

*This summary, written with adoptive parents in mind, documents key messages from a project undertaken by The Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation for Brighton and Hove City Council in 2013. The project was commissioned to inform Brighton and Hove's adoption support strategy development. The full report can be downloaded at <http://www.cevi.org.uk/publications.html>*

## Developing an adoption support strategy in Brighton and Hove Summary of key findings for Parents

### About the project

A multi-agency city wide strategy for post adoption support

Brighton and Hove City Council wants to develop a city-wide strategy for adoption support, drawing together the many agencies that adopted children and their families might turn to for help to provide coordinated support.

We looked at:

- what services are therein Brighton and Hove
- where are there gaps
- how can the strategy help to strengthen services

The Council asked the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation to help develop the strategy by looking at what is available now, identifying gaps, and highlighting how the strategy can strengthen services. We talked to adoptive parents and service providers in Brighton and Hove and looked at national and international research to see what that tells us about what adopted children need.

The Adoption Passport sets out parents' entitlement to support  
[www.first4adoption.org.uk/](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/)

### National policy on adoption

National government policy is recognising the importance of adoption support

Adoption, and support, are now being given **much more priority in national government policy**. The government wants to see adoption used more, and wants children to be placed more quickly. It has given adopted children priority in school admissions and said that **adopted children need to be given more priority in local service planning**. It wants to see **more specialist services for adoptive families** and is looking at ways of 'stimulating the market'.

One study found that:

- 90% of children who had been adopted aged 3-11 had experienced abuse or neglect
- a quarter of parents said their child had attachment problems
- over half had speech delay or language difficulties

### What we know from national research

Adopted children have a much higher risk of problems of different sorts

Most children who come into the adoption system have experienced maltreatment and neglect and need therapeutic parenting and developmental recovery. Of course, each adopted child is different, not all have experienced the highest levels of maltreatment, and many are happy and well-adjusted in new homes. But services for children need to recognise that adopted children have **a much higher risk** of developing a range of emotional, cognitive, educational, behavioural, health and social problems.

So adoptive families need a range of support

This means that having access to the right services is a central aspect of adoptive parenting. Adoptive families are likely to need support for learning, therapeutic

recovery and mental health, children’s physical and social development, parenting support groups, advice and information, training, and financial support. National research shows that there are gaps in meeting these needs, particularly in CAMHS and therapeutic services and in educational support. Adoption support seems to be particularly stretched for families in high levels of need.

## What did we find in Brighton and Hove?

### The services available in Brighton and Hove

What we found in Brighton and Hove is that there is a **very extensive range of provision in the city** that could be used by adopted children and families. This ranges from the services that all children and families in the city use to intensive support for children facing more difficulties. We heard about support in schools, Children’s Centres, health and mental health services, and in the voluntary sector. In the full report we list out all the services that we identified – some **examples** are shown in the box below.

#### Examples of adoption support provision in Brighton and Hove

##### Emotional, behavioural, therapeutic support:

- Individual and family therapy – various providers
- Art therapy, anxiety and other groups - CAMHS
- Counselling in schools and the community - Dialogue
- Youth support eg job search, positive activities, substance misuse – various public and voluntary sector providers

##### Child development and health:

- Occupational, physio- and speech and language therapy – Integrated Child Development and Disability Service
- Enhanced health visiting and healthy child clinics – Children’s Centres
- Play and learning support – Children’s Centres

##### Support for learning:

- Guidance for schools – Adoption Service
- Teaching assistants, literacy support, speech and language therapy – schools and SEN service
- Advice and advocacy on school issues for parents of disabled children – Amaze
- Direct work with schools, children and parents – Educational Psychology Service

##### Support for parenting:

- Telephone advice, guidance and home visits – Adoption Service
- Parent groups, workshops, lending library, Fun Days and picnics – Adoption Service
- Access to case history– Adoption Service
- Advice on benefits - Amaze

### Gaps in provision

In our interviews with adoptive parents and with service providers, a number of **gaps in provision** were identified. These are areas where either a form of support is not available at all, or where it is in very short supply. The areas identified were:

*‘There was a big breakthrough at primary school when she got to see the school counsellor and that made a massive difference because she felt safe and she was able to say these things to someone else and it helped her make sense of it all.’*  
Parent

There is an extensive range of relevant services in Brighton and Hove

But there are gaps in provision

- **therapeutic interventions for children:** particularly because of services being restricted or only available for high level specific needs. Children need help to overcome trauma, and to make sense of being adopted
- **support for play, social development and peer relationships.** Children need places where staff and other parents will understand they may have challenging behaviour and will help them feel safe and enjoy themselves. They may also need help with peer relationships
- **support in schools, particularly secondary schools:** Adopted children often need more support with learning and with adapting to the school environment. Our analysis suggests that there is particularly a need for more support in secondary schools
- **child development services:** such as speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. We were told that, as in the UK more generally, services are in short supply and families experience long waiting periods
- **short breaks or respite care:** these are very important for families facing intense pressure. But they are only available through social services within the safeguarding system – which is not a system that parents want to use
- **continuing contact by the Adoption Service:** a regular ‘touching base’ with families would make it easy for them to raise any areas of difficulty at an early stage
- **support groups for parents of older children**
- **more parent training, workshops and a buddying or mentoring service:** eg workshops on family dynamics, attachment, typical and atypical development, life story work and making sense of early childhood experiences, managing behaviour at different ages, and a parenting programme specifically geared to adoptive parenting.

*‘A TA was allocated to be her key adult but she only worked three days a week. They did what they could but it wasn’t enough. They had to fund her out of current resources and it would have needed a lot more intensive work to [make a difference].’*  
Parent

More money is needed in the adoption support system

These gaps are likely to be seen in many local authorities. The parents we spoke to were very conscious that the council’s resources are limited. Some felt that more money needs to be put into the system at a national level if the government’s objectives for adoption are to be achieved.

*‘The most important thing is that some proper money goes into it rather than moving the chairs around. Because as an adopter what’s frustrating is when government makes a push for more adoption to take place but they don’t follow it up with any additional resource in terms of post-adoption support.’* Parent

## Other ways of strengthening adoption support in Brighton and Hove

We also identified other ways of strengthening adoption support, looking at how what is available could work better for children and families.

Ensure there is a coherent system of provision

The range of help available is a rich resource for parents - but only if they know about it and can find their way through it. We think that what is available needs to be re-shaped into **comprehensive and continuous system of provision**. There should be provision at different levels of need, and an understanding of how different services fit together. Information about what is available needs to be made very accessible to families.

*'I was just passed from pillar to post. There's no written offer, if you like, of what's available. Everybody tried to pass me on to someone else, no one would take responsibility.'* Parent

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Improve coordination and team-working

There is a need to improve **coordination** in assessments and service delivery. There should be clear expectations about team-based working and how professionals will share information with each other, with the family's consent. We think Brighton and Hove should also think about developing a 'key worker' post, someone whose job is to coordinate services and advocate on a family's behalf.

### A key worker role:

- linking between services to share information and support consistent approaches
- advocating to services
- coordinating meetings
- chasing progress
- making suggestions for next steps
- helping parents to make decisions about service use

Improve services at key transition points

Families particular need **help at key developmental and transition points** such as starting school, moving from primary to secondary school or reaching adolescence. In developing the strategy we recommend Brighton and Hove's agencies jointly consider how well key transition points are addressed and how services can best come together at these points. It would also be useful to consider whether transition points can be anticipated so that families can be given information in advance of, for example, their child starting school.

Partnership and strengths-based working with families

**Partnership and strengths-based working with families** is important. Parents should be able to feel that the good care of adopted children is a shared responsibility. They should be able to feel their own particular expertise, insight and strengths are recognised and that they will be supported by services.

*'There has never been a moment's judgement of us – there's been nothing but empathy and support and advocacy on our behalf. She's brilliant.'* Parent

All services should be 'adoption competent'

All services need to be **adoption competent**. Both providers and parents described understanding of adoption as being patchy, especially outside specialist areas. Parents felt they had to ask repeatedly or push hard to get their child's needs taken seriously. They felt schools and other services need to do more to understand the particular

issues raised by adoption and childhood maltreatment. We think there is value in reviewing the training currently available across the city to establish a **continuing programme of multi-agency training at different levels**.

Establish a group of staff with specialist skills

There is also scope to consider establishing a **group of staff across agencies with specialist skills** relating to adoption. They would work closely with each other and with their own teams to support integrated working, service planning, training and strategic development.

**An adoption competent professional:**

- Understands the additional issues raised by childhood abuse and maltreatment, attachment difficulties and adoption
- Understands how to adapt their work and build relationships with adopted children
- Recognises when additional expertise is needed and knows where to access it

Consider routinely asking about adoption

None of the services we explored except the Adoption Service **routinely ask about adoption**, so they would not always know whether a child they are working with is adopted. There were mixed views among service providers about this. The views of parents were more clearcut. They felt it was essential services should know adoption status where it might be relevant, and felt it could be asked about sensitively – though they recognised that newer adoptive parents might feel differently. Collecting information systematically would be important for service planning and review as well as for working with individual families.

*'It's private information, but it's not shameful.'*  
Parent

Prioritising adopted children

None of the services we explored specifically **prioritise adopted children** and there were mixed views about this would be appropriate or feasible. One option would be to extend priority access for looked after children to adopted children. Certainly a focus on adoptive families in policy and planning would be strongly welcomed by families - and would be in line with new national policy. Having a **reference or consultation group** of adoptive parents, and a similar group of older adopted children, would also be useful.

*'For it to be recognised as there being a group of needs would be brilliant .... Standing up for adoptive parents and adopted children, making sure it's on people's agendas and they know what the issues are, lobbying a bit for it to be recognised as a special area.'* Parent

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