

# Volunteer agencies see donations slump

Increase in fees will not cover financial shortfall

## Britain's adoption crisis



Rosemary Bennett  
Social Affairs Correspondent

Voluntary adoption agencies, which find new homes for some of the neediest children in care, have been forced to increase their fees to try to stay afloat at a time when public donations have plummeted.

The 31 agencies, which have placed about 3,000 children with new families in the past five years, say they have no choice if they are to have a viable future. The registered charities play a vital role in the adoption system, finding homes for "hard to place" children such as those with a severe disability, older youngsters who often have greater emotional or behavioural problems, and large groups of siblings.

However they have been badly hit by a sharp fall in donations from the public.

The agencies are typically called in by local authorities to find families for children where council social workers have struggled and charge £25,000 for each child they successfully place.

However, the true cost of the work is around £37,000 per child, according to a Government-commissioned study. They make up the difference with

charitable donations but since the economic downturn, more and more agencies are dipping into their reserves to cover the shortfall, risking their future. The Times has learnt they will increase their fees to £27,000 at once.

The move is a gamble, as hard-up local authorities have been using their services less, and could balk at paying higher fees to facilitate adoptions, despite the long-term benefits for children involved.

One major agency, the Manchester Adoption Society, which had been placing children since 1965, was forced to close down last spring because so few local authorities in the area were prepared to pay the fee.

Councils are trying to use their own social workers for adoption to save their jobs rather than outsource the work, despite the far better performance of the voluntary agencies. The volunteers work much more intensively with prospective families before and after the adoption. As a result, the proportion of their adoptions that break down is six per cent, even though the children are considered more difficult cases. Nationally, 20 per cent of adoptions break down. Last month The Times launched a campaign to increase

the number of adoptions from 3,200 last year, close to a record low, and to cut the time taken to adopt a child from the current two years, seven months.

Norman Goodwin, chief executive of Adoption North West, one of the country's largest adoption agencies, said the fee increase was unavoidable.

"There has been a lot of agonizing over this decision," he said. "We know local authorities are in a tough financial climate too. But I have no doubt some agencies are in peril, and the more adoptions they do, the more money they are losing. I think the

message is getting through to local authorities that what we do makes economic sense."

Ministers have warned local authorities that they will be watching their individual performance much more closely since it issued new guidelines intended to arrest the fall in adoptions.

Jonathan Ewen, Director of Family Placement at Barnardo's, the children's charity that runs several adoption agencies, said many local authorities underestimated the true cost involved in each adoption, even when it was being done by their own social workers.



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## The hard truth about adoption in Britain

Times2, pages 2-5

## Would-be carers lost over fear they are too old for children

Rosemary Bennett

Thousands of prospective foster carers are being lost each year because they wrongly believe that they are too old to look after children in care.

A new poll has found that more than half (54 per cent) of people aged between 45 and 55 say that they are over the age limit. The result is particularly worrying as they are exactly the demographic who most commonly foster children. The average age of a foster carer has gone up in the past decade from 46 for women and 47 for men in 2000, to 53 for women and 54 for men last year.

There is currently a shortage of 10,000 foster carers, meaning that children removed from their homes because of the risk of abuse or neglect often end up with the wrong sort of

foster carer. That could mean children ending up spending many months or even years with carers who specialise in short-term placements.

It may also mean that children are forced to change schools because there are no carers in their neighbourhood.

The poll was carried out by Action for Children to mark the start of Foster Care Fortnight today. The hope is that more older people will volunteer when they discover there are no age barriers.

Darren Johnson, from the charity, said: "When it comes to meeting the needs of vulnerable children in need of a foster home, life experience can prove invaluable. The care system is under severe strain, and we need people to consider fostering and to come forward to help vulnerable children and young people turn their lives around."

## 'Anyone my age should go for it'

Case study

Peter Crawford, a telephone engineer from Perth, wondered what it would be like to foster a child in care. However, it took him until he was in his fifties to find out.

With his own three children grown up, he began investigating fostering three years ago. "Friends of ours have fostered and they are a similar age, so I knew my age would not be a problem.

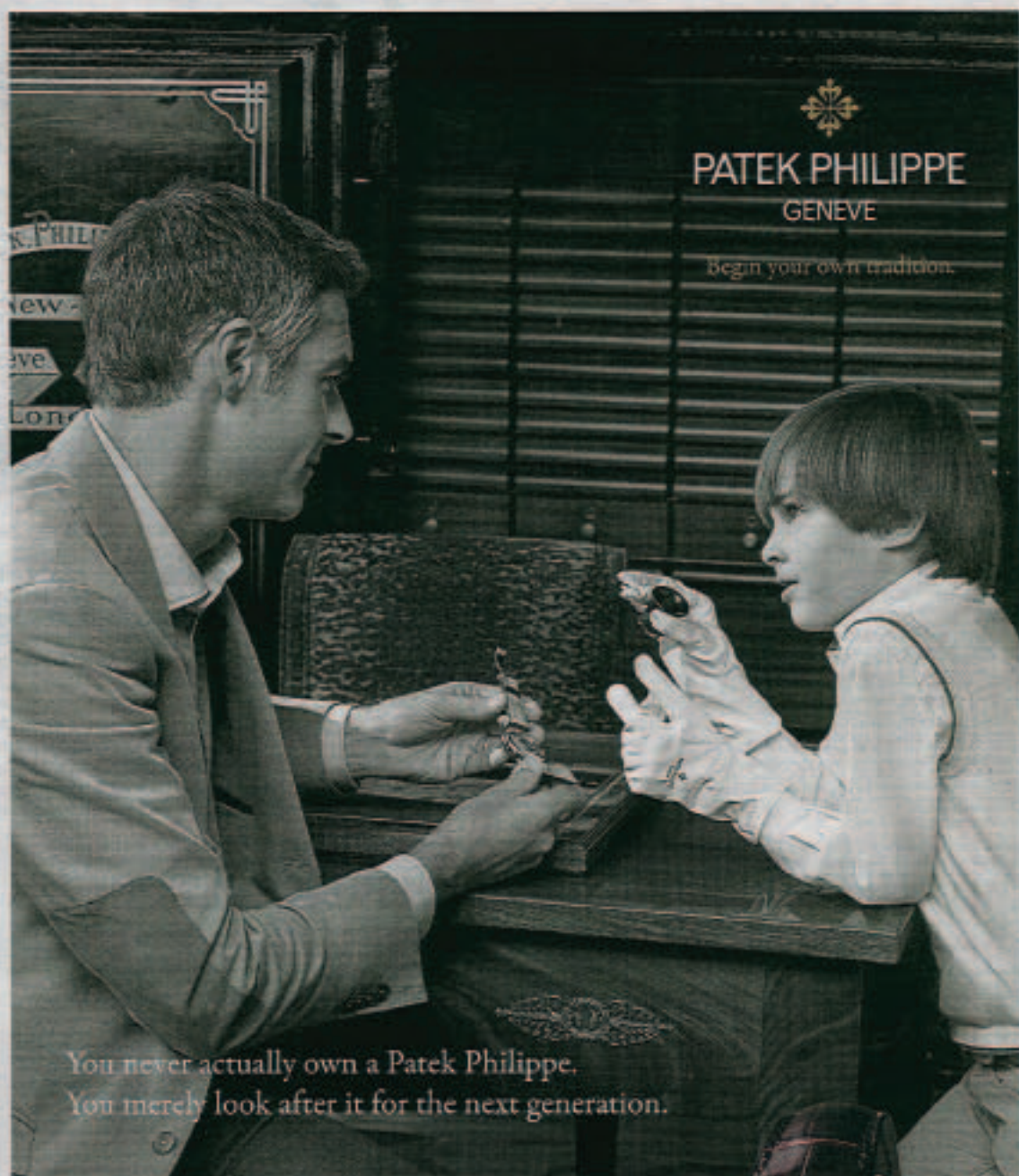
The training process took a year and a half. We were matched with

Joe close to the end of the process," he said.

Mr Crawford, 52, pictured left with his wife Christine, 51, stays at home to look after Joe while she works as a nurse. "Joe has settled in really well. He is from a town but he has adapted really well to country life. He is doing well at school, too," he said.

Joe, 14, is on a long-term placement, designed to give him the stability he needs, after years of neglect.

Mr Crawford added: "I would say to anyone my age to definitely go for it."



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# 'They need more than just love, they need your understanding and hard work'

After gaining unprecedented access to adoptive families, agencies, panels and local authorities, **Carol Midgley** finds the complexities of the adoption system can be both heartening and heartbreaking

## Britain's adoption crisis



In the sitting room of a sunny semi-detached house in Cheshire, an ugly question hangs in the air. Sarah and Philip, the couple who live here, have just been asked what they would do if their five-year-old daughter began "touching" her father in a sexual way.

The question is hypothetical but necessary. This couple have applied to adopt a child and it is their social worker's job to assess whether they could cope with one whose trauma includes sexual abuse. Who has grown up thinking that this is the way to "please" adults.

There are more things to consider as we sit on the sofa drinking tea. Would they be able to cope if their child locked himself in the bathroom, screaming personal insults and demanding to return to his foster home? Could they handle the extreme anxiety of a child who would go for days without being fed? Or who masturbates during family meals at the age of 6? Or who wets himself in public as a form of attention-seeking? Sarah and Philip look at each other and say that they think they could.

Could you? Could I? There are thousands of children in the care system needing new homes. A flick through the Adoption UK magazine *Children Who Wait* featuring some of them would make any human heart lurch: Harry, 5, with his lovely smile and history of

neglect; Liam, 2, with his buttermilk hair and features indicative of foetal alcohol syndrome; the beautiful Sophie, 3, who, like her twin brother, was born suffering from drug withdrawal and has been in foster care with him since last October.

Few would disagree that many children wait too long in care, but it can take time to find children such as these the right "forever" parents.

In recent weeks I have been watching adoption agencies do just this. I have shadowed social workers on home visits and at adoption panels, interviewed managers and prospective and actual adoptive parents in different parts of the country. Sarah and Philip, who are in their late thirties and cannot have children of their own, are midway through the assessment process, which all prospective adopters must complete, and have allowed me into their house to see it in action. There's no point beating around the bush: this is a long, intrusive and sometimes frustrating procedure. By the end some people joke that their social worker knows things about them that they wouldn't tell their own mother.

But agencies need to be sure not only that prospective adopters could cope, but are empathetic enough to understand attachment disorder — a child's failure to form healthy relationships with his or her primary care giver because of abuse and neglect.

Not all children are like this but many are — and what social workers are desperate to avoid is a placement breakdown, a child being settled with a new "forever" mummy and daddy who then find that they cannot cope and that the child must return to care. Imagine how damaging that is to an already fragile child. On average this happens in one case in five.

As Helen French, operations manager for Birmingham City Council's adoption service, the biggest in the country, says: "There's sometimes a perception that all these children need is a bit of love. They do need love, but it's more than that. It's love with a lot of understanding and a lot of hard work."

Do you know how adoption works?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that most people think they do, but don't. Why would they? It isn't something that touches most people's lives. Hence there are umpteen myths and misconceptions around it. Many people assume that you cannot adopt if you're single, overweight or not a homeowner (none is true).

Some simply don't realise how much the adoption business has changed in the past 40 years. If you are imagining it through the sepia-tinted gauze of the 1960s then you're hopelessly out of date. Children adopted then were overwhelmingly babies, often placed directly from hospital and largely born to women who were single but who would face social stigma for being an unmarried mother. They almost never maintained contact with their birth mothers. Adoption was a clean page.

All this has changed. The typical child adopted now is much older (the national

**“The typical child adopted now is much older and comes with a life-story book**

average age is just under 4), comes with a life-story book and may keep letterbox contact with their "tummy mummy" and other members of their birth family throughout childhood. They are also likely to have suffered a degree of trauma. Since there is no scandal in illegitimacy now, every effort is made to keep children with their birth mothers, hence the relative scarcity of infants for adoption (many agencies say that you can't stipulate that you'd like only to adopt a baby — you must be prepared to accept a child aged up to 3).

There can be several attempts at "rehabilitating" parents with chaotic lifestyles, meaning that children move in and out of care. Very few newborns are relinquished voluntarily. In Birmingham

last year there were just ten, given up for reasons ranging from rape to "secret" pregnancy. Of those babies identified in the womb as at-risk and taken into care at birth, most are born with symptoms of drug withdrawal or maternal alcohol abuse, which can cause complex health problems. Most of these babies won't be ready to be placed for adoption until they are a year old because it takes time for their needs to be correctly assessed.

Adoptive parents must then meet those needs. Parents such as Lorna Smith, who adopted a girl via Birmingham City Council last year. When she first took in Jade, whose mother abused drugs and alcohol throughout pregnancy, the child was aged 2. Because of growth deficiency, however, she was wearing clothes for a baby aged six to nine months. Jade suffers from thumb hypoplasia (small or underdeveloped thumbs) and a hearing impairment. She requires speech therapy and Portage, a home-visiting educational service for pre-school children with special needs. She is also a beautiful and happy child now at ease with calling Lorna "Mummy". Lorna, a health worker who proudly passes round photos of her daughter during a recent day out, is smitten. "When they told me about her they didn't paint a rosy picture," she says. "They said 'This is how she is. But I knew I wanted her.'"

The early days were difficult, more so because Jade couldn't verbalise what she wanted and cried for her foster mother. Lorna did her best to soften the blow by placing photos of Jade with her foster family around the house and lavishing love and attention on her. Now all has fitted into place, she is improving every day and Lorna couldn't be happier. She saw Jade's photograph in an adoption magazine soon after she was approved to adopt and instantly fell for her.

"I rang my mum and said 'I feel like I am looking at a picture of my daughter.' She contacted Jade's social worker and within a year the child was living with her. Lorna is single and assumed she would take second place in the queue to adopters who were couples. Indeed, a couple wanted to adopt Jade but the matter was decided in Lorna's favour largely because of the understanding she showed of the child's problems. The whole process, from Lorna making an initial inquiry to adopt, to being assessed, then approved, then getting a child, was two years and three months.

French, who is in charge of several social worker teams at Birmingham's adoption service, was adopted as a baby herself in 1963. She grew up in a happy, loving home and thus far hasn't wanted to trace her birth parents. But in her work she rarely mentions her own adoption at the outset. "People might make assumptions or think I have a particular agenda, which I don't," she says. "Being adopted doesn't make me particularly qualified, but I suppose it gives me a perspective."

Ofsted recently judged Birmingham's adoption service as "good" and its management "outstanding". Did French's background influence her decision to work in adoption? "It's difficult to say but I was always motivated to be a social worker so I suppose in a way it has. Adoption is very different now though, partly because the children tend to be older. It's not like in the old days when you were told 'You were special. You were chosen. You had no knowledge or recollection of your past. Now our children grow up knowing. If they come into the looked-after system at 4 they can remember their birth families. Whether

Right: Libby Parkes and Helen French, of Birmingham City Council's adoption service. "It's not like the old days when you were told 'You were special. You were chosen.' French says

FRONT: LINDA BROWN; MIDDLE: GORDON; BEHIND: BETTY HANDEL, ANNA HENNING/SHINE FOR THE TIMES



**2 years,  
7 months**

the average time  
between a child being  
taken into care and  
being adopted

**1 in 5**

adoptions breaks  
down with the child  
returning to care

**1 in 15**

children leaving care  
aged over 5 do so  
through adoption

**1 in 3**

children leaving care  
aged 0-4 do so through  
adoption

access from friends and family once a child is placed with them, and how long they plan to take off work (Lynn's employers are giving her adoption leave and she plans to go part-time thereafter). They needn't have been nervous; they are ideal candidates and are quickly recommended for approval. Tomorrow it will be rubber-stamped. This couple have been assessed and approved within six months.

Norman Goodwin is chief executive of Adoption Matters North West, which is based in Chester and has been finding families for children since 1947. It is a charity with roots within the Anglican Church, is now one of the country's leading voluntary agencies, employing 14 social workers, and at its last Ofsted inspection was marked "outstanding".

Anybody wishing to adopt a child must either go to his or her local authority or to a Voluntary Adoption Agency such as this, all of which are

**“When they told me about her they didn't paint a rosy picture. But I knew I wanted her**

non-profitmaking. VAAs don't have any children — they are all in the care of local authorities. Their focus is on finding, preparing and approving parents, who are then matched with the children who wait.

Why would someone choose a voluntary agency over a local authority? "It's a good question. We like to think that you get a more personal service and often a better service," says Goodwin, who worked for years as a social worker for local authorities. "Adoption is all we do. We are specialists and we are very focused. We can't afford to hang about; our business relies upon our families being used. That's how we earn our money. Until that child is placed and the local authority pays us, we've had no money."

One of its skills is finding families for harder-to-place older children and sibling groups. "We have placed a family of five where the oldest was 14 and the youngest was 14 months," he says. "It is do-able. Those children need a family as much as a two- or three-year-old." Recently it had a family who were approved to adopt three children and 17 local authorities were competing with each other to use that family, such is the need to place sibling groups.

In a room below Goodwin's office are rows of ringbinder files — the records of 3,500 previous adoption cases it has handled.

He says that when it comes to adoption services some local authorities are very good, others less so. He advises that prospective adopters do their research before making a decision.

"I know of someone who has been approved to adopt a child of up to 6 years old with a local authority and they have been waiting for two years," he says. "Even when they identify a child nothing seems to happen. Imagine how frustrating that is. We sometimes get people coming to us saying 'I applied with my local

that's negatively or positively, they'll often have a lot of loyalty to them. As an adopter now you have to understand that and you have to be aware."

Sixty miles away at a community hall in Cheshire, another couple are about to cross the finishing line of the approval process. This is Matthew and Lynn's adoption panel meeting, the climax of their assessment by Adoption Matters, a voluntary agency, and the last leg of the journey to parenthood. Biscuits and tea are served, kind attempts to make less formal what must feel like a cliffhanger moment. The couple, in their early forties, clasp hands, patently nervous. Who can blame them? Sitting with the 11 panel members, I feel jittery by proxy. This unremarkable room with its strip lighting and hard-backed chairs is where lives are changed.

It must feel to hopeful adopters as if one careless answer could ruin everything. In fact this is unlikely. If you have got this far it's because you have

satisfied most requirements. But it probably still feels like taking a driving test and getting medical results at the same time. Matthew and Lynn are both professionals and already have a son of 9. But they had problems conceiving a second baby and want to adopt a child aged between 3 and 6.

Contrary to what TV dramas tell us, prospective adopters don't remain in the room while the decision is made. So Matthew and Lynn wait in a small room as their future is discussed. The panel asks the couple's social worker how she thinks their existing child will cope with a new sibling and whether the parents are prepared for that. She says the son is an intelligent, securely attached child who is excited about the prospect of a brother or sister, but you can never predict how a child will react. Another panel member asks about contraceptive arrangements. When a couple have struggled to conceive prior to applying to adopt, they are expected to have

completed any fertility treatment such as IVF or Clomid. When infertility is unexplained, the agency sometimes wants reassurance that adopters are taking precautions to avoid a natural pregnancy.

"Adopted children need and deserve huge amounts of focused attention," a social worker tells me. "If there is a pregnancy it is virtually impossible for the adopted child to get what he or she needs so we have to be clear that couples are not still trying for their own baby. It isn't us being heavy handed, it's common sense."

Matthew and Lynn are then asked what kind of support network they will be able to



## Times modern

“Authority 18 months ago and I haven’t had a visit from a social worker yet”, or “I got a social worker but they went off sick for six months and I wasn’t assigned another”. Whoever you go to, the first question I would ask is ‘How quickly will I be assigned an assessing social worker?’ I know of at least five local authorities that are placing fewer than five children a year.”

Last year Adoption UK, a national charity supporting adoptive parents, conducted a survey and found that a quarter of people who expressed an interest in adoption were turned away by one or more agencies. The reasons most often given were that it was “not currently recruiting adopters” and that the person’s ethnicity “didn’t match the ethnicity of the children in care”.

“We know there are huge delays for children in the North West,” Goodwin says. “Recent figures suggest there are just under 150 children who have waited more than nine months. The average time a child waits in care is 18 months. At the extreme end we have placed children who have had 23 moves and they are aged only 5. We would argue that some of those children could be placed more quickly if more local authorities were willing to pay for it.” He believes one of the biggest reasons for delay in the system is the fee.

years Adoption Matters has been using its reserve funds because fees don’t meet costs. At a time when the Government wants to make adoption easier this situation seems perverse. Here is the third most successful adoption agency in Britain, placing between 40 and 50 children a year and with a placement breakdown rate of only 5 per cent, and yet there is a question mark over the survival of the voluntary sector. “I am fearful for the future,” Goodwin says. “If voluntary agencies go out of business a third of children waiting for adoption won’t be placed. Of that third most will be the more hard-to-place children.”

Jonathan Pearce, chief executive of Adoption UK, says: “The adoption work that voluntary organisations do is not rewarded properly.” Research has shown it is undervalued to the tune of around £10,000 for each adoption. “Authorities have tight restrictions on budgets. They are becoming reluctant to use the voluntary sector because they will have to fork out £24,000 each time. I do

**“ Authorities are reluctant to use the voluntary sector: they fork out £24,000 per child**

believe this Government is committed to adoption but it clearly doesn’t have plans to invest in it.”

At Birmingham adoption service, though, managers say there is no such strategy there. It places about 90 children a year, more than any other authority. Libby Parkes, the family-finding manager, says: “In Birmingham I think we are very good at using inter-agency placements. If we can, we’ll use one of our own families and place the children here because of our support packages, but we don’t make judgments based on money. It is on who is the best family for that child. We recently placed two children aged 3 and 4 in Peterborough using a voluntary organisation. It cost us £47,000. We will always pay for the right family.”

Are some other local authorities unable to do that, though? “There will be some whose budget is such that they cannot do that,” she says. “It must be very difficult in those circumstances.”

The Government made the news recently when it urged local authorities not to hang around waiting for the “perfect” family for a child of ethnicity but it was nothing new. The Labour Government said much the same thing 13 years ago and many social workers claim they were doing it anyway, certainly in areas with a high rate of ethnically diverse children in care. Existing regulations made this clear.

Privately some social workers have told me that the issue is much more complicated than simply saying “more white couples can adopt black and Asian children and the problem’s solved”. Irrespective of racial background, most children in care have suffered some sort of abuse or neglect. This is the overriding issue. But still, the importance of a child’s sense of identity cannot be underestimated.

Oona King, the former MP who herself adopted two children and supports making adoption easier, told *The Times* recently that any parent taking on a child from a different ethnic background should still be fully aware of the issues that arise when a child is



**Right: Norman Goodwin, of Adoption Matters agency in Chester: “We placed a family of five where the oldest was 14 and the youngest was 14 months”**

brought up outside of his or her community. She has had letters from many people who lament the loss of identity and the confusion caused by well-meaning white adoptive parents who were ill-prepared for what they were taking on. While a child may be oblivious to such issues at the age of 3, experience shows they may feel differently when 13 or 14.

In any case, some social workers say the idea that there are white parents queuing up to adopt black children is optimistic. One social worker described it to me as a “fantasy”. “Race isn’t the biggest issue,” says another in the South of England. “It’s about there not being enough people to take on children with disabilities, emotional issues and learning difficulties because of their prebirth and early life experience. It’s a big thing to ask of someone. Who are all these people who are going to take on a life-limited child? Even taking on a sibling group of three kids who cannot

be separated is a massive thing.”

And let’s not forget that, occasionally, adopters can be fussy. I recently met Nathan, a gorgeous little white boy of 3 — bright, engaging and picture-book handsome who was taken into care after being chronically neglected by his mother. Two adopters were asked if they were interested in adopting him but they declined. The reason? Because he has ginger hair. They were concerned he might be “bullied at school”. Many people want a child who looks like them or fits a preconceived picture. Happily, Nathan is now settled in a new home with loving parents and is thriving.

Other people go into adoption having no idea what it entails. I was told of one man, an educated professional, who attended his first preparation group, an early part of the adoption approval process, and said: “So when do we get the baby?” He assumed the child would be delivered later that week. He and his wife dropped out of the course.

**T**

here was no mention of funding when the Government recently called for guidelines to be relaxed to allow more transracial adoptions and shed “politically correct” attitudes that prevent white couples from adopting, say, black children. Given that VAAs are businesses that depend on “selling” their prepared families to local authorities, you could argue that they would say money is the issue. Every time a child is placed, a fee of £24,000 is paid by that child’s local authority to the agency that provides that family. But if an authority places a child with one of its own approved families this is cheaper.

Goodwin claims that delays arise when some (not all) local authorities try to save money by waiting until the right family comes along from their own “stock”, thus avoiding a big fee. So, he says, the child remains in foster care when there may be the ideal approved family available elsewhere. If this is true — many local authority social workers deny it is common — the temptation to do this more often is surely likely to grow as government cuts bite.

Goodwin’s point is that if local authorities do keep children for longer in care to save money then it’s a false economy. Adoption is cheap compared with foster care, which can cost between £300 and £800 a week a child. Plus, the younger a child is when adopted the greater the chances of the placement working and thus the greater benefits for society. “Research shows that the payment of that [adoption] fee will have a social return of £1.1 million [over each child’s lifetime],” he says. “If you delay for a year you are paying a lot of money to keep that child in care. But many local authorities don’t see the longer-term picture. Many are locked into a mentality of yearly budgets.”

Goodwin says that for the past three



relaxing the rules too much when it comes to transracial adoption. "It might be right for one child but not another," John says. "It takes time for you to really understand the implications. You see the two-year-old bundle and think 'how lovely', but you need to think what they'll be like at 13, grappling with their own identity."

The couple are very open about the issue. "Jess will come home from school saying 'I'm brown aren't I, and you're white?'" John says. "One of the things we've learnt about adopting children from a dual-heritage background is that you need to examine all areas of your life. It is not just about saying the right things, but about making it seem natural too. It's about the social groups you move in, taking it beyond the paper exercise. We know that when they get older they might not want white role models, and that's OK with us. But you have to know that you really are OK with it. My proviso would be, as long as the adoptive parents are equipped to deal with it, all well and good but you can't just rush it along."

"My worry about speeding the process up is that when you look back on it you realise that everything happens at the right time. When you are going through it it doesn't feel like that. You think 'Why aren't they matching me? I haven't heard from my social worker today. I'm cross with them. But now I realise... You need to be prepared for what you're taking on.'"

Lorna, mother of Jade, feels the same. "You get frustrated thinking 'There's all these children who need to be adopted, I've been approved — what's the hold-up?' I found that quite hard. But now I completely see the importance of waiting to get the right match."

Race isn't the only issue. Libby Parkes, at Birmingham, says that if a child has been living in a tower block, attending the local state school and, say, playing in a football team that child's interests might not be replicated in a family earning £200,000 a year. "That child might need to continue football, not cricket," she says. "He might need to go to the local school, not a private one, as that wasn't his early life experience."

This kind of work isn't easy. Imagine a woman who already has five children in care and is pregnant with a sixth. She agrees to relinquish the baby but wants the older siblings and the younger ones kept together (birth mothers can request this), so the task is to find two families who will take on three children each but who will agree to contact with their other siblings. Or when there have been three attempts to rehabilitate a mother who abuses alcohol, her child living with her intermittently and going back to foster care. How many chances do you give her? If you intervene too early you are accused of heavy-handed "baby snatching"; if you don't, you're accused of not doing your job properly. Since the appalling case of Baby P, it is estimated that there are 40 per cent more children in the looked-after system.

The consequences are painful for everybody when adoption doesn't work out. Take "Charlotte", a three-year-old whose case is being discussed at another panel meeting at a North West community hall. Members are visibly moved as the social worker explains why her placement has broken down. Her new adoptive mother had asked for her to return to care before the adoption order went through because she "couldn't bond with her". Charlotte, said the mother, "kept asking for her foster mother" and "looked right through me".

20,000

The number of adoptions in 1971

3,200

The number of adoptions in 2010

64,000

The number of children in care

This is a classic symptom of non-attachment. This child had spent a year with that foster mother, a third of her life — it's hardly surprising that she mentioned her frequently. But this parent couldn't cope with what she clearly saw as a personal rejection. She told the social worker: "I thought I could do it but I can't." She has now withdrawn from the adoption process.

One member of the panel asks what we are all thinking and hoping. Has Charlotte now returned to her original foster mother? She hasn't. The place had been taken by another child. Charlotte is in another foster home with new carers, starting all over again. This is a story which, weeks later, still upsets me.

Many experts believe that a more useful way to improve the number of successful adoptions is to put fewer resources into the assessment part of the process and more into supporting adoptive parents after placement. Jonathan Pearce says that it is not just help from social workers that is required but also from the child's school and therapeutic services. Many agencies are already very good at this. A decade or so ago it was a different story: new parents were waved off and it was assumed that they wouldn't require any further help.

It is also why people are asked tough questions early on. Claire, who recently adopted a one-year-old boy with her husband in the South of England, says: "At one point we were asked whether we'd adopt a child who was the product of rape and/or incest. I had no qualms at all — it didn't matter to me — but the idea affected my husband. Different people can cope with different things."

Parents are told much more now. A couple who adopted two girls aged 5 and

“It's such a positive thing to do. You are literally changing someone's life

6 in the North West in the 1990s were not told that they had suffered sexual abuse. When the girls' behaviour began to disturb their parents they asked their social worker why and were eventually told the truth. The social worker said she feared that it might have put them off if she had mentioned it earlier. The couple say that it wouldn't have deterred them — but knowing about the abuse would have made the early weeks with the children easier to cope with.

Take the case of two brothers, adopted aged 4 and 6, several years ago. Every Sunday lunchtime — a big and important fixture in this family's life — their behaviour would change bizarrely at the table into wild, uncontrollable tantrums. The adoptive couple were baffled and kept demanding access to their records. Once they got them, the mystery was solved. It emerged they had been sexually abused regularly by an uncle who often looked after them. That uncle had been a butcher and he would always send them home with a leg of lamb or joint

of beef for their mother to cook. They associated a roast dinner with abuse.

Before long Sarah and Phil will be asked to complete a form ticking off issues they feel able to take on. It is a daunting list that includes foetal alcohol syndrome, HIV/Aids, hepatitis, Down's syndrome, physical disabilities and sexual abuse. They need to discuss it, but they are determined to make it work. "I'm not easily shocked," Sarah says. "I love kids and I want to be a mum so I'll do what it takes." The rewards when it works are incalculable.

In a large, detached house in Staffordshire, I am watching the endgame, about which every adoptive parent dreams. An adorable brother and sister, aged 4 and 3, are running around the garden of their new house shrieking with laughter, their happiness palpable. Just five months ago they arrived here from foster care, nervy and distrustful after suffering chronic neglect at their birth home more than 100 miles away. Now they are flourishing.

Their parents, Dominic and Anna, say it has been exhausting but the best thing they have ever done. They know the hard work will continue. Billy, the oldest, needs to look in the fridge regularly to be reassured that there is food because he can remember not being fed. Both children still have a habit of hitting themselves when they are told off. Natalie has stopped banging her head on the walls now but will still lie in bed banging her head on the pillow. Billy still sleeps in the foetal position, which his parents are trying to coax him out of.

The love between parents and children is obvious. Dominic and Anna are realising that routine and certainty are even more important for adopted children than they are for other children. Recently they showed Billy photographs of their relatives. Instantly he became anxious, worrying that he was moving home again. They realised that the last time he was shown photos like these, they were of them at his foster home, when he was told they were his new mummy and daddy. Somewhere in his mind he thought the same thing was happening again.

"These kids are hyper vigilant," Dominic says. "They are watching your face all the time, assessing your mood." The social worker tells them this is normal for neglected children. Anna says that the bond didn't come instantly — sometimes adoptive parents can feel inadequate or guilty about this — but it didn't take long. "They are great children and brilliant good fun," she says. "We feel really, really lucky to have them."

In some ways it's a miracle that adoption works at all — taking adults with mostly no experience of parenting and asking them to look after some of society's most needy children. So, isn't it uplifting that in the majority of cases it does work? Whatever criticisms people have of the system it will always be an imprecise science. As Norman Goodwin says: "It can be an incredibly rewarding experience. It is such a positive thing to do. You are literally changing a child's life. Anyone who thinks they could do it, we'd like them to come and talk to us."

From what I have seen — from adoption agencies to parents — this is a hugely complicated issue. But we can at least be sure of this. Most of the people involved are doing the best they can.

As one social worker said: "We are in the business of hope." In the main, thank God, that hope turns out to be well-founded.

Some names and details have been changed. [adoptionmatters.org](http://adoptionmatters.org); [birmingham.gov.uk/adoptionandfostering](http://birmingham.gov.uk/adoptionandfostering)



John and Rachel Wilson are a white couple from Birmingham who have adopted two non-sibling children of dual heritage. In 2005 they adopted Anthony, then 4, and in 2009 Jessica, 2. There had been a previous attempt to place Jessica with one of her relatives when it was decided that her mother couldn't cope, but it had failed. Now Jessica is 4, the family has finally gelled and they say they are extremely happy. They believe adopting an older child has definite advantages. "Anthony did have the language to express his feelings," his father says, "so when in the first week he was very angry and shut himself in the bathroom screaming 'You're not my Mummy and Daddy', we were OK with it. We knew what was behind it and once he had calmed down we tried to encourage him to talk to us about it. Whereas an apparently unproblematic baby might not have that — you are reading between the lines a lot more."

Interestingly, they are wary of