

By rushing to speed up forced adoptions we are letting children down

December 10 2015, by Anna Gupta, Brid Featherstone, June Thoburn, Kate Morris And Sue White



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It is within the power of a judge to sever all legal ties between a child in care and its birth family through an adoption order. Most adoption orders for children in care in England are made without parental consent, and are sometimes referred to as "forced" adoption. With [political](#)

[pressure mounting](#) to speed up the adoption process, we are at risk of rushing through more of these adoptions, despite serious concerns on whether this is the best option for the children involved.

In the year to March 31 2014, 5,050 [children](#) in England were adopted from care and over 95% of these were without [parental consent](#). This happens in circumstances where children are deemed to have suffered or are likely to suffer significant harm through neglect or abuse.

The UK is not the only country in Europe with non-consensual adoption. It is possible in most countries, but no other EU state exercises this power to the extent [that England does](#). In Germany, [250 non-consensual adoptions](#) of children took place in 2010. In contrast the average number of children a year adopted in the Netherlands is 28 and [only if](#) the parents don't object.

These comparisons highlight the different ways countries meet the needs of children in care and the influence of social and political contexts on how policies develop. They also challenge the dominant political narrative in England that contrasts the "loving" adoptive family with the "tragedy" of a child remaining with its birth families or in foster care. While there are many loving adoptive families, the same can be said about parents, relatives and foster carers.

In many other EU countries, it is much easier for families to access support if they need help. [Great emphasis is placed](#) on helping families to care for children safely at home and maintaining family links if in care. But in "austerity" England, family support services are closing, thresholds are high, and social work is being defined as a narrow child protection service.

This came under scrutiny [in a report](#) from the Council of Europe in January which highlighted the impact of austerity cuts on social services.

It specifically criticised England for its child protection focus and the removal of children from women who have been subject to domestic abuse, or who are suffering from depression, particularly in the context of policies promoting non-consensual adoption.

With services increasingly focused on protection rather than support, [families fear rather than seek professional help](#) when struggling in adverse social circumstances. The promotion of adoption sets up an adversarial dynamic that can seriously undermine social workers' ability to develop trusting relationships with families needing help, as distrust and suspicion permeate the system.

Speeding up the adoption process

Prime minister David Cameron recently called for the adoption process [to be accelerated](#) to end the "tragedy" of children waiting to be placed in a "loving home as soon as possible". Any attempts to speed up the adoption process need to ensure a fair and just process that upholds the rights of children and their parents to family life and a fair trial.

In 2014 there were [changes introduced to the law](#) governing family courts, which included bringing in a [target of 26 weeks](#) for the proceedings to decide whether a child is removed on a long term basis from a parent's care, including non-consensual adoption. This has proved controversial and indeed one important [judgment](#) stressed that "justice must never be sacrificed upon the altar of speed".

The prime minister has urged a dramatic increase in the number of children placed with adoptive families before the 26-week target for the end of the care proceedings. Yet we know that currently at [the end of proceedings](#) many children are placed with parents or relatives. While Cameron's statement might sound laudable, the reality is far more complex. A premature placement with adoptive parents pre-judges the

outcomes of legal proceedings and also risks causing unnecessary distress to all concerned. It diminishes a child's right to family life and risks the early separation of siblings.

A [recent case](#) of a couple cleared of harming their child, but unable to have the child returned because of the irrevocable nature of an adoption order is a highly unusual but powerful reminder of the lifelong consequences for all.

It is important to note that [adoption](#) is far from the risk-free solution that Cameron presents it as. Feelings of loss and grief permeate the lives of many of those affected, including children separated from brothers and sisters. We can do better by our society's most vulnerable children and their families.

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