Supporting adoption and supporting families that adopt: value for money

Eva-Maria Bonin, Clare Lushey, Jenny Blackmore, Lisa Holmes, Jennifer Beecham

Executive Summary
Working Paper No. 21
October 2013
The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre is an independent research centre with funding from the Department for Education. It is a partnership between the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) and other centres at the Institute of Education, the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University and the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU) at the University of Kent.

The Centre takes a strategic approach to generating a range of evidence to influence the design and development of policies to support children’s capabilities and life chances, strong stable families and communities. This includes evidence to help protect children both from neglect and abuse and also from the more subtle pressures created by today’s commercial and media-rich environment.

The Centre undertakes both rapid response work and larger projects. Outputs include advice and briefing to policy makers; seminars and workshops; digests of current research; briefing papers; research reports and summaries and the maintenance of a database of cutting edge research in relevant areas.
Supporting adoption and supporting families that adopt: value for money

E-M Bonin, C Lushey, J Blackmore, L Holmes, J Beecham

Executive Summary

Based on a review of national statistics and UK-based quantitative research studies published since 2000, this paper summarises our research on the costs associated with adoption and post-adoption support for families who adopt children from care.\(^1\) The cost of adoption from age 4 to age 16 was estimated, alongside the cost savings associated with three ‘what if’ policy scenarios. The main points from the literature review are identified, as well as the evidence gaps.\(^2\)

The adoption pathway

The figure below shows the adoption pathway for a child between the ages of four – the average age at adoption – and 16, the age at which many providers stop supporting children. Each box represents an ‘event’ in the pathway that informed our model and the arrows show the movement between these events.

---

\(^1\) The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned researchers from the Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (CWRC) to undertake a short piece of research to develop the model from existing literature; 51 researcher days were allocated to this study.

\(^2\) The main report detailing the methods and evidence is available from the Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (CWRC) website: [http://www.cwrc.ac.uk/projects.html](http://www.cwrc.ac.uk/projects.html)
The costs of supporting children with a plan for adoption

To estimate the costs of adoption, probabilities were attached to the pathway at the points where the arrows meet the boxes (nodes, see below), but the lack of evidence from existing literature means these are taken from just two studies (Farmer et al 2010; Selwyn et al 2006).

Using our model\(^3\) the base case cost of adoption and adoption support for a child from age 4 to 16, estimated at today’s prices, is £270,000.\(^4\) The following ‘what if’ scenarios show the ‘break-even’ point for potential investment in policies that reduce the chance of a negative event along the adoption pathway. This does not imply that investing the specified amount of money will ensure that the negative event is averted. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to suggest what type or level of intervention or service provision could generate improved outcomes.

What if adopters are available for all children for whom adoption is appropriate?

- The chance of being in an adoptive placement at age 16 could increase by 17%.
- Average savings compared to the base case could be £70,000 (NPV) per child.

What if no breakdowns occur at any stage in the placement?

- £3,000 per child per year could be invested while still ‘breaking-even’ compared to the base case costs.

What if all children are placed within 6 months of the decision for adoption?

- £60,000 per child (NPV) could be invested without increasing costs above the base case.

Because there is so little evidence these cost findings should be used with care. The figures are indicative not absolute and should be used alongside a range of other local and national considerations to inform decisions; they should not drive

---

\(^3\) We use a decision-analytic Markov model with 12 one-year cycles

\(^4\) This is our ‘base case’ value. The cost is estimated at net present value (NPV); the total amount paid over the years, adjusted to reflect its value in today’s prices by applying a discount rate of 3.5%.
local policy and provision. They do, however, suggest that the potential savings may justify quite high levels of investment per child.

The literature review and survey\textsuperscript{5,6}

Evidence was sparse. The overall base case assumptions are as follows.\textsuperscript{7}

- A child with a plan for adoption has an 80% chance of being placed for adoption.
- There is a 13% chance that a match will break down during introductions, but 57% of children who experience this will be placed for adoption again.
- There is an 8% chance that an adoption placement will break down before the Adoption Order (AO) is granted; 64% of these children are placed again.
- After the AO is granted, there is a 9% chance that the adoption will break down early as the child settles in; there is a 4% chance of disruption in the longer term, typically when the child faces a transition such as school or puberty.
- If a placement breaks down and the child is not placed for adoption again, s/he moves into an alternative placement. There is no information on this issue.
- Processes to allow adoption\textsuperscript{8} cost between £7,614 and £19,934.
- Support costs are between £501 and £1,177 per month post-placement and between £276 and £1,177 per month post-Adoption Order, including financial support. Costs fall mainly to children’s social care departments.
- Alternative placement costs reflect nationally applicable prices (see Curtis, 2012).

Major evidence gaps include: the amount of each support service received by adoptive families and the period over which they are used (required to estimate costs); the benefit derived from this support; numbers of adoption placement breakdowns and disruptions; what happens to children where the plan was adoption but they were not adopted; longer-term outcomes for adopted children compared to those in other care placements and for the population as a whole.

The literature and survey also found that

\textsuperscript{5} Generally, only one or two studies cover any given topic. The references can be found on the last page.
\textsuperscript{6} A DfE commissioned rapid response survey (Holmes et al. 2013). Twenty-two English local authorities completed online surveys and representatives from 11 local authorities were interviewed.
\textsuperscript{7} These are overall assumptions; they change over the 12-year period.
\textsuperscript{8} Such as family finding, linking and matching, introductions, etc.
The main support needs for adopted children are for attachment difficulties, emotional and behavioural disorders, and over activity/restlessness.

When surveyed, around two-thirds of families did not understand the importance of adoption support prior to adopting and less than half were receiving services.

Better preparation of prospective carers, normalising the need for support, and continuity of adoption staff may help adoptive parents request support.

Families most frequently request services that are in short supply: child and adolescent mental health services; other therapeutic services; education support.

The most commonly available and/or accessed types of support post-adoption were: contact with an adoption worker; help with birth family contact (e.g. letterbox); financial assistance; and access to support groups.

Satisfaction with post-adoption support was mixed.

Needs for post-adoption support are likely to change as the placement progresses.

Pressure on resources and the capacity of adoption services mean it is difficult to meet fully the needs of adopted children and their families.

References
Pennington E (2012) It takes a village to raise a child. Adoption UK survey on adoption support, Banbury: Adoption UK.
Supporting adoption and supporting families that adopt: value for money

Eva-Maria Bonin, Clare Lushey, Jenny Blackmore, Lisa Holmes
and Jennifer Beecham

Contact us:
Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (CWRC)
Institute of Education,
20 Bedford Way
London
WC1H 0AL

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7612 6957 | fax: +44 (0) 7612 6927
email: cwrc@ioe.ac.uk
www.cwrc.ac.uk

This brochure is available in alternative formats.
Please contact Marketing for assistance.
Telephone: + 44 (0)20 7911 5556
Email: info@ioe.ac.uk