

Principle 1c:

Children from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds

With this inquiry considering stability for all children journeying into and through adoption, it is vital that particular attention is paid to children who face additional barriers when it comes to matching and therefore often wait the longest for an adoptive family.

This includes sibling groups, children from ethnic minority backgrounds, children with disabilities, and children over the age of five. For this inquiry, the APPGAP focused specifically on children from ethnic minority backgrounds, as statistics highlight that:

- White children wait 19 months on average, whereas children from ethnic minority groups wait 22 months on average.⁹
- Black children wait the longest and are the least likely to be adopted at all.¹⁰

When there is **intersectionality** of characteristics, the disadvantage faced by children from ethnic minority backgrounds is further compounded:

- Single children aged over 5 years old, who are from a ethnic minority background and have a disability, wait on average 38 months to be placed. This is 10 months longer than children from a White background with the same characteristics.¹¹

Despite the removal in 2014 of the statutory requirement for “the adoption agency [to] give due consideration to the child’s religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background”¹² during matching, the underrepresentation of adopters from some ethnic minority backgrounds has been identified as an ongoing contributing factor to certain groups of ethnic minority children not being matched and placed in a timely way. Witnesses to the inquiry shone a light on a number of factors that contribute to this pattern, one of which is a mistrust and concern among these communities about interacting with the social care system and how they might be treated.¹³

In order to overcome this barrier, further steps need to be taken to build relationships and trust through community engagement and outreach, which is beginning to take place through initiatives such as the **#YouCanAdopt** national adopter recruitment campaign. But there is much more to be done. Urgent attention also needs to be given to ensuring that there is racial diversity and representation amongst the social work workforce and on adoption and matching panels to ensure that unconscious bias is not disadvantaging prospective adopters.

#YouCanAdopt

is a national adopter recruitment campaign that aims to raise awareness of the number of children waiting for adoption, particularly children from ethnic minority backgrounds and those in sibling groups. The campaign is being delivered by The National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group and is supported by the Department for Education.

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“As we walked into the room that morning, I couldn’t help but notice this – here we were, a Black couple, sitting in front of a majority White panel, waiting to hear if they thought we were fit enough to adopt, based on a report. Thankfully they did, but there is that lack of diversity in a lot of adoption panels that I think needs to be addressed to make it more inclusive.”

Vivian, adoptive parent [OE]

Social workers reflected in their evidence to the APPGAP that despite the legal change around ethnic matching where a child is matched with adoptive parents of the same or very similar ethnicity, practice has not followed suit and that strict adherence to ethnic and cultural matching can often remain. This is a huge barrier for children from ethnic minority backgrounds, causing those from backgrounds where there is an underrepresentation of adopters to often wait longer for matches. We recognise this as a challenging area for policy to address, as some adopted young people shared with the group through the Call for Evidence their experience of wrestling with their cultural identity due to growing up in a transracial adoptive family. In reflecting on his own experience as both an adopted person and an adopter, one witness spoke movingly about the need to hold in tension the significant role that ethnicity can play in a child’s identity, with the recognition that a ‘perfect’ ethnic match is not sufficient in and of itself.

“For me, [...] there is a concern about idolising and idealising the idea of an ethnic match because I think you can have an ethnic match but not a good placement, but at the same time you can have a non-ethnic match and have a wonderful placement, and that’s been my own experience of life so far.”

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Luke, adopted person and adoptive parent [OE]

The APPGAP heard that alongside removing the barriers to encourage a greater diversity of prospective adopters to step forward, good practice involves working with adopters to support them in positively promoting the ethnic or cultural heritage of a child when it is different to theirs.

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“Our social worker looked at the diversity of the neighbourhood we live in for instance. And asked extra questions about how we would integrate our kid’s ethnic background into our life.”

Adoptive parent

The APPGAP was encouraged to hear about some of the proactive approaches being taken to find families for children who typically wait longer. These include Adoption Activity Days,¹⁴ such as those delivered by Coram, which have proven particularly effective in enabling prospective adopters to informally meet children who are waiting. The APPGAP also received numerous evidence submissions on the benefits of starting the family finding process earlier for children who are likely to wait longer for an adoptive family, even considering adopters who are in the process but not yet approved.

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Children from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds (continued)

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“My experience of being matched was really good and pretty amazing. The social worker throughout the assessment of my mums from the beginning was thinking of who might be a match for them. This meant when they did the disability form, I wasn't written off as she could hint that low level autism would be maybe okay. I think that's something that could be better - the disability form and helping realise a lot of things are spectrums. So an appropriate match doesn't get stopped just because a kid has a worry of slight autism.”

Tiegan, adopted young person [OE]

In her evidence to the APPGAP, Dr Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor from Coventry University stressed the need to train social workers to be curious and self-reflective when it comes to matching children from ethnic minority backgrounds. As such, social workers should receive comprehensive cultural literacy training, so that they are equipped to facilitate strong matches for children from ethnic minority backgrounds. The APPGAP heard about IAC – The Centre for Adoption's good practice in this regard, as they work to creatively help their adopters “positively promote the ethnic, cultural and religious heritage of a child that is different to theirs.” All of the children they serve and 85% of those seeking to adopt through IAC are from ethnic minority backgrounds, thus this awareness and training is vital to their work and has resulted in adopters being better able to meaningfully tap into the diversity of their support networks.

Finally, some social workers identified the inter-agency fee as a barrier to high-quality matching, as it incentivises agencies to match sequentially, looking first within their own pool of adopters before widening their search geographically.

“[Barriers to matching include:] Sequential searching for adoptive families - this causes delay, with agencies focused on internal resources before looking for the best match; looking for the best internal agency match rather than looking for the best match for the child amongst the whole pool of adopters; and paying inter-agency fees - financial constraints may dictate the “best match” due to the inter-agency fee.”

Adoption agency

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Some social workers felt that sequential matching added unnecessary delays to the process for children who are likely to wait longer to find an adoptive family. Despite this, we recognise the benefits of placing some children with a family who live closer to the child's home as it means that the child's social workers are nearby and can aid the family in accessing local support and navigating contact. Through the Call for Evidence, the APPGAP heard about a RAG (Red-Amber-Green) rating framework that has been developed and piloted in the North West to identify children from the outset who are likely to wait longer for adoption, and who therefore might benefit from a wider pool of adopters being considered early on. We recognise the merits that a tool such as this could provide in enabling children, especially those who might wait longer, to be matched more quickly if utilised on a larger scale. In addition, we recognise that much more work needs to be done on the impact of other characteristics, including disabilities, that often mean children wait longer for adoption, to explore and develop solutions that will prevent them from waiting too long.

“We are excited to see who our son becomes. We are excited that he is no longer one of the stats but sadly there are many Black boys, particularly for whom the system has stopped trying to find a home because they have reached a certain age, so the system gives up on them, [...] leaving them in the foster care system. I believe that we need advocates who really see our Black boys and girls and won't give up on them until they've found their home for good.”

Vivian, adoptive parent [OE]

Recommendations



- **We must ensure that there is racial diversity and representation amongst the social work workforce and on adoption and matching panels.** Research should be conducted to ascertain current levels of diversity and an action plan developed, based on the findings.
- To ensure that individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds have a positive experience of exploring and pursuing adoption, **social workers should be supported and trained to take a culturally literate approach in their work.** The feedback and experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds who have previously engaged with the adoption process should be incorporated into the development of this training.
- **Every Local Authority should have a published strategy on how they identify, at the earliest stages, those children who are likely to wait longer for adoption, accompanied by a clear process for seeking to match these children with a family in a timely way.** Existing frameworks such as the RAG rating tool developed by a group of agencies in the North West could be utilised in the development of these strategies.

