

## Summary of research presented to the review committee

I am presenting a body of research which is relevant to the trends in children entering care. Some of this national and international research is already published; some is in the process of publication and some is early results of data currently being analysed. This paper summarises the research, includes some of the early findings of current and as yet unpublished research and attempts to highlight the relevance of the research for the review. The research covers the following areas:

1. Trends in child protection
2. Trends in the numbers of children removed from parental care

### 1. Trends in Child Protection

I am submitting the following published papers:

- a. Bilson, A., & Martin, K. E. (2016). Referrals and Child Protection in England: One in Five Children Referred to Children's Services and One in Nineteen Investigated before the Age of Five. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(3), 793-811  
*This paper shows the extent to which children enter the child protection system before the age of 5. It includes information on the rate of children entering care as well as child protection investigations and child protection plans.*
- b. Bilson, A., Featherstone, B., Martin, K., (2017) How child protection's 'investigative turn' impacts on poor and deprived communities. *Family Law* 47: 316-319  
*This paper demonstrates the 'investigative turn' which has seen an increasing proportion of referrals leading to formal investigations under section 47. These investigations are less likely to lead to a child protection plan. This research suggests that there are likely to be concentrations of increasingly investigation led interventions in poor and excluded communities and this is likely to reduce the number of children and families receiving support.*
- c. Thorpe, D., & Bilson, A. (1998). From protection to concern: Child protection careers without apologies. *Children & society*, 12(5), 373-386.  
*A study showing the possibility of adopting a differential response in England as discussed in paper e below*
- d. Bilson, A. (2004). Family support: Messages from research. *Representing Children*, 1, 10–20  
*This paper details the response by Northamptonshire to the study in c showing the ability to reduce the need for investigations and how being subjected to an investigation that did not find maltreatment either led to a refusal of services if offered or to the social worker not responding at all to the need that was so clearly evident in the descriptions on file.*
- e. Harries, M., Cant, R. L., Bilson, A., & Thorpe, D. (2015). Responding to information about children in adversity: Ten years of a differential response model in Western Australia.

*Child abuse & neglect, 39, 61-72.*

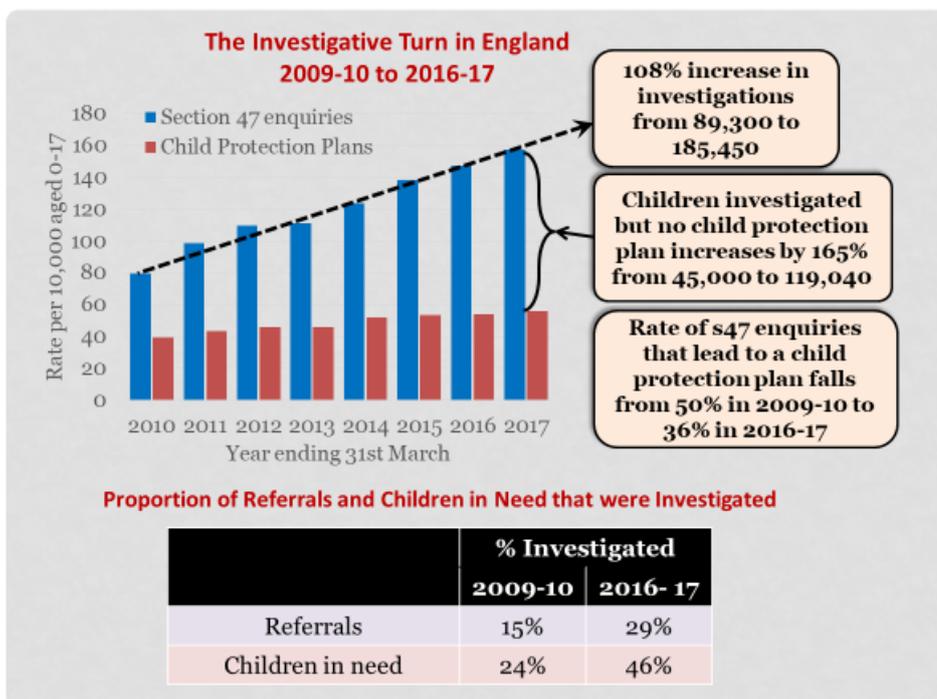
*This paper provides a 10 year follow up to the implementation of a differential response system in Western Australia which reduced the need for investigations and ensured families and children received higher levels of support*

- f. Bilson A. (In press) Bruises in Pre-Mobile Children: A review of the NICE and LSCB guidance: Are the Major Differences in Local Safeguarding Children Board Procedures Justified?

*This review of English Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) policies on bruising in pre-mobile children found major differences in the actions policies require social workers and other professionals to take despite being based on the same research evidence. In some local authorities all pre-mobile children found with a bruise are required to be subject of an enquiry under section 47 of the Children Act regardless of the explanations for the bruise or the views of front-line practitioners. This action is not justified on the basis of research into bruising which is limited and contradictory. Despite the common finding that bruising in pre-mobile children is less frequent than in more mobile ones, the view in both the NICE guidance and the CORE Info systematic review that this means that such bruises are suggestive of physical abuse is questioned when the prevalence of physical abuse is taken into account. The most recent British study shows that accidental bruising occurs in 27% of all pre-mobile children in a 6 to 7 week period. This paper questions the current process of policy making by LSCBs and the example of bruising in pre-mobile children shows how it exaggerates risk and impinges negatively on professional decision-making. This paper is currently being amended following review and will be submitted once accepted for publication*

I am currently doing research into national trends in children's involvement in the child protection system and am in the process of analysing national statistics and data on children's involvement in the child protection system before the age of 5. Early findings from this research are listed below and I would be happy to give more detailed information in evidence to the review:

- The "Investigative turn" is continuing with increasing proportions of referrals leading to investigations – an increase of 108% in investigations since 2010; an increase from 15% to 29% of referrals leading to an investigation; and the proportion of investigations leading to a child protection plan falling from 50% in 2009-10 to 36% in 2016-17. The 165% increase in investigations that do not lead to a child protection plan between 2010 and 2017 is likely to mean that many of these children who are in need will not receive support services (see papers c, d and e above plus other research by David Thorpe). In 2016-17 alone this would affect almost 1% of all those aged 0-17. My current research will look at how these trends are distributed across local authorities and how they relate to rates of entry to care.



- I now have data on the rate of involvement in the child protection system of children born in 2011-12 before their fifth birthday. Whilst it is still the case that about 1 in every 5 children is referred to children’s services as I found for children born in 2009-10 the investigative turn means that 6.3% were investigated under section 47 an increase of 17% on children born just two years earlier. I am currently analysing changes in the number who had been looked after and numbers adopted and the different rates at which this is happening in different local authorities.
- This and other new data shows how the scale of harm to children may be being exaggerated with a negative effect on policy and practice in children’s social care

## 2. Trends in the numbers of children removed from parental care

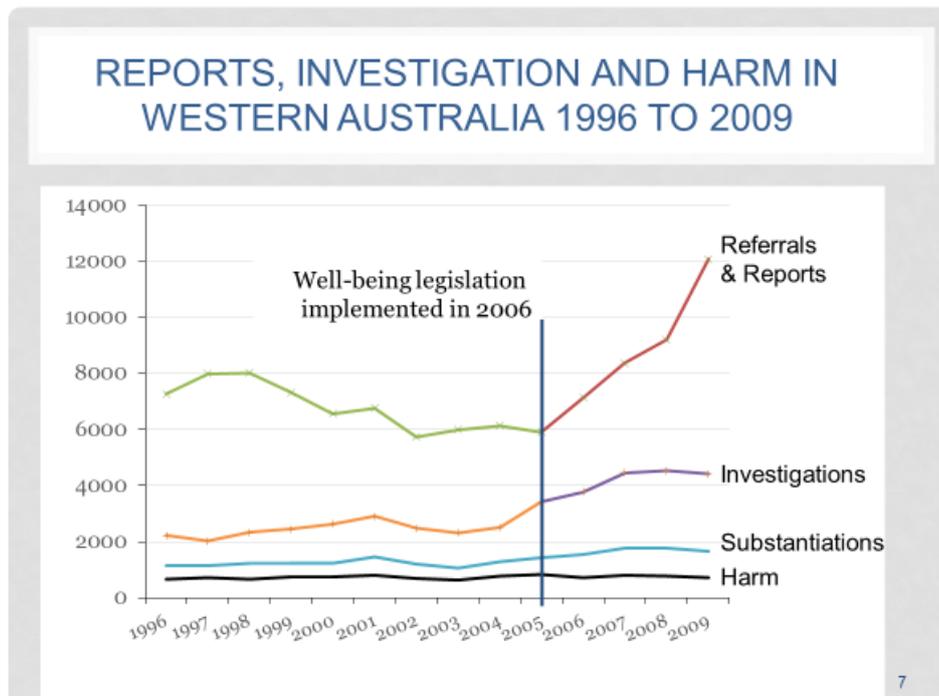
This section will update earlier research on trends in the number of children placed in special guardianship and adoption. This uses data on the ages of children leaving care to these placements since 1995 obtained by a freedom of information request and a new longitudinal analysis of nationally published data. I will also provide a study of longitudinal trends in children entering care in Australia which I think is relevant to England

- g. Bilson A., (2017) The government's adoption drive isn't achieving its aims. *Community Care* February 9<sup>th</sup>

*This paper presents an analysis of data on adoption estimating the number of children placed aged 0-17 who have left care to be adopted. This paper is updated below using data from an FoI and supplemented with data from my current research.*

- h. Bilson, A., Cant, R. L., Harries, M., & Thorpe, D. H. (2017). Accounting for the increase of children in care in western Australia: What can a client information system tell us?. *Child abuse & neglect*, 72, 291-300.

*This paper analyses a fourteen-year period of Western Australian data from the client information system of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support. Western Australia saw a large increase in the number of children in state care similar to trends across Australia as a whole. The study shows the following trends: changes in response to 'referrals' with particular increases in the number of findings of neglect and increasing proportions of these followed swiftly by entry to care; changes in patterns of entry to care with more children under one-year-old entering; increased length of stay of children in care; and, the high incidence of Aboriginal children entering and remaining in care. The data demonstrate unequivocally that increased 'referrals' are not associated with increased substantiations of harm or 'acts of commission with dangerous intent', but that neglect assessed early in the lives of children was the major precipitant for entry to care and particularly so for Aboriginal infants.*

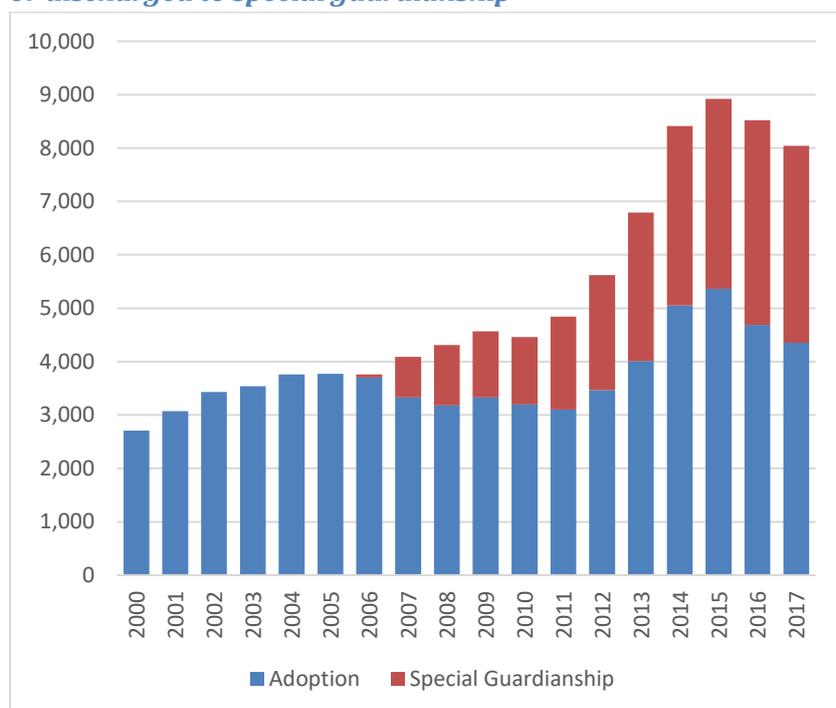


## The government's adoption drive isn't achieving its aims.

### 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**

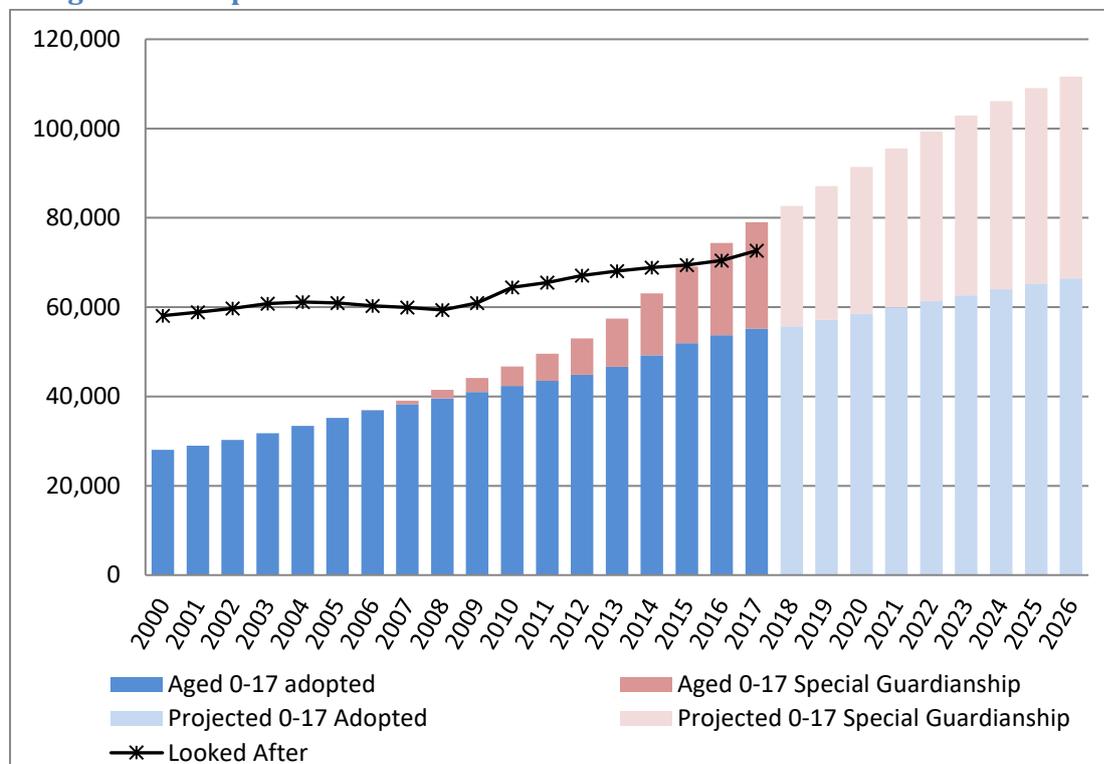


### Increasing numbers of children separated from parents

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

a Excludes unaccompanied asylum seeking children



understate the impact of growing inequality and poverty, and the reduction in services. Nigel Parton calls this an authoritarian neoliberal approach. It is justified by a call for austerity to respond to challenges thrown up by the economic crisis of 2008/09. This includes ideological rationales which hinge around a “coercive paternalism that strives to strengthen labour discipline and social behaviour, particularly among the section of the population understood as the ‘underclass’” (Parton 2016 p.7). The state is increasingly laissez-faire promoting deregulation and freedom for entrepreneurs and those with capital but directive, supervisory and disciplinary for poor and marginalized groups. “The link between neoliberalism and coercive interventions lies in the definition of freedom as a practice of efficient living that requires a certain inner discipline, so that those who fail at this freedom must be trained into it.” (Parton 2016 p.8)

My previous research shows how existing children’s services are increasingly investigative and focussing on the poorest communities where in the most deprived decile children are 10 times more likely to be in care or on a child protection plan and an estimated 45% of children born in 2009-10 were referred to children’s social care before the age of 5; 22% came under suspicion of abuse; and 11% were formally investigated (see paper b). My current study of children born just two years later in 2011-12 shows that the number of children investigated for abuse before the age of 5 has risen by 17%. This study of adoption and guardianship shows that children are increasingly separated from their parents. There is already a focus on promoting adoption. We need to look at those authorities where adoption is low and care is falling to see if there is good practice from which we can learn, though my concern is that they will be classified as underperforming and pressured to change.

It is time for a change of direction. Policy and practice is needed to:

a) promote support for families and reduce unnecessary investigations using approaches such as a differential response (see papers c,d and e above);

b) reduce the exaggeration of risk (see paper f above); and

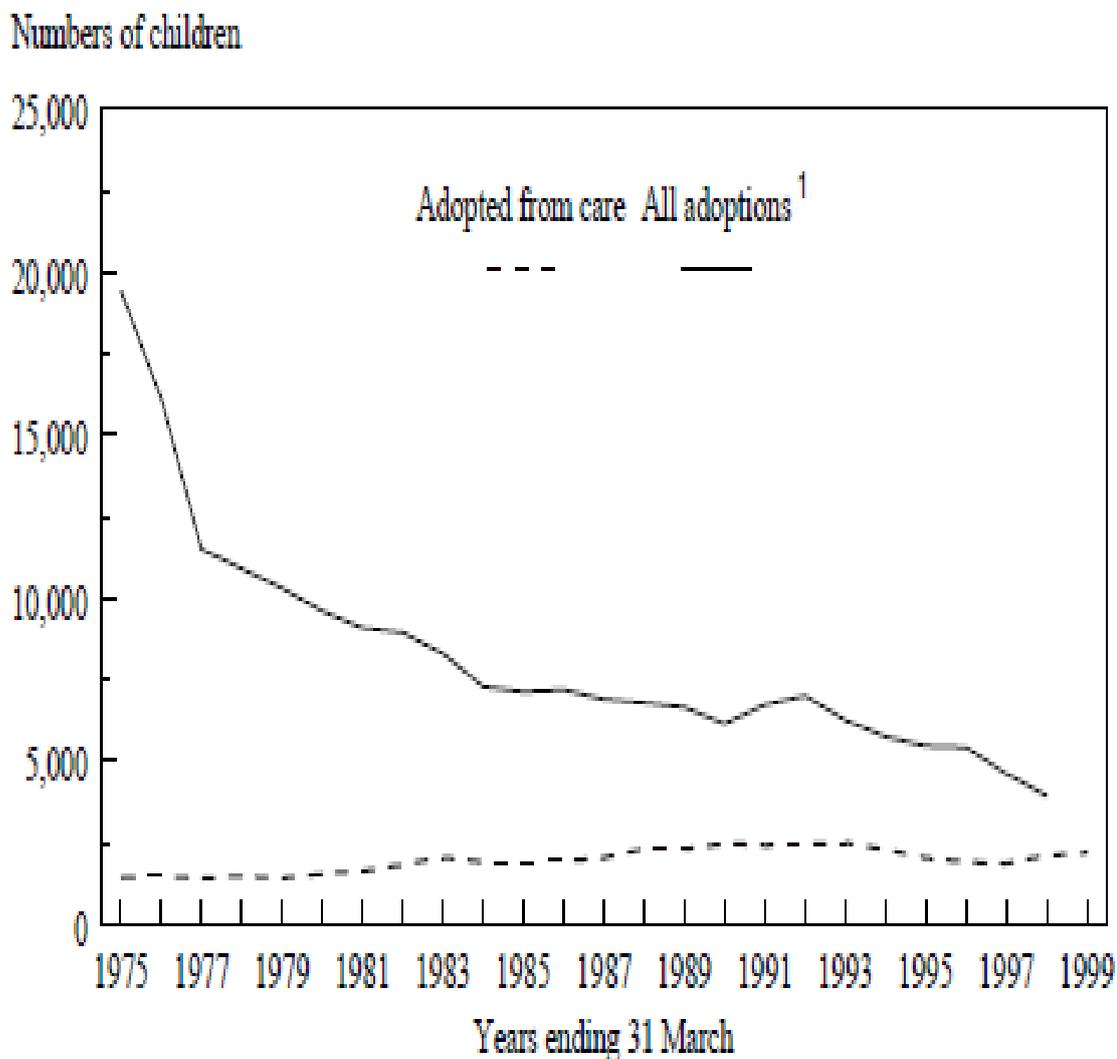
c) promote the co-production of services working alongside people in excluded and impoverished communities (see paper b).

d) promote a social development approach to social work. This alternative paradigm has the following key elements:

- **Social investments** that enhance capabilities including: “employment placement, childcare, adult literacy, micro-enterprise, and asset savings accounts” (Midgley & Conley, 2010: xii–xiv)
- **Advocacy oriented** to move from a narrow preoccupation with practice with families and children
- **Community oriented** to combat social exclusion
- **Strengths-based** acknowledging and focussing on family and community assets and aiming to promote resilience
- **Interdisciplinary** focus including promoting access to, for example, housing, medical care, education, and recreational facilities

This approach needs to start with children's, parents' and community participation in the definition of the problems they face which can then feed into the development of the services which focus on support and strengthening families and communities rather than the continuing focus on searching for harm, confusing poverty and neglect and finding people to blame. I would be happy to provide verbal evidence on these issues to the review.

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



<sup>i</sup> 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

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

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