

Education Secretary urges overhaul of adoption system

[The Education Secretary's speech, delivered at Coram, can be viewed in full on the Department for Education's [YouTube](#) channel.]

Hello. Thank you for joining me today.

In an ideal world, I would not need to be giving this speech. In an ideal world every child would grow up in a stable home, with a family who loved them. Sadly, that is not the world we live in.

We simply cannot overestimate how important a family is to a child. The security that comes from knowing that they are safe and cared for, it's vital for helping all children grow up ready to make the most of life's opportunities.

A child whose parents read to them when they are young, for example, is more likely to do better at school. Whereas one that has a poor relationship with their parents is likely to record far lower GCSE grades than their peers.

Evidence from the Study of Early Education and Development shows that a good quality home learning environment can help a disadvantaged student catch up and keep up with their peers. This is powerful evidence of how much families matter to children.

Yet those children whose birth parents are not able to give them this love often end up being bounced around the system, waiting an age for an adoptive family.

And for prospective adopters, those wonderful people who are just desperate to give a child a home, as a child is so desperate to be given one, they too often face a bureaucratic system, with too many boxes to be ticked, and too many judgments made based on where they live.

I want to change all that.

I have made it a personal mission to do whatever I can to find a stable and loving home for all our children.

I am in awe of all of those who step up and adopt. The trouble is there are not enough adoptive parents to go round. Just to give you some idea of the shortfall, there are currently around 2,400 children waiting for adoption, waiting for a home, waiting for parents to love them – but fewer than 1,800 approved adopters who are ready to give them a home.

When it comes to adoption, what we have seen over a number of years is something that I can only call narrow mindedness or maybe even a snobbery that only certain people fit the profile, only certain people can provide the loving home a child needs.

It wasn't so long ago that if you were gay you couldn't adopt. Thankfully we have broken down those barriers but still too many of those barriers exist: if you are single, or if you rent your flat rather than own it, or if you don't conform to a middle-class lifestyle, then you are not able to provide a child with the love they need.

This needs to be changed. Unfortunately too many local authorities are putting up these sort of barriers. The reality in too many places is still that if you're not that middle class person, you will be given a much harder time when it comes to being approved for adoption.

That has to change. The only qualification that people need to worry about is whether or not they can love and care for a child.

Of course there have to be checks, there has to be process. And let me be clear: this is not about relaxing safeguards.

What I am talking about is the kind lifestyle-judging which has made adoption seem a daunting and even an intrusive experience for too many.

In January I asked councils to put adoption at the top of their agendas, and to make sure that people are not being turned away because they are too old, or had a low income, or because of their faith, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

I know Regional Adoption Agency leaders took action to address this issue ahead of the recently launched national recruitment campaign. However, I expect all agencies to ensure that their practice is in line with the law and to keep tabs on this issue through regular monitoring.

The national campaign will reach out to churches, mosques and other community groups starting with a pilot service in London and Birmingham.

We want to make sure that far more people from all sorts of different backgrounds are willing to become adoptive parents, and to do that we must end this obsession with finding the perfect ethnic match for children.

You might have heard of Sandeep and Reena Mander from Maidenhead. This lovely couple were told that they couldn't register to adopt because they were Indian and there were no children of Indian origin waiting for adoption.

There is no acceptable reason – none – to block adopters from registering because there happen to be no children of the same ethnicity waiting to be adopted.

And let us go further and look at adoption in an even wider sense. To do that, we can learn from other countries and how their adoption systems work. For example, some states in the United States allow adult adoption, and many European countries have adoption processes that differ from ours.

What we must do is get as much input and challenge on our adoption system from as wide a range of sources as we can, so that we can make sure the system is modern and responsive to the needs of those who can benefit from

it.

One of the most significant reforms we have made was to introduce the Adoption Support Fund back in 2015. This was designed to help children who have experienced the most shocking abuse and neglect to start a new life with their adoptive parents.

Since then, with the dedication of all those who make it possible, it has given a lifeline to more than 50,000 families and that is why I committed another £45m to it for this financial year.

While we want to see the same high-quality service right across the country it is a fact that not all areas offer the same service. It is vital that we draw a line under this postcode lottery. The quality of the service you receive should not depend on where you live.

There are more Regional Adoption Agencies going live every month. Working side by side with Voluntary Adoption Agencies who play such a vital role, we now have 25 operating across the country covering 119 local authorities. By the end of March next year, all our local authorities will be working within one, which will help us ensure consistently good practice everywhere. So we will have gone from 151 different localised adoption systems to just 30 agencies who are working together along with the voluntary sector. That in itself is an improvement as today's new evaluation report on Regional Adoption Agencies shows.

We are also committed to virtual school heads who are in charge of overseeing children looked after by local authorities and making sure they make the educational progress they need to.

This is about giving every child in this country the best possible start in life. Our ambition is for a permanent and stable home for every child – while adoption is brilliant and will provide that for many, adoption won't always be the right option for every single child. We need a children's social care system that works for all children and gives them the best possible chance to succeed in life.

That's why our Children's Social Care Review will launch soon, to raise the bar for these children at the earliest opportunity and improve their life prospects.

I want to end, by saying a huge thank you. A thank you to all those parents who have opened their hearts and homes to some of the most vulnerable children in our society – you are the very best of Britain, of society, and I hope many of you who are watching this will follow their lead.

For those of you who may have considered adoption but didn't go ahead because there were too many barriers in the way, I will do everything I can to make sure we break down those barriers; make sure that you have the opportunity to open your home and open your heart to those young children who so need you.

I want to thank all of you for all that you continue to do and all of you out there who will take that step and provide a home to a child who so

desperately needs it.