enter adoption. However, as placement in adoption is a long term option its effects are cumulative and require analysis that provides a longitudinal view to analyse impact. This paper provides a longitudinal view through calculations using government annual statistics.

A politically promoted policy

Adoption from care has been promoted by all three major English political parties whilst in government. A more aggressive policy was introduced in 2000 when the Labour government produced a white paper declaring its intention to increase the number of adoptions from care by 40% by 2005. Alan Milburn, the health secretary who at that time was responsible for social work, said: "Children stay in the care system for longer than they should. More than 28,000 children have been in care continuously for more than two years." Ten years later, in 2015 the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, also called for a doubling of the number of children adopted from care¹. The stated reason for the current government's and both the previous coalition and Labour governments' policy of promoting adoption was to ensure children in or likely to be in care long-term were considered for adoption. The policy promotes the use of adoption including where parents contest it. Whilst the rhetoric¹ of this policy is to provide placement in a "loving family", a more cynical interpretation might suggest that this also has something to do with the spiralling costs of children who are looked after.

Trends in the number of children adopted from care

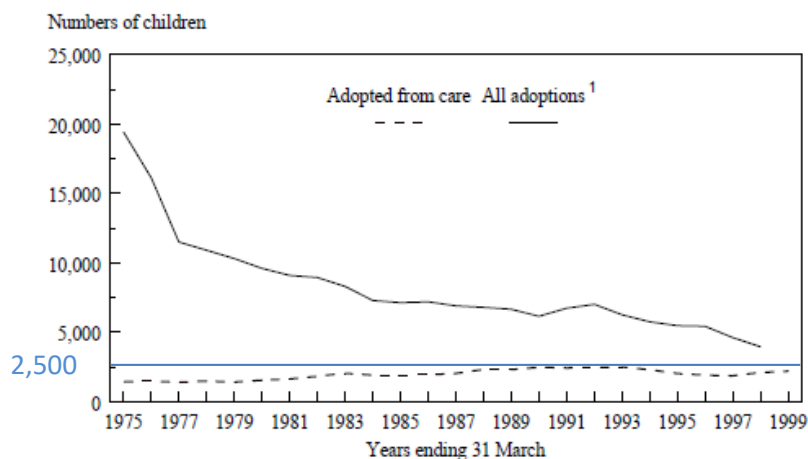
The dotted line in Figure 1 shows the number of children who left care because they were adopted between 1975 and 1999. The 1989 Children Act introduced the concept of parental responsibility which reduced the need for adoption to attain parental rights and contributed to the continuing decline in adoptions of children not in care shown in Figure 1². As can be seen the numbers adopted from care prior to 2000 were below 2,500 a year. I have not been able to obtain the data on which this graph is based but have found information on children adopted from care going back to 1995 in the annual looked after children statistics which are available on-line and trends are shown in Figure 2 and Table 1. This shows that the Labour government's target of a 40% increase in adoption from care was achieved.

¹ David Cameron cited in <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/11/02/special-guardianship-order-assessments-strengthened/>

² Source: Figure 9.1

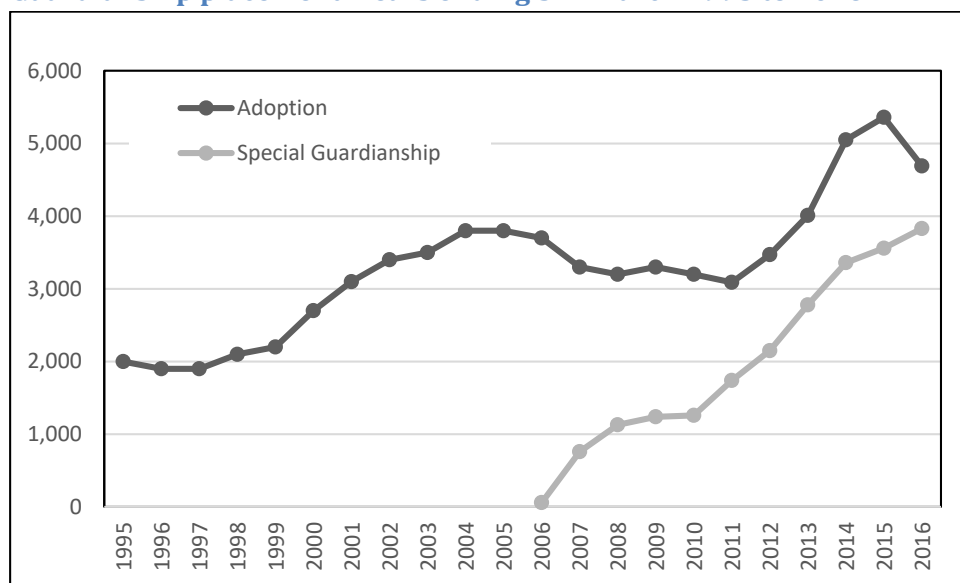
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Figure 1: Children adopted from care, and all adoptions years ending 31st March 1977 to 1999, England



Source: Children looked after by local authorities, year ending 31 March 1975-1999, England: Commentary³

Figure 2: Trends in Looked After Children Leaving care for Adoption and Special Guardianship placement. Years ending 31st March 1995 to 2016



Source: Children looked after in England (including adoption) statistics

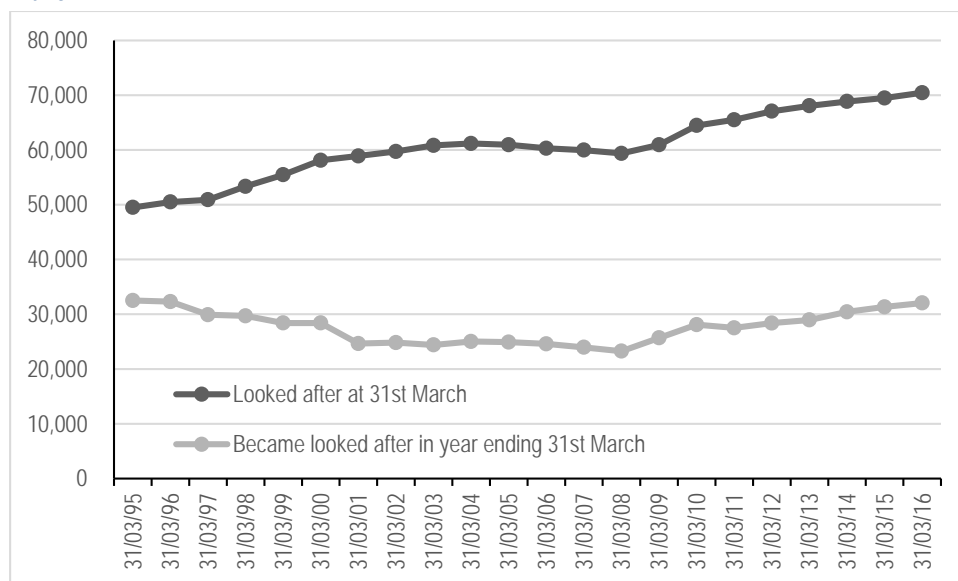
Trends in children being looked after

Figure 3 shows that during the period leading up to the declaration of the policy in late 2000 the number of children entering care *fell* by about a quarter and the numbers in care *increased* by just under a quarter indicating that children were staying for longer periods in care. From 2000 to 2008 the numbers of children becoming looked after fell very slightly whilst the numbers in care

³ Downloaded from http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Statistics/StatisticalWorkAreas/Statisticalsocialcare/DH_4080268

plateaued. From 2008 onwards there has been an increase in both children becoming looked after and children looked after at 31st March.

Figure 3: Number of children looked after on 31st March and becoming looked after in year ending 31st March 1995 -2016



Special Guardianship

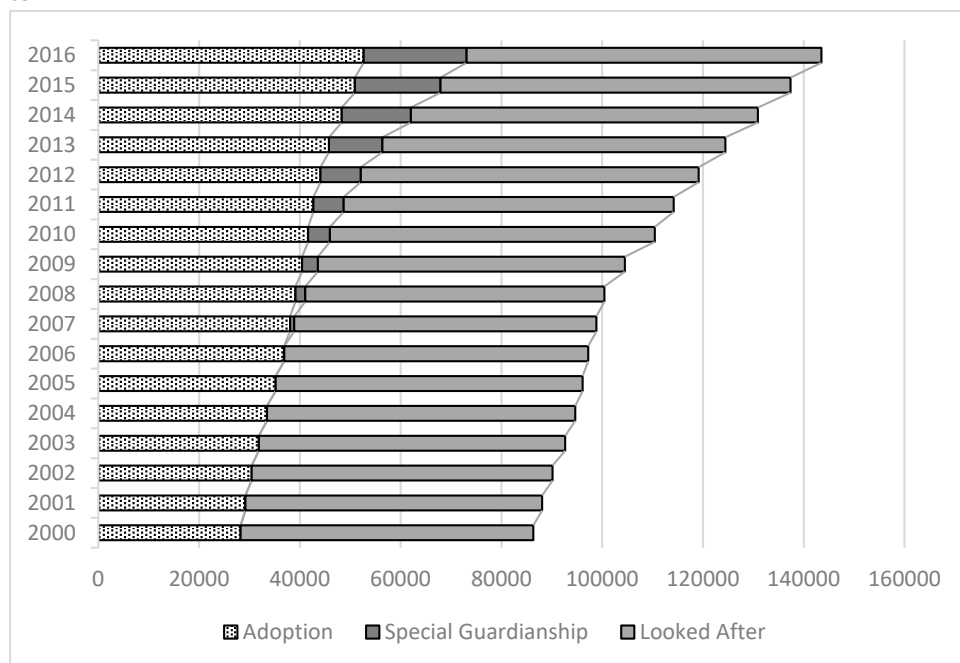
Whilst the focus of the adoption inquiry is necessarily on adoptions the trends in adoption need to be understood alongside other permanence options as well as trends in children in care. The Labour government, in its announcement of its policy on adoption also announced its intention to introduce a new measure, special guardianship, to reduce long stays in care for children needing a permanent home, but not wanting to sever links with their birth parents. This came into force on 1st January 2006 and, like adoption, provides permanent care outside of the looked after children system. Special guardianship provides a route for foster carers to take on a permanent relationship with their foster child and is also used for other carers, often relatives of the child, to have a permanent legal bond with a child. Since its introduction 21,870 children have left care by this route and figure 1 shows the rapid increase since its introduction in 2006. Just over half of the children left care to live with special guardians who were former foster parents who included some relatives – 12,340, 56.4% of children entering guardianship.

Number of adoptions from care increases by 76%

So what was the impact of these changes on adoptions? Over the 16-year period from 2001 to 2016 59,970 children were adopted from care. An estimated⁴ 34,000 children would have been adopted between 1985 and 2000. This estimate shows that there was likely to be more than 25,000 extra adoptions of children from care since 2001, an increase of 76%.

⁴ Figures from before 1995 could not be obtained for this report, the number of adoptions from 1995 to 2000 was 12,800, an average of 2,133 a year and figure 1 shows this average would be similar for the 16 years preceding 2000. The estimate is therefore 2,133*16

Figure 4: Children looked after, leaving care to adoptive parents and special guardians⁵ at 31st March 2000 to 2016



Both the numbers in care and living in permanent placements have risen

81,840 children left care for permanence through adoption or special guardianship between 2001 and 2016 an increase of over 47,000 above the estimated number leaving care to permanence in the 16 years before 2001. Also over the years since 2001 the number of children in care has risen by 20% from 58,890 to 70,440 in 2016.

The number of children (i.e. those aged under 18 at the 31st March) who left care to live with adoptive parents or special guardians can be estimated from the age at placement and the year placed⁶. Figure 4 (also see Table 2 in the appendix) shows the trend in the numbers looked after alongside the estimates for children living with adoptive parents or special guardians⁷ on 31st March 2000 to 2016. On 31st March 2016 it is estimated that there were over 24,400 more children who had been adopted than in 2000 alongside the 20,400 children who had been in guardianship. This means that the total of 73,000 children on 31st March 2016 who had left care to go to adoptive or special guardianship placements was more than 2.5 times the number of children who had been to adoptive families on 31st March 2000. These trends mean that there are clearly more children separated from their parents than before the policy, but it is hard to work out exactly how many. There will be some children who were adopted or in guardianship who have returned to care

⁵ Note there will be some children double counted due to breakdowns in adoption and special guardianship where children return to care and were still in care on 31st March

⁶ The DfE publishes the ages of children leaving care to be adopted in age bands and for the purpose of this estimate it has been assumed that children are equally distributed within an age band -i.e. in the age band 1-4 years each year of age is assumed to have a quarter of the total for that age band. For children leaving care under special guardianship there is no regular publication of numbers. Estimates have been made on the basis of the age distribution found in Wade, Sinclair and Stuttdard (2014 p. 78) using a similar approach to that for adoption.

⁷ Estimates have been made about how many children aged 0 to 17 were placed with adoptive parents and special guardians using available data on the ages of children when leaving care to adoption or special guardianship and estimates for the period prior to 1995 are based on averages from 1995 to 2000.

because their placement broke down and likewise others may have returned to parents. If this overlap is ignored the number of children separated from their parents in care, adoption or special guardianship increased from around 86,300 in 2000 to around 143,500 in 2016 the latter being a rate of 120 /10000 children in England aged under 18 and a 66% increase in children placed away from their parents since the introduction of the adoption policy.

Increase in children staying for long periods in care

This policy was meant to reduce the number of children staying for long periods in care reducing it from the 28,000 children cited by Alan Milburn. However, the number of children looked after for more than two years on 31st March 2015 was 32,682 children⁸ an increase in line with the increase of 20% in children in care. Thus despite the large increase in numbers leaving care for permanence there are more children in long stay care than before the policy.

High users of adoption are also high users of special guardianship

Research into special guardianship found that “authorities that were relatively high users of SGOs relative to their population also seemed to be high users of adoption” (Wade et al. 2014 p.89).

Numbers in care increased in areas with higher rates of adoption and fell in areas with lower rates of adoption

The percentage of children leaving care to be adopted varies across local authorities from 30% to under 3%. Authorities that have the highest percentage of children leaving care to be adopted should show a fall in numbers in care as it is assumed these children would otherwise remain in care. However, the opposite is true. In the third of local authorities with the highest adoption rates over the last five years there was an increase of 10% in children in care⁹ whilst in the third with the lowest rate of adoption the number of children in care fell by 3% (see table 1). Rather than higher rates of adoption leading to less children in care it is associated with increases.

Table 1: Adoption and changes in the number of children in care 2012 to 2016 (excluding unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children)

Rank of local authorities ^a by proportion of children leaving care to be adopted	Percentage of children leaving care who were adopted 2012 to 2016	Adopted from care 2012 to 2016	Number looked after ^b on 31/03/11	Number looked after ^b 31/03/16	Change in children in care
Top third ^c	20.5%	10040	23056	25356	2300
Middle third ^c	14.7%	8355	24300	25746	1446
Bottom third ^c	9.1%	3990	15439	14947	-492

a Excludes 3 small local authorities where less than 15 children left care
 b Excludes unaccompanied asylum seeking children
 c Two groups contain 50 local authorities and the middle 49

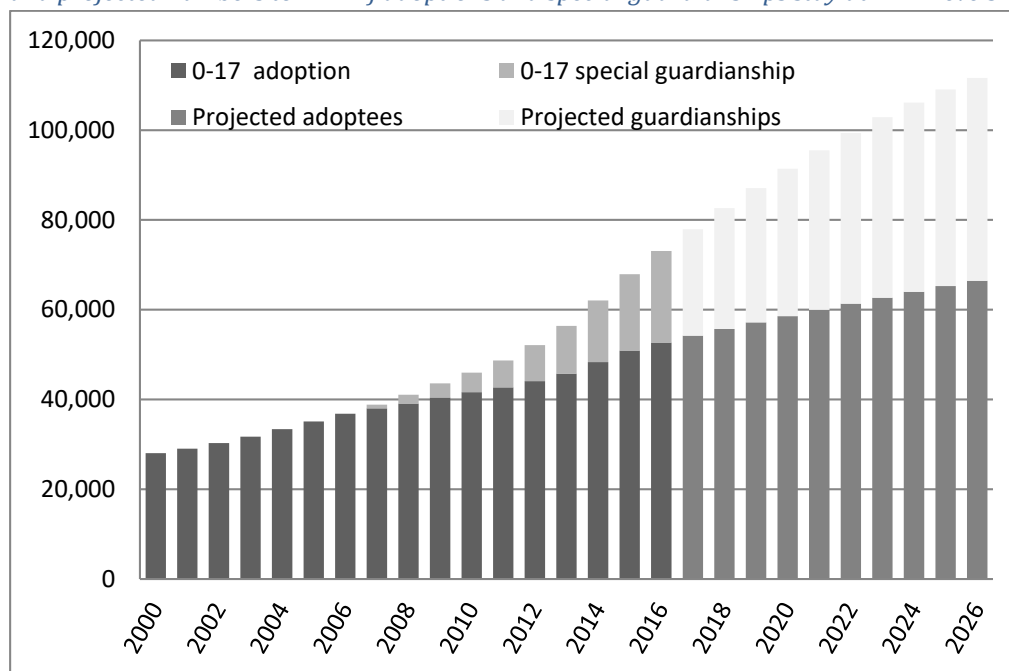
⁸ Figures for 2016 are not available and for 2015 this is calculated from the number of children who were in care for more than a year in 2014 and the numbers leaving between 2014 and 2015 who had been in care for more than a year.

⁹ In these comparisons Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children have been excluded from the looked after figures

Numbers living with adoptive parents and special guardians projected to rise for the next 10 years

Figure 4 shows projections for the numbers of children ceasing to be looked after because of adoption or guardianship based on the numbers placed for adoption and special guardianship staying at 2016 levels. It shows that, without any increase in numbers placed it can be expected that the number on 31st March who had been with adoptive parents and guardians will continue to rise for at least 10 years.

Figure 4: Estimated¹⁰ numbers of children living with adopters and special guardians on 31st March and projected numbers to 2026 if adoptions and special guardianships stay at 2016 levels



Discussion

The findings above show a number of unanticipated outcomes of the policy to increase the number of children adopted from care. Firstly the policy has been accompanied by a substantial increase in the number of children placed away from their parents. The extent of this has been hidden since the numbers living on any one day in adoptive families and special guardianship are not estimated or published. Secondly, the policy has clearly failed in its aim to reduce the number of children staying for long periods in care. The fact that the number of children in care has risen to a 31 year high over a period when increasing numbers of children have been taken out of care to be adopted or placed in special guardianship is very surprising. This increase in both children in care and placements for adoption implies that one or a combination of the following have occurred:

- Children were adopted or placed with special guardians who previously would not have had long placements in care
- Children were adopted or placed with special guardians who would previously have stayed for long periods and other children replaced them in care

¹⁰ Uses the same method of calculation used to estimate the number of children placed on 31st March annually using the assumption that the number of children adopted or placed in special guardianship stays at the 2016 level

- New groups of children have entered care
- Children who previously would have stayed in care for short periods are now staying in care longer term.

Figure 3 suggests that there has been a combination of these factors possibly occurring at different periods in response to other factors in the child care system such as levels of preventive services and political and public attitudes. One factor that has been felt to have had a major impact on the number of children entering care has been the response to the death of Peter Connelly (also known as Baby P) in 2007. This was followed by widespread publicity which focussed on blame of social workers and children's social care which has been said to lead to a more defensive practice by social work agencies. In addition, this period from 2007/6 saw the start of the impact of the financial crisis, growing poverty and austerity policies leading to cuts in family support. In the face of this 'perfect storm' the long term downward trend in children becoming looked after ceased and both the number of children becoming looked after and the numbers looked on 31st March after started to rise following the short decline between 31/03/04 and 31/03/08. In the appendix tables A3 to A5 show that alongside this there was an increase in the number of child protection investigations – a change which has been called the investigative turn. Larger proportions of these investigations do not lead to a child protection plan and the increase in plans is almost entirely due to neglect or emotional abuse.

Thus despite ever growing numbers of children placed away from their families we are not seeing any reduction in children being involved in the child protection system, in fact the child protection net continues to widen rapidly.

The BASW investigation into adoption aims to consider the ethical implications of this area of practice. The above findings indicate that at the system level this policy is at best not having the desired impact and at worst appears to be part of a mass and growing removal of children from parental care based on an ever wider definition of what constitutes abuse and neglect.

Appendix

Table A1: Children in care, leaving care and adopted from care 1995 to 2016

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Looked after 31 st March	49,500	50,500	50,900	53,350	55,460	58,100	58,890	59,710	60,820	61,170	60,940
Entries to care	32,500	32,300	29,900	29,700	28,400	28,400	24,640	24,820	24,390	25,020	24,910
Care Leavers	Not Available	Not Available	30,300	29,000	27,100	26,800	25,100	25,100	24,300	25,800	26,000
Adopted	1,980	1,870	1,830	2,190	2,060	2,710	3,070	3,430	3,540	3,760	3,770

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Looked after 31 st March	60,300	59,960	59,370	60,930	64,470	65,500	67,070	68,060	68,840	69,480	70,440
Entries to care	24,590	23,960	23,250	25,680	28,090	27,510	28,390	28,960	30,430	31,340	32,050
Care Leavers	25,500	24,990	24,500	25,030	25,310	26,830	27,510	28,650	30,600	31,320	31,710
Adopted	3,700	3,300	3,200	3,300	3,200	3,090	3,470	4,010	5,050	5,360	4,690
Special Guardianship	60	760	1,130	1,240	1,260	1,740	2,150	2,780	3,360	3,560	3,830

Table A2: Children looked after, and estimates of those aged under 18 who left care for adoption and special guardianship at 31st March 2001 to 2016

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Increase 01 to 16	
Adoption ¹	29,000	30,300	31,700	33,400	35,200	36,800	38,000	39,100	40,400	41,600	42,700	44,100	45,800	48,300	50,900	52,700	23,700	82%
Special Guardianship ²						60	800	2,000	3,100	4,300	6,000	8,000	10,100	13,700	17,000	20,400	20,400	-
Looked after	58,890	59,710	60,820	61,170	60,940	60,300	59,960	59,370	60,930	64,470	65,500	67,070	68,060	68,840	69,480	70,440	11,550	20%
Total ³	87,900	90,000	92,500	94,500	96,000	97,200	98,800	100,400	104,500	110,400	114,200	119,200	124,400	130,900	137,400	143,500	55,600	63%

Notes: 1 Estimated number of children adopted from care aged 0 to 17 on 31st March estimated numbers are rounded to nearest 100

2 Estimated number of children going to special guardians from care aged 0 to 17 on 31st March estimated numbers are rounded to nearest 100

3 Total may not add up due to rounding and note there will be some children double counted due to breakdowns in adoption and special guardianship where children return to care

Submission to BASW Enquiry by Professor Andy Bilson

Table A3 Referrals to Children's Social Care, Child Protection Investigations registrations

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Referrals	-	569,400	570,200	572,700	552,000	569,300	545,000	538,500	547,000	603,700	615,000	605,100	593,500	657,800	635,600	621,470
S.47 enquiries	80,100	69,900	65,000	72,100	68,500	71,800	73,800	76,800	84,100	89,300	111,700	124,600	127,100	142,500	160,200	172,290
CP Plans/ Registrations	27,000	27,800	30,200	31,200	30,700	31,500	33,300	34,000	37,900	44,300	49,000	52,100	52,700	59,800	62,200	63,310

Table A4: Child Protection Registrations/Plans made during years ending 31st March and main abuse category 2001, 2008 & 2016

	2001	2008	2016
Registrations or child protection plans made during the year	27,000	34,000	63,310
Initial Main abuse category of registrations and plans			
Neglect	12,400	15,300	28,360
Physical abuse	8,000	5,000	6,200
Sexual abuse	4,300	2,300	2,970
Emotional abuse	4,600	8,600	22,420
Multiple/other	600	2,900	3,350

Table A5: Child Protection Registration/Plans on 31st March and main abuse category 2001, 2008 & 2016

	2001	2008	2016
Registered or on child protection plan at 31 st March	27,000	29,300	50,310
Main abuse category of registrations and plans			
Neglect	10,100	13,400	23,150
Physical abuse	5,800	3,400	4,200
Sexual abuse	3,200	2,000	2,370
Emotional abuse	4,600	7,900	17,770
Multiple/other	3,200	2,500	2,810