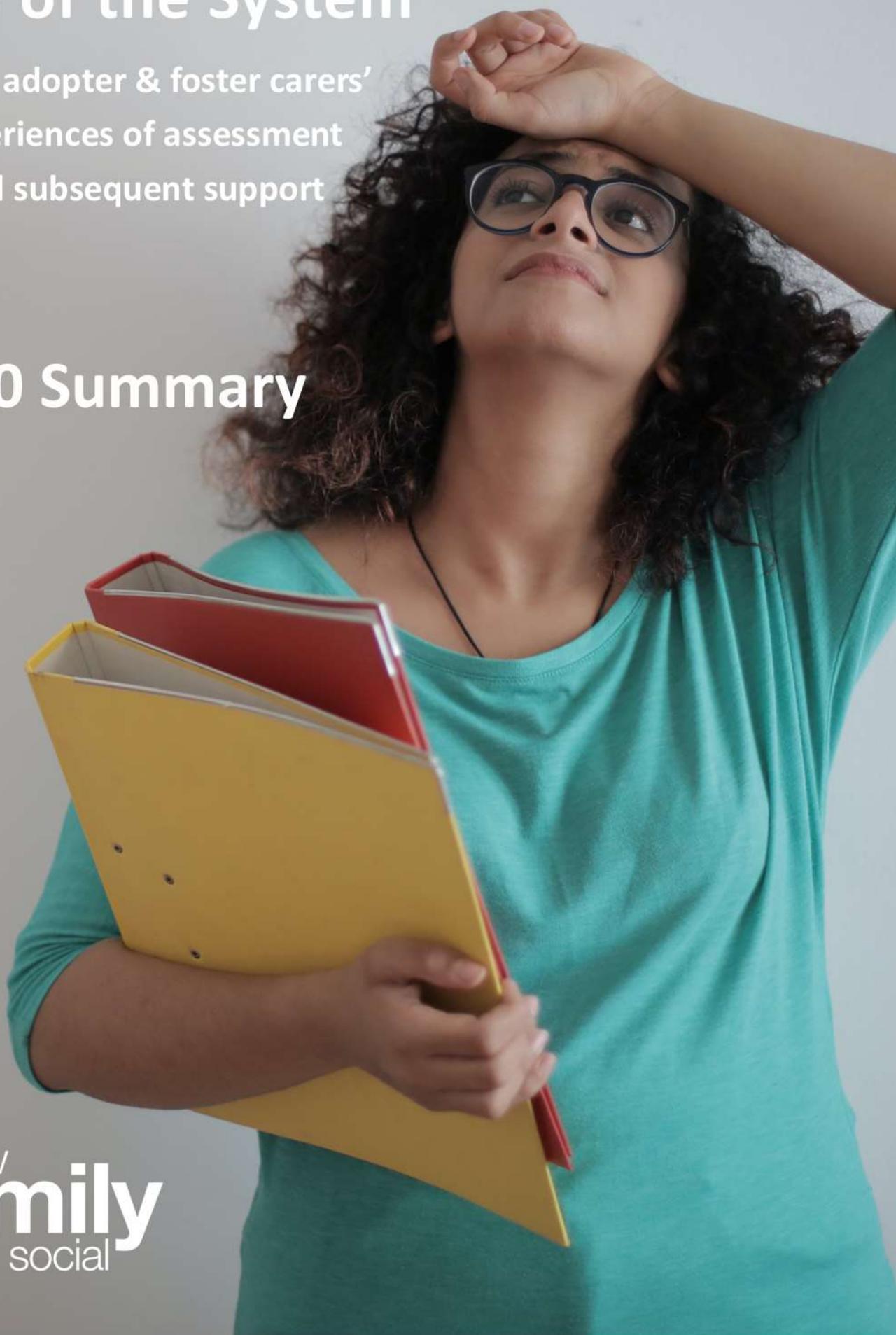


State of the System

LGBT+ adopter & foster carers'
experiences of assessment
and subsequent support

2020 Summary



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Introduction

The United Kingdom faces great pressure as the number of looked-after children across the union continues to grow. There's been a consistent growth in the number of LGBT+ people exploring both adoption and fostering – the two parenting routes where the number of applicants is frequently outstripped by the number of children needing care.

LGBT+ people now form an invaluable pool of potential parents and carers and this resource is increasingly used to support the country's most vulnerable children. To ensure this continues New Family Social frequently asks its members about their experiences of the assessment process. However, no adoptive parent or foster carer's journey ends with a child being placed with them. Indeed, without appropriate support adoptions can end in disruption, as can foster placements.

This summary report outlines the recommendations New Family Social makes based on the results of the 2020 survey, along with the survey results that fed into them. The full report is accessible to our Gold, Silver and Orange members, who are verified adopters, foster carers or member agency professionals. We hope the results and recommendations are as informative and useful for adoption and fostering agencies as they are for New Family Social's ongoing work to bolster LGBT+ adopters and foster carers.

Challenges are highlighted throughout the report and we hope that agencies use the results to drive change in their organisations.

Tor Docherty, New Family Social Chief Executive

Methodology

The survey opened from 17 July 2020 to 1 September 2020 to New Family Social's Gold, Silver and Bronze members. Respondents were self-selecting. Their responses were anonymous and not linked to their New Family Social membership beyond the survey being placed on a members' only page or sent to their registered membership email address. Those members who elected to receive information updates or to share their experiences further submitted their account email address to do so.

We thank everyone who took part for sharing their experiences.

Key Findings

- 1 in 2 LGBT+ adopters sought support in the past year , with 1 in 4 LGBT+ adopters doing so in the past three months.
- 4 in 10 LGBT+ adoptive parents say their agency responds to direct requests for support within five working days. A further 11 per cent say that their agency responds within ten working days
- Of the post adoption support delivered, 1 in 3 interventions were done through the Adoption Support Fund. However, the reluctance of agencies to work across UK countries (e.g., Wales to England) to access the fund is causing unnecessary distress and delay to LGBT+ adopters and their children
- 4 in 10 LGBT+ people currently in the adoption approval process report delays to their assessment as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. This was also seen in family-finding to a lesser degree, with 1 in 3 LGBT+ people at that stage in the process reporting delays relating to the pandemic. A similar proportion of LGBT+ foster carers said their ability to foster was impaired as a result of the impact of the virus on fostering systems.
- 1 in 7 LGBT+ people (16 per cent) currently being assessed for adoption say that their sexual orientation has been a barrier in the process. This rose to 1 in 3 of those at the family-finding stage.
- 67 per cent of LGBT+ adopters and foster carers are aware of the extent of adoptions by same-sex couples in England – which stands at 1 in 7.

Recommendations

- **Adoption and foster care agencies need to update their paperwork and systems to include a wider range of sexual orientations and gender identities.** This will make sure that there's a wider understanding within the organisation of the diversity of applicants. This research shows that there's a small, growing number of applicants who don't describe their sexual orientation as gay/lesbian or define their gender identity as male/female.

Survey result: 1.3 per cent of respondents identified their gender identity as trans. 5.2 per cent define their sexual orientation as bi, 2.6 per cent identify as queer and 1.3 per cent as asexual. All of these are separate distinct identities and orientations – their needs and support cannot be met by using the same terminology and assumptions that may be used with applicants who identify as gay or lesbian or in the traditional male/female model. 1 in 13 respondents report that they are going through the assessment process or are now parenting/caring as a single person – data that is not often captured and shared with potential applicants who may be deterred from proceeding if agencies solely focus on same-sex couples.

- **Agencies need to lead on developing internal audits that answer the question 'How well do we meet the needs of LGBT+ applicants, parents and carers?'** If existing data collection systems don't address this issue, then this area of weakness in the agency will be difficult to resolve.

Survey result: Anecdotal evidence given by respondents outlines outdated paperwork still being used by agencies asking applicants to identify as 'Mr & Mrs'.

- **Agency staff must – as a matter of routine – receive regular and refresher training** to develop their understanding of sexual orientation, gender identity and the positive skills an LGBT+ person brings to adoption and foster caring. Anecdotally, feedback to this survey shows that recruiting social workers are often keen to engage LGBT+ applicants. Training however must expand to also include family finders, children's social workers and panel members, as all play a key role in the journey of an LGBT+ adopter or foster carer.

Survey result: 16 per cent (1 in 6.25) of LGBT+ people currently in the adoption assessment process report that their sexual orientation has been a barrier. Children's social workers and family finders were directly cited by a number of respondents as opposing the matching of a child or sibling group with a same-sex couple or LGBT+ single applicant, often giving the need for the child/group to 'have a Mum and a Dad' as the reason.

- **Training and information dissemination on the structure and availability of the Adoption Support Fund needs enhancing**, in terms of the eligibility of children adopted from Wales into families living in England. This should be extended to all adoption agencies in both England and Wales as this research shows that barriers to applying can be present in the adopter's agency in England and in the adoptive child's agency in Wales.

Survey result: In a number of cases where an LGBT+ individual or same-sex couple reported adopting their child/children from Wales and then seeking Adoption Support Fund support while a Welsh agency bore responsibility for applying, there were process issues that led to no funding being sought. The difficulties appear not to be with the fund itself, but with agencies' willingness to work with one another across countries. Ultimately this leads to an absence of support for those adoptive families that need it most. It may also result in a reluctance among some English agencies to work with their Welsh counterparts.

- **Stronger guidance on how to approach disclosures of consensual non-monogamous relationships is needed.** At present LGBT+ people in these relationships can be caught in a 'don't ask, don't tell' scenario.

Survey result: Survey respondents highlighted a tension between the need for applicants to adoption and fostering to be totally honest with their assessing social worker and the reality of some applicants' relationship structures. More work is needed to be done to assess the prevalence of consensual non-monogamous relationships and how the assessment process can best accommodate this reality of some people's lives; particularly given the known incidences of non-consensual non-monogamous relationships among adoptive couples and foster carers of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

- **Fostering sector needs to lead on collecting engagement data with LGBT+ people.** The fostering sector could replicate the success of the adoption sector in attracting more LGBT+ applicants if it started to monitor and publish its engagement rates with the community. While the statistics may start from a low base, this was also the case with adoption statistics which grew as LGBT+ people's confidence and the visibility of same-sex couples adopting grew.

Survey result: 7 in 10 LGBT+ adopters and foster carers know what the proportion of adoptions in England were to same-sex couples in 2019. The absence of similar data to inspire LGBT+ people into fostering undermines recruitment efforts to engage more LGBT+ people with fostering.

How New Family Social supports agencies to achieve this

- New Family Social's online training – available from Jan 2021 – will cover all elements of LGBT+ inclusion in the adoption and fostering journey as well as information on gender variance and the latest good practice for seasoned practitioners.
- LGBT Adoption & Fostering Week is the annual campaign led by New Family Social to encourage more LGBT+ people to consider adoption or fostering. Agencies that want to engage more with LGBT+ people can use the campaign to extend their reach while also using materials and approaches to be meet the needs of people from this vital pool of potential parents.
- Agencies can join New Family Social as a member agency, giving all of their LGBT+ adopters and foster carers free access to our peer support network and members' only events.
- Member agencies of New Family Social can directly reach LGBT+ people approved to adopt with profiles of children they are actively family-finding for, to help ensure they are considered by a wider pool of potential parents.



New Family Social, Harvey's Barn Park End,
Cambridge CB25 0NA
newfamilysocial.org.uk
T: 020 3880 2683
Registered charity number: 1138340

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