



KEEPING THE PROMISE FOR ADOPTED CHILDREN

The future of adoption as a safeguarding measure is uncertain. Interest in adoption is waning,[1] local authorities are facing legal action for insufficient support,[2] and the numbers of children being adopted are declining. **Change is needed now** to halt these trends and protect this form of permanence which has the best outcomes for children at the lowest cost.

CVAA is calling on the next Scottish government to understand, champion and take steps to reform and modernise adoption in Scotland, given the compelling evidence of its value for children and benefits it brings to society and the economy.[3]

- A better adoption system **strengthens Scotland's leadership** across the UK in prioritising children's welfare and rights, building on long-standing legislation and national commitments including The Promise and the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024.[4]
- A coherent adoption strategy supports a **joined-up response** to other pressing issues affecting care-experienced children, including child poverty, young people's mental health and rising Additional Support Needs (ASN).
- There is a moral case for reforms that give **adopted children the same life opportunities** as those who have not endured harm and loss at an early age.

Adoptees of all ages and their families need our system and support to be better. We are calling on all political parties to:

1. Recognise the value of adoption
2. Tackle delay for children awaiting permanence decisions
3. Make high-quality, timely adoption support available for all
4. Support adopted children's identity needs
5. Acknowledge the lifelong impact of trauma

RECOGNISE THE VALUE OF ADOPTION

The number of children being adopted in Scotland is steadily falling. The most recent figures show that 161 children were adopted in 2024, down 22% since 2020.[5] This is despite the growing evidence that adoption provides lifelong benefits across health, education and future employment which currently exceed other permanence options for children such as foster care or kinship arrangements.[6]

It is vital that the next government enables children who cannot safely remain with their birth families to experience these enhanced life outcomes by ensuring policy and practice supports it as a valued route to permanence.

Our recommendations below are not 'pro adoption' objectives but solutions to ensure that adoption can be achieved for the right children when it is the right permanence solution for them. **At present too many Scottish children with adoption plans are not achieving this outcome due to systemic issues.**

WHAT'S NEEDED

1. A **unified adoption strategy** which brings together legislation, policy, funding, regulation, data and practice development, alongside structures for collaborative responsibility, delivery and accountability.
2. **Ensuring adoption is represented and understood within key decision-making forums** where different permanency routes are being considered, prior to the granting of a Permanence Order with authority to adopt.
3. Including **early permanence** / foster to adopt as an option available for all children, to help reduce the number of moves children experience when coming into care.
4. **Equal support for all forms of permanence**, including kinship, underpinned by further research into children's outcomes under different care arrangements.
5. **Enhanced training** via the Judicial Institute for Scotland on the latest evidence on children's outcomes under different care pathways and the ongoing work to modernise adoption practices.

TACKLE DELAYS FOR CHILDREN AWAITING PERMANENCE DECISIONS

Despite attempts to improve permanence planning for children over many years, timescales for adopted children in Scotland remain extremely poor. Many children in Scotland wait over two years on average for a permanence recommendation to be made, and then even longer to move to their adoptive homes, with 2025 research finding that achieving permanence is taking 4.36 times longer in Scotland than in England. Drift and delay in Scotland also has cost implications, with the care system for children under 5 being almost twice as expensive as England.[7]



More troubling though is that these delays frequently have lifelong implications for children, contributing to instability and poorer life outcomes, which are contrary to the ambitions of The Promise.

Introducing new measures to significantly reduce delay for all children is essential, as well as ensuring that children with more complex needs and characteristics – many of whom VAAs support[8] – are not disproportionately impacted by delays. Legislative and policy change in this respect would also amplify the positive impact of practice developments such as the recent AFKA Scotland permanence guides.[9]

WHAT'S NEEDED

1. **New statutory timescales** for making permanence recommendations through legislation via the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, replacing the current guidance.[10]
2. **Updated regulations** which look at the engagement, support and planning needed with parents before and when a child becomes 'looked after'.
3. Investment in a **programme of culture change** across local authorities so that practitioners can adapt to these changes and coordinate effective multidisciplinary assessments and decisions within the necessary timescales.
4. **Enhanced data collection** to ensure full oversight of a child's journey through Scotland's care system, to support compliance with legally binding timescales and ongoing improvements for children and families.

MAKE HIGH-QUALITY, TIMELY SUPPORT AVAILABLE FOR ALL

Children who have suffered early harm and loss have needs that affect their sensory and nervous systems, brain development, mental and physical health. As a result, almost all adopted children will require support at some point in their lives. Not providing this support can allow children's trauma to escalate and put families under immense strain, sometimes resulting in adoptions breaking down, at great emotional cost and financial cost to society.[11]

The latest Adoption Barometer found that 40% of adoptive families in Scotland are facing severe challenges and only half of families who received support felt it had a positive impact.[12] Adopted young people report feeling isolated, unsupported and let down by education and mental health services.[13] Similar themes emerged in research from The Potato Group.[14]

In line with The Promise Plan 24–30 commitment to lifelong, fair support for adoptees and families[15], the next government must reform how support is organised and funded. This is a high stakes issue for the future of adoption in our society. Adoption support must be viewed through the lens of a corporate parenting responsibility requiring strong cooperation across national and local government, health, education and the voluntary sector.

WHAT'S NEEDED

1. A new blueprint for **high-quality, timely support** for adopted children and families (adoptive and birth), which ensures consistent and equitable access for everyone, regardless of where they live or which adoption agency they were adopted through.
2. **A robust core support offer[16] alongside access to enhanced specialist support** when needed, available at any time.
3. **An assessed multidisciplinary support plan for every adopted child** at point of matching, with a duty to deliver it and review it at regular intervals.
4. A **review of the financial support** available for adopters and review of the '3-year rule' which transfers responsibility for support to the local authority where the family resides.
5. **Mandated training on trauma informed practice** across education, health and social care, aligned with the National Trauma Transformation Programme[17], with an emphasis on key transition moments within schools.

SUPPORT ADOPTED CHILDREN'S IDENTITY NEEDS

In recent years the evidence for children maintaining positive and meaningful, lasting relationships with their birth families and other significant people in their early lives, has grown and strengthened. Well-supported forms of keeping in touch are closely linked with children's ability to make sense of their own personal stories and develop a positive sense of identity.[18]

In Scotland, The Promise has been groundbreaking in protecting relationships between brothers and sisters, now enshrined in the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 and propelled by Stand Up For Siblings. Yet social work practice still lags behind the latest evidence and is not keeping pace with practice improvements in other UK nations. Scottish families are less satisfied with support for maintaining contact than any other UK nation.[19] Likewise, 92% of UK adoptees agree that they need specialist support to understand their pasts, as 1 in 3 do not feel confident in their identity.[20] The quality of life story work to support children's identity development varies considerably, showing the lack of skills and expertise in this work.[21]



WHAT'S NEEDED

1. A new **culture change and training programme** for care planning and adoption social workers to improve how children's lifelong relationships are supported.
2. Development of **practice resources** to support high quality and consistent work with adoptees and families around identities and maintaining relationships.
3. **Direct investment in services** to support adopted children's lifelong relationships, such as adoptee groups and mental health support, adopter groups and training, and support groups for birth family members.
4. Providing VAAs and local authorities with **funds to invest in digital tools** to modernise and improve letterbox contact and life story work.
5. **Development of an online information hub** solely dedicated to supporting the relationships of adopted and care experienced children and young people.[22]

ACKNOWLEDGE THE LIFELONG IMPACT OF TRAUMA



Adult adoptees face consistent struggles when it comes to accessing records, tracing birth relatives, understanding their medical histories and accessing mental health support. These challenges, combined with the poor provision of specialist support services in childhood and adulthood, have serious emotional and health consequences.[23]

Adoption is lifelong, as can be the impact of early trauma and loss, and the need for support does not end at age 18. This is why The Promise has called for all care experienced children, young people, families and adults to have access to independent advocacy support by 2030, at all stages of their experience of care and beyond.

A modern adoption system needs to ensure that support continues into adulthood, alongside clear information about how to access different types of support, delivered in a trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive way.

WHAT'S NEEDED

1. **Support for adult adoptees** to be included in any blueprint for adoption support developed, alongside investment in services including adoption-informed counselling.
2. **Improved regulation of birth records and adoption files** so that adoptees can access their records more easily and quickly, without incurring a fee.[24]
3. Stronger protocols around the **protection of birth records and adoption files**.[25]
4. **Joint working between Health and Social Care to support adoptees in managing inheritable medical conditions**, for example through automatic screening for conditions and more training for professionals around obtaining and interpreting medical information.[26]
5. **Adoptee rights to be brought in line with care leavers** by recognising them within 'care experienced' frameworks.



ABOUT CVAA

The Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies UK (CVAA) was formed in 1993, creating a structure for joint endeavour to enable a coordinated approach to placement pricing, developing best practice and working together in improving the lives of adopted children and their families. The membership has been at its most powerful and effective when agencies have worked together; setting the interagency fee, lobbying for adoption support resources and increasing the recruitment of adopters across the UK, particularly Black families and LGBTQ+ families.

CVAA works with VAAs and sector stakeholders to champion their impact on the lives of children who need adoption. Across the UK between 20-25% of all children being placed for adoption are placed with VAA adopters. CVAA demonstrates the strength of collaboration in a complex care system and the vital contribution voluntary agencies make to achieving positive, lifelong outcomes for children who cannot remain within their birth families.

In Scotland the 5 VAAs are: Barnardo's; Kibble Adoption; Scottish Adoption and Fostering; St. Andrew's Children's Society; and St. Margaret's Children and Family Care Society.

ABOUT VAAS

VAAs are independent, not-for-profit organisations which are smaller than most statutory agencies and offer a personalised service to children and families from all backgrounds. They work in partnership with local authorities to find families for children in care who are unable to stay with their birth relatives.

VAAs have a wealth of experience in matching children with adoptive families. Some have been working for well over 100 years supporting all kinds of children and families. VAAs provide lifelong support to adoptive families, their children and adopted adults through information, family days, counselling, therapeutic services and peer support. Many also support birth families and help with keeping in touch arrangements.

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