

Adoption and Child Protection Trends for children aged under five in England: Increasing investigations and hidden separation of children from their parents

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Highlights

- 1 in every 16 children investigated before the age of 5
- Over 50% increase in children adopted and investigated before the age of five in 2016-17 versus 2011-12
- 12 x difference in the rate of adoption decisions between lowest and highest ranked local authorities
- Where adoption increased the most there was a larger than average increase in involvement in children's social care at all levels
- Adoption and special guardianship have become additions to not replacements for children being in care

Abstract

This study of adoption and special guardianship in England shows the failure of these permanent placements to replace long stays in care. The study provides new information on trends in the use of adoption and special guardianship for children under 5 since 1999. It also compares two cohorts of children, one whose fifth birthday was in 2011-12 and the other in 2016-17, showing that for these children born five years apart there were increases of over 50% in the number of children adopted and in the number of children investigated for abuse and over 33% for children in need and those on a child protection plan. One in every sixteen children in the 2016-17 cohort had been investigated before their fifth birthday. There were wide variations between local authorities and the 29% of local authorities which had very large increases in adoption also had larger increases in all areas of social care intervention than other authorities and, despite more children having been adopted, had increased the number of children in care at the age of five by 30% whilst in other local authorities this had changed little. The study suggests that the chances of a family receiving support or being split up are determined by national and local policies, resources and a growing culture of child rescue responses to family difficulties.

Key words: Adoption, Child protection, Children in care, Child protection investigations, Neglect, Emotional abuse

1. Introduction

In 2000, the government announced its intention to increase adoption and introduce a new form of permanent placement called special guardianship (SG). All subsequent governments have promoted adoption and, more recently, government has 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. In 1999 2,060 children were adopted and SG had not been introduced whilst in 2017 8,040 were adopted (4,390) or placed in SG (3,650). Thus by 2017 the annual rate of adoptions had more than doubled since 1999 and when SG is added almost four times as many children left care to these permanent placements. 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. The increase in care proceedings has led to Sir James Munby (2016), the President of the Family Judiciary, to say that the family court service in England faced a “clear and imminent crisis” because of large increases in the number of care cases. The incoming President, Sir Andrew McFarlane confirmed the continuing crisis and its link to reducing support for families saying:

“It may properly be said that we have reached a stage where the threshold for obtaining a public law court order is noticeably low, whereas, no doubt as a result of the current financial climate, the threshold for a family being able to access specialist support services in the community is conversely, very high” (McFarlane 2018).

2. Background

Between 2000 and 2017, 92,610 children left the care system to either adoption (67,050) or SG (25,560) and new data from the Department for Education shows that around 76,690 of these were aged under 18 on 31st March 2017, more than the number of children in care. The vast majority of these children will be still in their adoptive or SG placements. Despite the dip in the annual number

of children leaving care to be adopted since the 2014-15 financial year, the number of children who left care to be adopted and were aged under 18 on 31st March 2017 is higher than at any time this century (Bilson, 2017) and a further group are in special guardianship. Underpinning these trends in care, SG and adoption there have been large increases in the number of children who have been investigated under section 47 of the 1989 Children Act (hereafter referred to as child protection investigations) because of concerns that they may have suffered or are likely to suffer significant harm (Bilson and Martin, 2016). The proportion of referrals and children in need that receive an investigative response has grown significantly in recent years and the biggest impact is felt in areas where deprivation is highest (Ellison and Renton, 2018; Bywaters et al, 2016). Bilson et al (2017) estimated that, before the age of five, 22% of all children living in the most deprived tenth of communities were classified as having been in need because of abuse or neglect or the related category of family dysfunction.

In order to understand how these trends relate to each other and whether there are differences in practice between local authorities, this paper provides an analysis of data concerning two cohorts of children and their experience of children's services before their fifth birthdays in the years ending 31st March 2012 and 2017.

3. Methods

The paper uses data from several freedom of information (Fol) requests. Two Fol requests obtained information on the number of adoptions and SG orders made in the whole of England for each of the financial years from 1994-5 to 2015-16 and the number of children in care on 31st March by age in single years on 31st March 1995 to 2016. This data provides a means to calculate both the annual number of children adopted or placed in SG by age and make accurate calculations of the total number of children who have been placed in adoption or SG and their ages at the end of any particular year. This calculation of what might be called the stock of children who had left care to be

adopted or placed in SG shows how many children on the 31st March had experienced being separated from their parents in these placements.

A further series of Fol requests were sent to all 152 English local authorities requesting data on two cohorts of children. The 2012 cohort had their fifth birthday in the year ending 31/03/2012 and the 2017 cohort had their fifth birthday in the year ending 31/03/2017. These requests asked for data on the number of children who had, before their fifth birthday, been involved with different parts of children's services including adoption. The request also asked for the legal status of children who were looked after on 31/03/2012 and 31/03/2017 and this data is used as a proxy for children in care on their fifth birthday.

Ninety-three local authorities provided some or all of the data requested for both the 2012 and 2017 cohorts and a further six provided data for 2017 only. Seventy local authorities provided complete data on looked after children and adoption for both cohorts and for other aspects of the data the numbers of local authorities on which results were based is given in the relevant tables. Office for National Statistics (2016, 2017) mid-year estimates of the number of children aged 5 in the relevant year is used to calculate rates per 10,000 children aged five for local authorities. This age was chosen in preference to the number aged under one because it was found that the population of five-year-olds was higher, particularly for the 2017 cohort. This means that estimates of rates are more conservative using this data.

3.1 Limitations

Using Fol requests enabled the study to be undertaken quickly with wide coverage but limits the scope of the study in a number of ways. Some local authorities reported that they could not provide data over the periods given due to changes of information systems that limited reporting and in other cases because this would exceed the maximum time allowed for a freedom of information request.

The questions focussed only on data that was collected nationally to ensure that there would be consistency in the definitions and terms used but a small number of local authorities still reported in a different format for some questions. This particularly affected one question concerning the category of maltreatment when a first child protection plan was implemented. Nationally local authorities are asked to report on the main category of maltreatment, but some local authorities responded with data that had multiple categories (e.g. neglect plus physical abuse). These authorities were excluded from the analysis of this area.

In some cases where less than five children fell into a category the data was redacted. In these the mean value of the possible values of 1 to 4 (2.5) was used to allow inclusion in analysis. This may create a very small error on analyses that combine data across local authorities but may cause a larger discrepancy where findings on some individual small authorities are reported. Similarly, in the FoI request that collected data from the Department for Education on ages of children looked after, adopted or placed in SG numbers were rounded to the nearest 10.

The ability to fully check the quality of the data is also limited. Checks were carried out through identifying logical anomalies such as whether the number of children experiencing child protection plans was higher than the number of children who had been investigated. In a small number of returns data was queried with the local authority and amendments received. As a check that the responses to the FoI request reported on individual children rather than counting the number of referrals, the FoI request to local authorities asked for both the number of referrals on children in the cohort and the number of children referred. This check could not be included for all categories due to time limits for work on FoI requests, but this question was intended to highlight that other questions were focussed on the number of children. In the case of adoption and legal status of a child at 31st March there cannot be duplicates for individuals. In the absence of direct access to the data this means that the study is reliant on the skills of local information officers to accurately interpret the request and provide correct data.

Finally, this study is collecting data on children having contacts with individual local authorities. Some children may move between local authorities and have contacts with more than one and may then be counted twice. This will lead to a small error in totals when some of the categories of local authority data are combined.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results for both sets of FoI requests are dealt with in the sections below. Where overall trends for all five-year-old children across England are reported this uses data from the Department for Education. Findings that focus on the two cohorts of children aged five use data from the local authority FoI requests.

The FoI requests to local authorities provide information on the nature of the trends in the number of children who have accessed different elements of children's services including referral, section 47 enquiry, child protection plans, care and adoption before their fifth birthday (see table 1). The data showed increases in both the number and rate of children involved in all levels of the child protection system (table 1) except for the number and rate of children looked after at 31st March which has a different pattern discussed below. Key findings are:

1. Small increase in referrals and a large increase in children in need
2. Large increase in investigations and smaller increase in child protection plans
3. Large increase in child protection plans for emotional maltreatment and neglect
4. More children entering care before the age of five but little change in the number of children in care without a decision for adoption
5. Large increase in the number and rate of children adopted from care
6. Large increase in children separated from parents
7. Large differences in adoption trends between local authorities
8. The Adoption Score-Card does not distinguish different patterns of practice

Each of these findings is now discussed in turn and, because of the wide range of issues involved, findings are followed by discussion of each issue.

Table 1: Involvement in children's services showing comparisons of the 2012 and 2017 cohorts

Number and rate per 10,000 children involved with children's services before the age of five			
	2012 cohort Number of Children (Rate /10,000 children) ¹	2017 cohort Number of Children (rate/10,000 children) ¹	Increase or decrease in number of children and (rate of children) between 2012 and 2017 cohorts
<i>Referred to children's services data from 79 local authorities²</i>	67,144 (2,015)	78,101 (2,114)	+16% (+5%)
<i>Children in need data from 65 local authorities²</i>	31,061 (1,164)	41,372 (1,400)	+33% (+20%)
<i>Investigated (section 47 enquiry) data from 71 local authorities²</i>	14,700 (469)	22,178 (635)	+51% (+35%)
<i>Child protection plan data from 88 local authorities²</i>	11,713 (306)	15,932 (375)	+36% (+22%)
<i>Adopted data from 70 local authorities²</i>	1,221 (41)	1,856 (56)	+52% (+36%)
<i>Looked after before the age of five data from 70 local authorities²</i>	4,828 (161)	5,773 (173)	+20% (+7%)
<i>Number and rate per 10,000 children looked after on 31-03-2012 or 31-03-2017</i>			
<i>Not on a placement order data from 70 local authorities²</i>	944 (32)	1,008 (30)	+7% (-4%)
<i>On a placement order data from 70 local authorities²</i>	358 (12)	256 (8)	-28% (-36%)
¹ Rate per 10,000 children aged 5 in mid-2016 and mid-2011			
² The number of local authorities with comparable data for this type of involvement			

4.1 Small increase in referrals and a large increase in children in need

There was little change in the proportion of children in these local authorities being referred to children's services at some point before the age of five (table 1). Some of these children were referred on more than one occasion and there was an average of just under two referrals per child in both cohorts (the average was 1.77 referrals per child in the 2012 cohort and 1.74 in the 2017 cohort).

In just five years there was an increase of a third in the number of children who had been in need.

The definition of being 'in need' is set out in s17 of the Children Act 1989 which refers to a child who is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development, or whose health and

development is likely to be significantly or further impaired, without the provision of services or a child who is disabled.

This 33% increase in children in need means that one in every seven children aged five in 2017 had already been assessed as being in need. This concerning statistic demonstrates a rapidly growing challenge to children's health and development. Despite emphasis in the Working Together guidance on the need to increase 'early help' which is aimed to reduce the numbers in need, the government's austerity policies have undermined these good intentions by the evisceration of children's centres (Smith et al, 2018) and the rapidly reducing funds for anything but statutory services (Webb and Bywaters, 2018; Ellison and Renton, 2018). This removal of support is additional to the increasing pressures on a growing group of children and families affected by cuts in benefits and for those in employment on poor and insecure pay (Barnard et al 2017).

4.2 A large increase in investigations and smaller increase in child protection plans

The number of children subject of a child protection investigation increased by a half and children who had been on a child protection plan by over a third (table 1). In the 2017 6.4% of children had been investigated before their fifth birthday.

The spiralling growth of child protection investigations which increased by a half in just five years means that *one in every sixteen children aged five last year* had been through a child protection investigation. In some local authorities this rate was even higher reaching a peak of more than one in six children in Blackpool and more than ten percent of all children in seven local authorities.

Over half of child protection investigations are on children over the age of five so a much higher proportion of children will have been investigated by the time they are eighteen. If all this investigative action was effective in protecting children we would expect to see a reduction in investigations and findings of abuse over time, but there has been an increasing number of both for the last fifteen years. It is sad to note that despite the continued rise in investigations, the number of child deaths recorded by the Child Death Overview Panels as being due to "deliberately inflicted

injury, abuse or neglect” have changed little since 2010 fluctuating between a low of 30 in 2010 and a high of 62 in 2014 This is likely to be a more accurate indicator of the deaths in child protection cases than the more general homicide rates often cited (e.g. Bentley et al., 2017). This raises the key question of whether the increasingly investigative response to families does reduce risk of serious harm. Gilbert et al (2012) in a study across six countries considering child maltreatment in children younger than eleven including England found “no clear evidence for an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions”. In England recent policies have hollowed out support for families and increased inequality whilst carrying out more and more investigations concentrated in the most deprived communities (Bywaters et al 2016). With no evidence of reductions in harm these policies need to change (Ellison and Renton 2018).

4.3 Large increases in child protection plans for emotional maltreatment and neglect

The category of maltreatment applicable when the child was first subject to a child protection plan is shown in table 2. *Neglect and emotional maltreatment were by far the most common reasons for a child protection plan* being the key category in three-quarters of plans. Child Protection plans starting because of emotional maltreatment and neglect had increased by 50% from 7,403 children to 11,097 in the five years between these cohorts. Child protection plans thus mostly focused on these areas rather than physical and sexual maltreatment which together accounted for 16.2% of plans in the 2017 cohort.

Table 2: Type of maltreatment recorded at the start of the first child protection plan

Number of children with this type of maltreatment recorded at the start of the first child protection plan

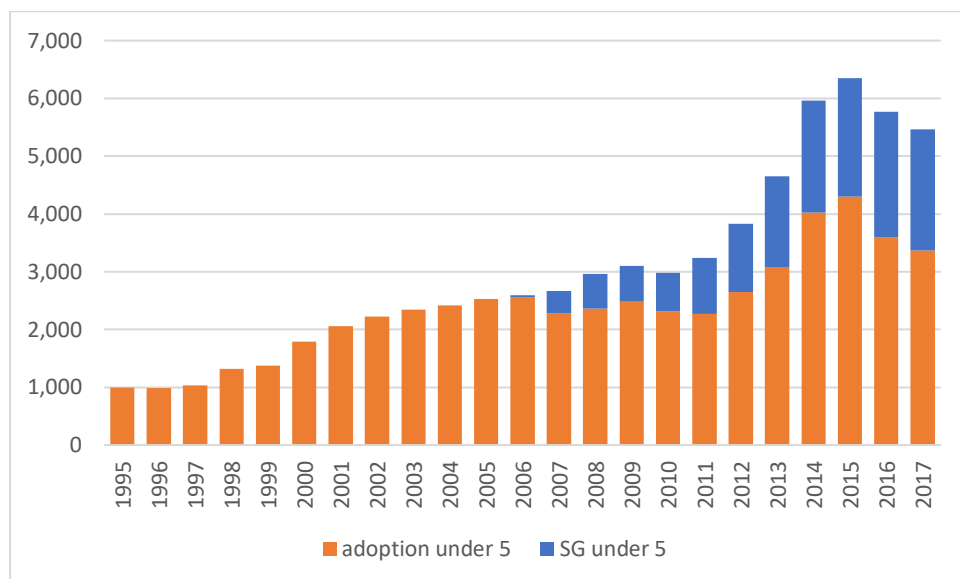
	2012 cohort Number of Children (Rate /10,000 children) ¹	2017 cohort Number of Children (rate/10,000 children) ¹	Increase or decrease in number of children and (rate of children) between 2012 and 2017 cohorts
<i>Neglect</i>	4795 (137)	6818 (177)	+42% (+28%)
<i>Physical</i>	1515 (44)	1851 (48)	+22% (+10%)
<i>Sexual</i>	444 (13)	512 (13)	+15% (+4%)
<i>Emotional</i>	2608 (75)	4279 (111)	+64% (+48%)
<i>Multiple/not recorded</i>	1112 (32)	1094 (28)	-2% (-12%)

*Data is for 78 local authorities with complete data for both cohorts
population of children aged 5 in mid-2011 was 347,385 and in mid-2016 was 386,218*

4.4 More children enter care before the age of five but little change in the number of children in care

The number of children who had experienced a period of being looked after before the age of five had increased by 20% and the rate by 7%. However, the number of children in care on 31st March 2012 and in 2017 had reduced slightly from 1302 to 1264. This overall number includes children with a placement order waiting for an adoptive placement and those without a current legal decision to be placed for adoption. Table 1 shows that the numbers on placement orders fell by 36% whilst those not on a placement order were unchanged. This fall in the numbers on placement orders is likely due to two changes. The large increase in adoptions before the age of five might have been due to shortening the time to adoption placement and/or the reduction in children being put forward for adoption since 2014.

FIGURE 1: Looked After Children Leaving care for Adoption and SG placement of children aged 0 to 4 years-old. Figures for England in years ending 31st March 1995 to 2017



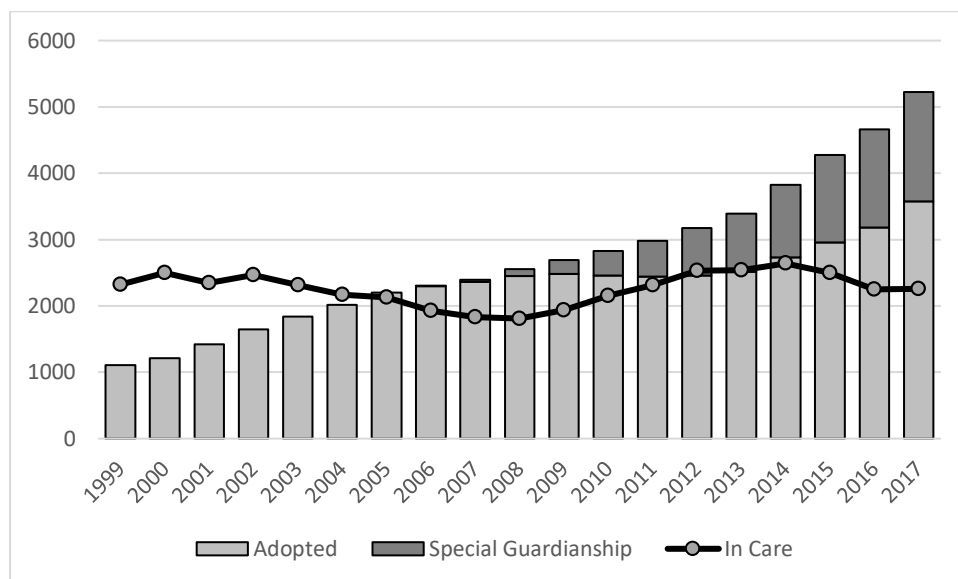
Source: Freedom of information request to Department for Education

4.5 Large increase in the number and rate of children adopted from care

Figure 1 shows the number of children aged under five adopted from care since 1995 using the FoI request from the DfE. National statistics (DfE, 2000 figure 9.1) show that the total number of children of all ages adopted from care between 1975 and 1995 was below the 2017 figure for under five year-olds alone. Despite the drop in annual numbers adopted in recent years, there were more children aged 0 to 4 leaving care to be adopted during the year ending 31st March 2017 than in any year from at least 1975 to 2014.

The number of adoptions for increased between the 2012 and the 2017 cohort because the annual rate of adoptions for all five years of the 2017 cohort were higher than in any of the years covered by the 2012 cohort (figure 1). The result was a 52% increase in the number and 36% increase in the rate of children adopted before the age of five between the two cohorts in the 70 local authorities providing data. Calculations from the DfE FoI for England as a whole of the change in adoptions between children aged five in 2012 and 2017 is slightly lower (46% and 32% respectively).

FIGURE 2: Children aged five who had been adopted, placed in special guardianship or were looked after on 31st March 1999-2017



Source: Freedom of information request to Department for Education

4.6 Large increase in children separated from parents

The increase in the number of adoptions and SG placements since 1999 means that there are more children separated from their parents than before the policy change in 2000. Government provides statistics on how many children were looked after on the 31st March each year but doesn't provide statistics for the stock of children who were living with adoptive parents or guardians. Figure 2 shows the number of five-year-olds in care on 31st March each year calculated from data supplied by the DfE. It also shows the number of children who had left care for adoption or special guardianship before their fifth birthday – the stock of five-year-olds who had been adopted or placed in special guardianship. This stock of children adopted and in SG had increased by a factor of 5 between 1999 and 2017.

Most of this stock of children will still be in their adoptive or special guardianship placements as post-order disruption rates for both types of legal orders have been found to be low, with an overall

disruption rate for adoption of 3.2% (Selwyn et al., 2014) and an estimated disruption rate for special guardianship of just under 6% (Wade et al., 2014). Adoption disruptions were more likely to occur five or more years after the adoption order was made, most commonly occurring during the teenage years. Whilst special guardianship order placements were found to be more likely to disrupt quickly and within two years of the legal order being made, the child being older at their entry into care was found to be a higher disruption risk factor for children on both types of order and means lower rates for these cohorts of children aged under 5.

This shows that the number of children separated from their parents in care, adoption or special guardianship at the age of five has increased from a figure likely to be just under 3,400 in 1999 to just below 7,400 in 2017. The intention of government policies that adoption and special guardianship would replace care has clearly not been fulfilled and the number of five-year-old children in care on 31st March 2017 is little different to that in 1999 despite a five-fold increase in the stock of five-year-olds who have left care for adoption or SG.

4.7 Large differences in adoption trends between local authorities

The number of five-year-olds on placement orders had fallen in the 70 local authorities. Thus the number of children who were adopted or on a placement order (hereafter adoption decisions) at the age of five had still increased but the change was lower than for adoptions alone (34% increase in numbers and 20% in rate). This trend for children with adoption decisions is used here as it more fully reflects the continuing trend in adoptions and removes some of the differences due to reductions in the time for placement with adoptive parents.

The changes in children adopted and those on placement orders waiting to be adopted between the 2012 and 2017 cohorts in each of the 70 local authorities are shown in figure 1. *There was a twelve-fold difference in rates of adoption between the local authority with the highest and lowest rates.*

FIGURE 3: Rate of children with formal adoption decisions 2012 and 2017 cohorts

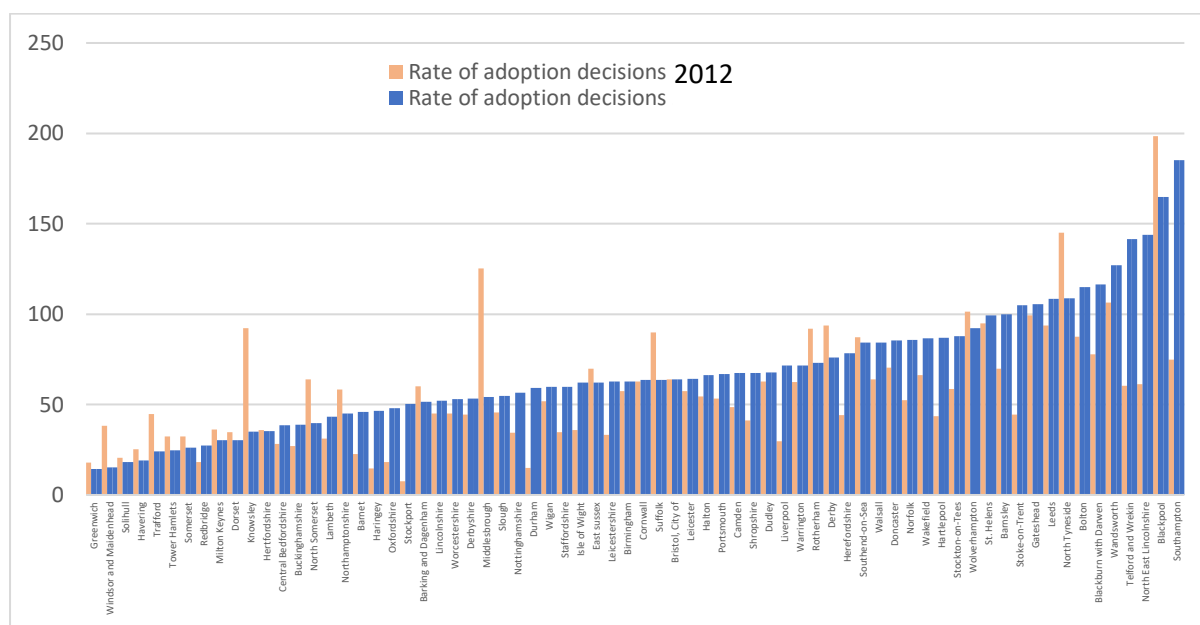


Table 3: Four patterns of change in rates of adoption between cohorts

Pattern	Number of local authorities	Criteria for inclusion in this pattern based on change in rate of adoptions between 2012 and 2017 cohorts
Large increase	20	Increase in the rate adopted greater than 25/10,000 children
Small increase	13	Increase in the rate adopted between 10 and 25/10,000 children
Little change	26	Change in rate adopted between +10 and -10 /10,000 children
Reduction	11	Decrease in rate adopted greater than 10/10,000 children

There were four different patterns of change in the rate of children being adopted which are shown in table 3 and details of the rates of use of different services against these patterns are shown in table 4. One group of eleven local authorities had a *reduction* in the rates of adoption decisions of more than 10 per 10,000. This group had generally had higher than average rates of adoption in the 2012 cohort and had fallen to close to the average of 56/10,000 in 2017 (from an average of 85 to 59 per 10,000). Twenty-six local authorities had *little change* in rates of adoption decisions and another thirteen had a *small increase* (between 10 and 25 per 10000).

The remaining twenty local authorities had a *large increase* in the rate of adoption of more than 25/10000 – more than double the average change between these two periods (table 4). This latter group had a rate of children having an adoption decision below the average for the 2012 cohort, but this had almost doubled by the 2017 cohort (from 41 to 80 per 10,000). This increase was because of both a 30% increase in children entering care before the age of 5 in these authorities (from 169 to 207 per 10,000) alongside an increase in the proportion of these children entering care who were adopted which increased from 25.4% to 38.5%.

The changes in this group of authorities were associated with a larger than average increase in involvement in children's social care at all levels (table 4). The group stood out having the largest increases in all measures of activity concerned with child protection (table 4). The rate of children on child protection plans had risen by over 52% compared to a change of 18% in the other local authorities. The rate of children who had been investigated under section 47 increased by 90% almost three times the next highest increase (table 4).

A more detailed analysis of the reasons for children being put on child protection plans showed that all categories of abuse had risen in the local authorities with a large increase in adoption but that emotional harm and neglect had more than doubled (114% increase compared to a 26% increase in other local authorities). Physical abuse in these authorities rose by 64% compared to a 6% increase in other authorities and sexual abuse by 38% compared to 6% elsewhere. Thus either there was a far larger change in all types of abuse in the authorities with a large change in adoption or this was due to lowering thresholds for investigations and child protection plans.

Also, this group with the biggest increase in adoption had a 30% increase in children who had been looked after before the age of five in contrast to little change in the other groups. There was also an increase in children in care who were not on a placement order.

Table 4: Rate of Involvement with children's social care for the four patterns of change in adoption

<i>Patterns of change in rate of children adopted</i>	<i>2012 cohort Rate /10,000</i>	<i>2017 cohort Rate /10,000</i>	<i>Increase or decrease in rate /10000 children between 2012 and 2017 cohorts</i>
<i>Adopted or on a placement order at age 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	41	80	+96%
<i>Small increase</i>	54	71	+32%
<i>Little change</i>	50	51	+3%
<i>Reduction</i>	85	59	-31%
<i>All local authorities</i>	53	64	+21%
<i>Looked after before age 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	160	207	+30%
<i>Small increase</i>	169	178	+6%
<i>Little change</i>	154	150	-2%
<i>Reduction</i>	178	172	-3%
<i>All local authorities</i>	161	173	+7%
<i>Looked after and not on a placement order on 31/03/12 or 31/03/17</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	37	42	+14%
<i>Small increase</i>	44	29	-35%
<i>Little change</i>	26	26	0%
<i>Reduction</i>	22	24	+9%
<i>All local authorities</i>	32	30	-4%
<i>Child protection plan before age 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	278	422	+52%
<i>Small increase</i>	317	370	+17%
<i>Little change</i>	304	352	+16%
<i>Reduction</i>	318	404	+27%
<i>All local authorities</i>	306	375	+22%
<i>Section 47 enquiry before age 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	410	778	+90%
<i>Small increase</i>	543	722	+33%
<i>Little change</i>	455	602	+32%
<i>Reduction</i>	442	525	+19%
<i>All local authorities</i>	469	635	+35%
<i>In Need before the age of 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	1272	1820	+43%
<i>Small increase</i>	1238	1499	+21%
<i>Little change</i>	864	1024	+19%
<i>Reduction</i>	1486	1763	+19%
<i>All local authorities</i>	1164	1400	+20%
<i>Referred before the age of 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	1731	2311	+33%
<i>Small increase</i>	2062	2153	+4%
<i>Little change</i>	1995	2125	+7%
<i>Reduction</i>	1749	2080	+19%
<i>All local authorities</i>	2015	2114	+5%

4.8 The Adoption Scorecard does not distinguish different patterns of practice

The adoption scorecards produced by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board

(ASGLB) is used to rank and compare local authorities on their performance (DfE 2016). Most of the

performance measures focus on the timeliness of adoption activities and the recruitment of adopters. The main indicator used to assess the local authority's level of use of adoption is the percentage of children leaving care to be adopted and here the guidance (DfE, 2018 p.10) says: "A higher percentage represents good performance, but percentages should not reach 100%". This indicator was calculated for each of the 70 local authorities in this study, but *was not sensitive to different patterns of child protection intervention or to the differences in rates of entry to care seen in practice and reflected in the FoI data.*

For example, Blackburn with Darwen had a high score of 27% on this indicator for the period 2015-2017, an indicator of good adoption practice according to the ALB. This authority had a high adoption rate of 116 per 10,000 children. Blackburn with Darwen also had one of the highest rates of children entering care before the age of five with a 74% increase in children entering care between the two cohorts rising to 326 per 10,000. Child protection activity was also very high with 1,020 per 10,000 (over 10% of children) being investigated under section 47 before the age of five – a rate that nearly doubled between the two cohorts. In contrast, Wigan whilst similarly having 27% of children leaving care for adoption in 2015-2017, had a very different pattern of practice regarding its adoption rate, the rate at which children entered care and in terms of the rate of child protection investigations. Wigan's rates on all these measures were substantially lower than Blackburn with Darwen's at 60 per 10,000 for adoption; 162 per 10,000 for rates of entry to care and 617 per 10,000 for section 47 investigations. *It is hard to understand how the percentage of children leaving care for adoption can be regarded as an indicator of good practice when such percentages are underpinned by such diverse patterns of activity.*

5 CONCLUSION

The findings above show the impact of current policies and resource decisions in the child protection system. Firstly, there has been a substantial increase in the number of children placed away from their parents across England as a whole. The full extent of this has been hidden since the numbers

living on any one day in adoptive families and SG are not estimated or published. Secondly there are large disparities between local authorities in the rate of children being adopted or on placement orders with high and increasing rates of decisions to adopt children accompanying large increases in child protection investigations and children in need. There are large differences between authorities with similar demography.

The finding that the group of authorities with the biggest increase in adoption also had large increases in all levels of involvement with children's social care is important. The background of increased social work activity at all levels in these authorities may be due to substantial and rapid changes in the needs of children because of the increasing pressures on families and the removal of family support. This may explain the large increase in children in need before their fifth birthday and more worryingly the large increase in child protection investigations due to concerns about significant harm. However, this is a rapid change in just five years and the increases are substantially higher than in other local authorities with similar levels of deprivation. A more likely explanation is a combination of cuts in family support alongside a change from a family preservation to a child rescue orientation to practice (Parton, 2016) in these authorities leading to changes in thresholds for interventions and responses to family difficulties (Featherstone et al 2016). Whatever the cause the plight of children and families is worsening, and they face less support, more removal of children and more investigations in response to their difficulties (Ellison and Renton, 2018). Parton suggests that such changes are consistent with government policy which increasingly casts social workers in the guise of 'child rescuers' (2016, p. 8). In addition, both this finding and the finding on the adoption score card indicator show the impact of government promoting adoption without adequate consideration of the wider context of responses to children's needs and family difficulties.

The overall increases in children in need and child protection investigations and plans as well as the rapid changes in over a third of local authorities in the study should be seen alongside the 89% of Directors of Children's Services who have reported that it is becoming increasingly challenging to

fulfil their statutory duties to provide help for children in need under s17 Children Act 1989 (Clements et al, 2017). The combination of cuts in children's services, increasing inequality, and the huge increase in child protection investigations has created a hostile environment for children living in the most deprived communities. This research shows that in just five years child protection investigations have increased by 50% to a rate of one in every 16 children nationally and that there is a large increase in the number of children removed from their parents. The fact that this is not happening evenly across the country suggests that this is not an issue of reducing parental competence but rather that the chances of a family receiving support or being split up are determined by national and local policies, resources and a growing culture of child rescue responses to family difficulties.

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