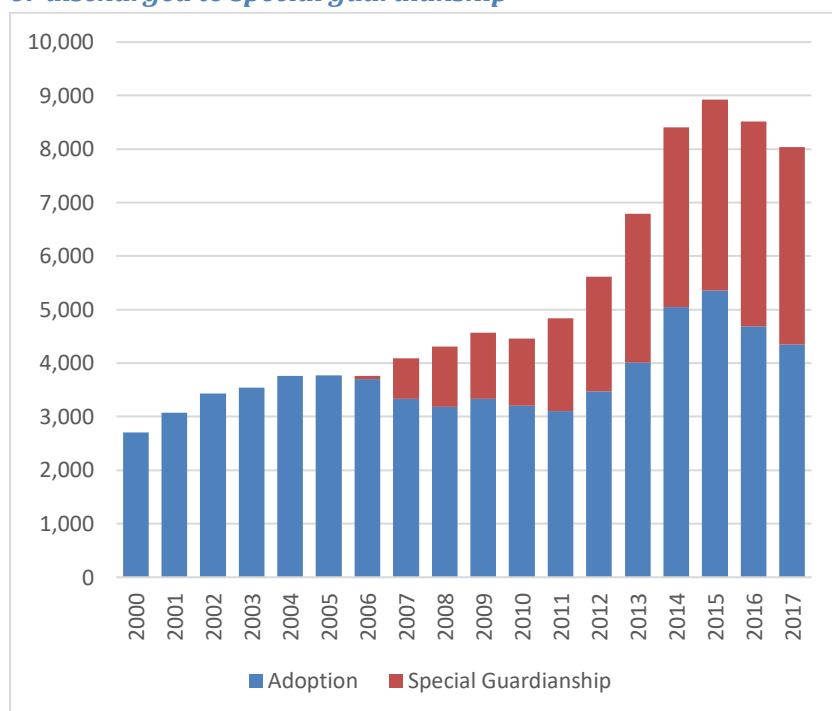


The government's adoption drive isn't achieving its aims.

Updated paper from Community Care

Seventeen years ago, the government announced its intention to increase adoption and introduce special guardianship (guardianship) to reduce the numbers in care. More recently government has again called for the number of adoptions to be doubled. A key aim of this policy is to reduce the number of children looked after, especially those who spend long periods in care, and instead to find permanent homes through one of these two means. By 2017 the rate of adoptions had more than doubled since the late 1990s and when guardianship is added almost four times as many children left care to these permanent placements (in 1999 2060 children were adopted whilst in 2017 8040 were adopted or placed with guardians). Between 2000 and 2017, 92,610 children left the care system to permanent placements, 67,050 to adoption and 25,560 to guardianship including many guardians who were family members. Over the same period the number of children in care has increased by 25% and is higher than for over 30 years and more children are spending long periods in care.

Figure 1: Annual number of children ceasing to be looked after because they were adopted or discharged to special guardianship

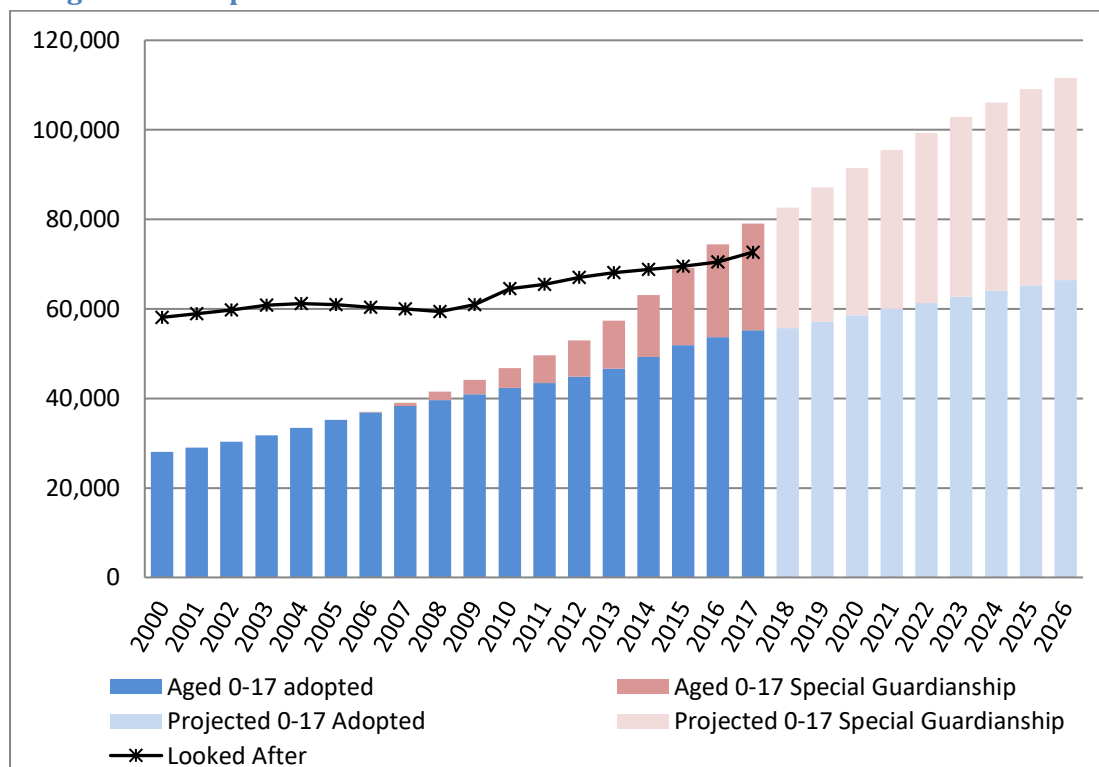


Increasing numbers of children separated from parents

These trends mean that there are clearly more children separated from their parents than before the policy, but it is hard to work out just how many. Government provides statistics on how many children were looked after on the 31st March each year, but we don't have the same statistics for the stock of children who were living with adoptive parents or guardians. The graph below shows estimates of the number of children who left care for adoption or guardianship who were still aged under 18 on 31st March of each year.¹ This includes some children no longer with adoptive parents or guardians because their 'permanent' placement broke down. Figure 2 shows that the number of children aged 0-17 who had been adopted or placed with special guardians rose from an estimated 29,750 children on 31st March 2000 to 79,000 in 2017 and, if the annual rate of adoptions and

guardianships stay at the 2017 level rather than doubling as the government have proposed, these numbers will increase to over 111,000 in the next 10 years (figure 2).

Figure 2: Estimated number aged 0-17 at 31st March 2000-2017 who have been adopted or placed in guardianship, number looked after and projection if 2017 rate of adoption and guardianship is maintained



Differences in practice

This picture of increasing adoption and increasing numbers of children in care is not uniform across the country. The annual rate of children leaving care to be adopted varies across local authorities from 28% to under 4%ⁱⁱ of children leaving care to be adopted in the last 5 years. If adoption and guardianship is an alternative to placement in care we might expect authorities with the highest rates of children being adopted or placed in guardianship to reduce numbers in care as more children are taken permanently out of the system. However, the opposite is true. In the third of local authorities with the highest proportion of children leaving care to be adopted or placed in guardianship over the last five years there was an increase of 10.9% in children in care whilst in the third with the lowest rate the number of children in care fell by 3.2% (see table 1). A study of guardianshipⁱⁱⁱ found that higher users of adoption were also higher users of guardianship. However, this relationship was not found for the rates of children leaving care for guardianship and adoption in the last five years.

High users of adoption and special guardianship increase the numbers in care

So there is a gradient with local authorities that are higher users of adoption and special guardianship more likely to increase the numbers in care. It was found that those authorities with a high rate of use of adoption and special guardianship also had a 50% higher rate of children under one entering care in the last five years (see table 1). In these local authorities 1.07% of all children aged under 5 in 2017 had been placed in care before the age of one compared to 0.70% of those in

the local authorities with low rates of adoption and guardianship. This significant difference in practice with high rates of children entering care in their 1st year of life needs further exploration to determine the extent to which the higher rate of children leaving care to adoption and guardianship is a consequence of higher rates of entry or vice versa and how this relates to the level of support offered to families to prevent entry.

An analysis comparing the extent of deprivation in local authorities and the proportion of children leaving care to be placed in adoption and special guardianship found no statistically significant relationship between levels of use of adoption and guardianship and the extent of deprivation in the authorities (see table 2) though there are slightly more authorities with a high extent of deprivation amongst the authorities making less use of adoption and guardianship which are also those with lower entries to care of those aged under one and a slight fall in the number of children in care. This raises the question of what is the reason for the 50% higher rates of children entering care aged under 1 in the last five years in the local authorities with high rates of adoption.

Table 1: Adoption, Special Guardianship and changes in the number of children in care 2013 to 2017 (excluding unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children)

	Rank of local authorities ^a by rate of children leaving care to be adopted		
	Low (50 Local Authorities)	Medium (50 Local Authorities)	High (51 Local Authorities)
Looked After on 31/3/12^a	19713	20223	24968
Looked After on 31/3/17^a	19079	21364	27690
Change 31/3/12 to 31/3/17^a	-634	1142	2722
Change %^a	-3.2%	+5.6%	+10.9%
Adopted from care 1/4/13 to 31/3/17	5587	7578	10019
SG from care 1/4/13 to 31/3/17	4563	5153	7125
Adoption + SG 1/4/13 to 31/3/17	10149	12730	17144
% care leavers adopted or SG	12.0%	17.6%	22.8%
Admissions aged under 1 year old 1/4/13 to 31/3/17	8106	9290	12236
Rate admissions under 1 of those aged 0-4	0.70%	0.82%	1.07%

a Excludes unaccompanied asylum seeking children

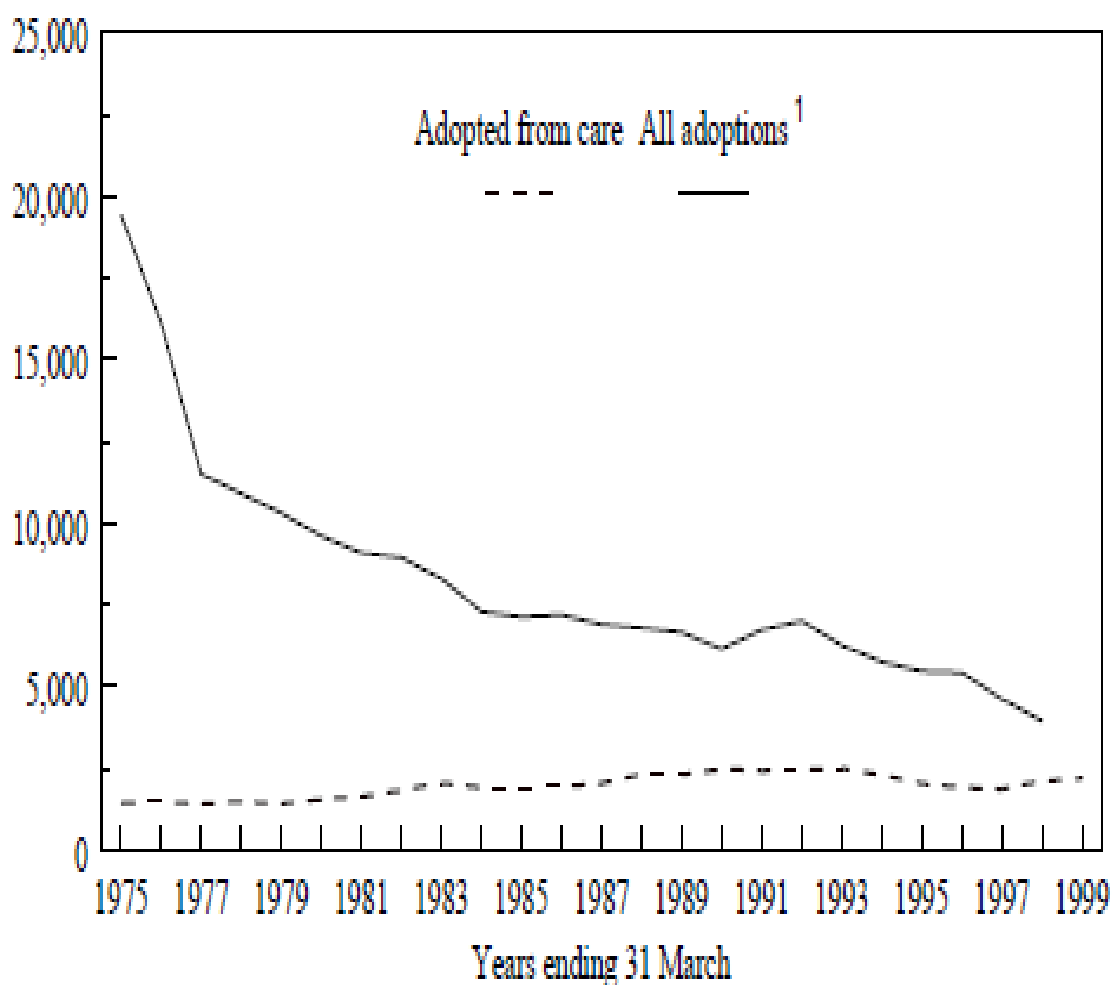
Table 2: Relationship between the rate of children leaving care to be adopted or placed in special guardianship and the extent of deprivation in the local authority

	High Deprivation	Medium Deprivation	Low Deprivation	Total
High rate A+SG	14	20	17	51
Medium rate A+SG	17	15	18	50
Low rate A+SG	19	15	16	50
Grand Total	50	50	51	151

The chi-square statistic is 1.8554. The p-value is .762328. The result is not significant at $p < .05$. The ranking of extent of deprivation uses the rank for this in the English Indices of Deprivation with authorities ranked into 3 groups High being the third of Local Authorities with the highest levels of extent of deprivation and so on.

Appendix 1: Early data on the number of children adopted from care

Numbers of children



ⁱ These estimates use data from a freedom of information request which gives figures by single year of age for children adopted or placed in special guardianship from 1995 to 2016 and thus the calculations for the number of children who have been adopted or placed in special guardianship from care for the years 2012 to 2017 should be close to exact with only slight errors caused by rounding of figures provided by the DfE. Figures for the number of adoptions and ages from 1983 to 1991 and 1994 use published data on children in care. For 1992 and 1993 I have been unable to find exact numbers but estimates from the diagram published in appendix 1

ⁱⁱ Excludes City of London where a small number of children left care and none were adopted

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/SpecialG2014.pdf>