



Home for Good's manifesto asks for the next General Election

At Home for Good we are committed to seeing change from the top down. Sparking systemic improvements to the care system plays a crucial role in our mission to find a home for every child who needs one across the UK.

Children's social care is under more pressure than ever before.

In England alone the number of children in care has increased by 28% since 2010, rising from 64,400 to 82,170 children looked after.[1] The election is an opportunity for political parties from across the entire political spectrum to support action that will drastically improve the experience of children and young people in care.

We have created a list of five asks to help the next government commit to systemic improvements to the care system.

Summary



Ask 1: Raise the profile and encourage the use of supported lodgings

Activate local authorities to commission services and encourage members of the public to come forward as hosts so that teenagers in care are no longer housed in inappropriate accommodation.

Ask 2: Statutory adoption pay for self-employed adopters

Enable equal access to adoption leave and pay by providing an adoption allowance to self-employed individuals so that hundreds of new adoptive homes can be found each year.



Ask 3: Increase engagement with faith groups involved in children's social care

Partner with faith communities and organisations who work to unleash the potential of these communities to address the crises in Children's Social Care.





Ask 4: Improve the experience of prospective foster carers

Interrogate and address the driving factors that result in 99% of people who enquire about fostering dropping out of the approval process so that the urgent need for more fostering households can be met.

Ask 5: Increase data collection to monitor patterns of racial disparity

Increase data collection around the experiences of ethnic minority children and young people entering and leaving care so that Black children no longer wait the longest to be adopted.



Ask 1

Raise profile of Supported lodgings

The next government will inherit a care system that is under more pressure than ever before. Media coverage in recent years has highlighted the shocking reality of young people housed in B&Bs, bedsits, caravans and canal boats. We believe this is entirely inappropriate for young people in care and highlights an alarming lack of suitable accommodation. A major change in the landscape of children's social care over recent years has been the significant rise in the number of teenagers in care. The latest figures show one in four children in care are aged 16 years and over.[2]

As a result, there is an urgent need to increase the availability of high-quality, cost-effective provision for older teenagers in the care system. Currently there are limited high-quality options for accommodating these young people due to a shortage of foster carers willing or able to care for teenagers and huge variation in the quality and support of semi-independent and independent settings.

We believe more teenagers should be offered the benefit of living in a family home whilst recognising that a foster home might not be appropriate for all young people. The relational needs of every young person are incredibly important. These fundamental needs are too often overlooked by an overstretched system struggling to cope where social workers have too few options available to them.

Supported lodgings is a valuable option for holistically meeting the needs of older teenagers in the care system, but it is often poorly understood and therefore under-utilised. Supported lodgings provides young people with stability, helping them to transition into adulthood with strong foundations. Fundamentally, relational support is at the heart of supported lodgings. By living alongside one another, hosts are well-placed to help a young person by offering support and advice as the young person navigates life's challenges.



ASK: The next government should raise the profile and encourage the use of supported lodgings for older teenagers, activating local authorities to commission services, and members of the public to come forward as hosts.

The latest figures show that the number of young people housed in semi-independent accommodation has increased 23% since 2021 and has more than doubled (130% increase) since 2012.[3] The majority of this increase has been within residential forms of semi-independent accommodation, despite family-based care being better suited to many of these young people. These figures highlight the need to provide a family-based alternative.

It is also the case that supported lodgings presents a far more financially viable and sustainable option than many of the alternatives. Housing a young person in supported lodgings tends to be significantly cheaper than other semi-independent settings, where floating support or ongoing support workers can be expensive. Supported lodgings hosts are generally paid less than foster carers, with most paid between £100-£300 per week.

Supported lodgings offers local authorities a family-based alternative to residential care that is cost effective. We believe supported lodgings is brimming with potential and is well placed to launch young people into adulthood with strong foundations.

[2] Department for Education. 2022. Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available [online](#).

[3] Department for Education. 2023. Looked after children aged 16 to 17 in independent or semi-independent placements. Available [online](#).

Ask 2

Statutory adoption pay for self-employed adopters

There are currently 1,980 children waiting for adoption in England; 50% of these children have been waiting for 18 months or longer.[4] Consequently, there is an urgent need to recruit more adopters with the right skills to meet the needs of the children who are waiting. Home for Good is committed to tackling any barriers that prevent prospective adopters from stepping forward. The lack of statutory adoption pay for those who are self-employed is one such barrier.



ASK: The next government should enable parity of access to adoption leave and pay by providing an adoption allowance to self-employed individuals. They should also extend shared parental leave to couples where at least one individual is self-employed.

The solution is not a big investment; it is a small sum that could make a significant difference for many, not least children who are waiting for an adoptive home. The Federation of Small Businesses estimates that it would cost the Government just £5 million per year to enable self-employed individuals to access paid adoption leave.[5] Given the long-term costs incurred when a child is unable to find an adoptive family and thus remains in the care system on a long-term basis (with an annual social cost estimated at £72,500 per child in care), [6] this provision would enable vital savings for the Government over the long term.

The average age of adoption in England is 3 years and 3 months. If a child who could have been adopted by a self-employed adoptive parent, but is prevented from adoption due to a lack of statutory pay and leave, the cost to the state to care for the child until their 18th Birthday is estimated at £1,065,000. Therefore, you would only need five children adopted by self-employed adopters who otherwise wouldn't be able to adopt to make this a cost saving exercise.

[4] Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board. 2022. Headline Measures: Q3 2022/23. Available online.

[5] Bowlizer, Amelia. 2019. Government Overlooks Self-Employed Once Again, Says FSB. Available [online](#)

[6] The Independent Review of Children's Social Care. 2021. Paying the Price: The Social and Financial Costs of Children's Social Care. Available [online](#).

In Autumn 2022 the APPG for Adoption and Permanence conducted a survey of self-employed adopters and prospective adopters. The findings revealed that the current policy decision not to offer self-employed adopters an equivalent to the Statutory Maternity Allowance as given to self-employed birth parents was potentially putting off prospective adopters. 63% of those responding said the lack of paid leave had played a major role in them not yet commencing the assessment process; whilst 46% of established adopters said that a lack of paid leave played either a large or a fairly significant role in their decision to not adopt again in future.

It was concerning to see some responses to the survey reported a lack of paid parental leave was impacting their ability to consider adopting their child's biological sibling. One adopter said: "We have already been approached to adopt another sibling and had to say no because there was no financial package available to help with nursery." The evidence gathering by the APPG for Adoption and Permanence, along with the stories we hear every day, demonstrate that the current barrier is not acceptable. We therefore urge the next government to take the necessary steps to address the discrepancy facing self-employed adopters.

Ask 3

Increase engagement with faith groups involved in children's social care

Home for Good mobilises the UK Church to respond to the needs of children in care through families stepping forward to foster, adopt or provide supported lodgings for teenagers and churches wrapping around families with support. We recognise that many communities – both faith-based and secular – have a role to play. By focusing on this one community, we by no means want to diminish the work done by many other groups and organisations. But we passionately believe that the Church is a great place to recruit carers.

It is estimated that 7,200 new foster carers are needed within the next 12 months alone [7] and there are 1,980 [8] children are waiting to be adopted in England. There is a great need to recruit more carers, especially for children who wait the longest (such as, children aged over 5, male, from an ethnic minority background, have a disability or are part of a sibling group). Encouragingly, a recent survey suggests that nearly a third of adopters in the early stages of adoption had a religious faith [9], highlighting the importance of positive engagement with faith communities.

[7] Department for Education. 2022. Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available [online](#).

[8] Department for Education. 2023. Looked after children aged 16 to 17 in independent or semi-independent placements. Available [online](#).

[9] Adoption UK. 2023. The Adoption Barometer. Available [online](#).

The scale of need within the children's social care system is great. But given that there are around 50,000 churches with 3,000,000 regular churchgoers, the scale of the Church across the UK is a significant audience to engage. In addition, the Christian church is geographically spread and present in nearly every locality. Almost every village, estate and city centre has a church or multiple churches at its heart.

We know that by inspiring members of these churches to consider whether they could welcome a child into their home and heart through fostering, adoption or supported lodgings, we could make significant strides in helping the care system to provide children with the homes they need. Home for Good's approach to partnering with churches and journeying with people, has led to applicants who are better informed and prepared. One local authority found that Home for Good enquirers are 2.5 times more likely to become approved foster carers than those who come through their own recruitment channels.

Assessing social workers regularly tell us that they find prospective carers from faith communities have strong support networks that are essential for building resilient fostering families. While formal support groups and networks can take time to be established and developed, churches offer preexisting supportive communities, ready to wrap around children and families. Toddler groups, kids clubs, youth work, family workers, pastoral care and regular, consistent gatherings of people are just some of the environments where relationships can be formed and the needs of families can begin to be met.



ASK: We urge the next Government to engage with faith communities to tackle the shortage of foster carers and adoptive parents.

Through partnering with churches, local authorities and national government, we believe that many thousands of altruistically motivated individuals, couples and families will step forward to open their homes and hearts to children in the care system. In addition to this, church environments themselves can become trauma-aware, supportive contexts for children and families where they feel welcomed and cared for.

Ask 4

Improve the experience of prospective foster carers

Thousands more foster carers are needed across the country but at the moment, as few as 1% of prospective carers who enquire about fostering go on to be approved carers.[10] Data from Ofsted shows there has been a significant increase in the number of fostering enquiries over recent years, but the number of approvals has remained low. With such a great need for more foster carers, it is crucial that the next Government ensures the experience of prospective carers who enquire about fostering is positive.

The current mechanisms for recruiting and processing prospective foster carers are not working sufficiently. There is a drop off rate of 94% from the enquiry to application stage of becoming a foster carer.[11] Even if a portion of these enquires are duplicates, as is often speculated in defence of the poor conversion rate, the figures remain extremely worrying. With social workers struggling to manage the extensive demands on their time, there are concerns over whether the system has reached a ceiling in its capacity to process applications and carry out assessments.

At a roundtable hosted by Home for Good, we heard anecdotal evidence that as a result of this capacity ceiling, some local authorities and agencies are only accepting applications from enquirers if they are strongly confident that they will go on to be approved. This results in a very high bar being set for enquirers right from the outset and means that fewer enquirers are being given the opportunity to go through the assessment process.

We also heard anecdotally from foster carers about instances where, as a result of the need to ensure that applicants make it through the process, social workers expressed during initial assessments that they were looking for people who were willing to foster any child, with any need, from age 0 – 18. This was understandably off-putting for those who did not feel able or equipped to commit to caring for children across such a broad range. For example, some families might not feel able to foster full-time but might be willing to offer respite or short-break care for one weekend per month. To better retain interest and to meet the wide range of needs in the system, there must be a greater openness to assessing individuals and families who are only open to caring for a narrower range of children, not least as carers may go on to other forms of fostering as their confidence grows.

[10] Ofsted. 2022. Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. Available [online](#).

[11] Ibid.



ASK: The next government should interrogate and address the driving factors that result in 99% of people who enquire about fostering dropping out of the approval process.

It is clear that urgent steps must be taken to ensure that prospective foster carers can journey towards assessment without being cast aside, or put off, by a system that is meant to be recruiting more carers. We urge the government to improve the experience of prospective foster carers and address the driving factors that are causing so few prospective foster carers to be approved.

Ask 5

Increase data collection to monitor patterns of racial disparity in the care system

Every child deserves a stable place to call home with people around them who will support, care for and journey with them no matter their background or ethnicity. It is therefore not acceptable that Black children are disproportionately represented in the care system. While Black children make up 5% of the general population, they make up 7% of the looked after children population.[12]

It is also the case that Black children are then less likely to go on to be adopted and wait longer to find their adoptive family.[13] The number of Black children who were adopted between 2015 and 2020 decreased by 50%, with the latest figures showing that only 2% of children adopted each year are Black.[14] We urge the next government to make addressing the inherent disadvantage faced by Black children within the care system a priority.

[12] Department for Education. 2022. Children looked after in England including adoptions. Available [online](#).

[13] Department for Health and Social Care. 2021. Adopted and looked-after children. Available [online](#).

[14] Ibid.



ASK: The next government should commit to improving data collection of the experiences of ethnic minority children and young people entering and leaving care.

The drivers behind racial disparity within the care system are not well understood. While preliminary analysis and action have begun on racial disparity within adoption, the system-wide disparity has not been sufficiently interrogated.

There is a need for greater cultural literacy and awareness among social workers. In addition, practice around ethnic matching by agencies and local authorities is hugely varied, which can create confusion among prospective foster carers and adopters as well as the general public. Our research has shown that those from the Black community are twice as likely to consider adopting in the future compared to their White counterparts, yet individuals from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be nervous about the process, the cost of adopting and how their community will react.[15]

Fundamentally, there are huge knowledge gaps when it comes to racial disparity within the care system. There is strong evidence that it exists, but it is not clear what the drivers are or how it plays out across different aspects of the system. We expect there to be a range of socio-economic and cultural factors involved in contributing to racial disadvantage, which is why we are calling for this to be thoroughly examined. We must shine a light on racial disparity across the care system, identifying the drivers and developing robust solutions.

The Political Advocacy team at Home for Good would love to speak with you as you develop your manifesto commitments. You can reach our Policy and Research Officer Sam Lomas at sam.lomas@homeforgood.org.uk

[15] Savanta ComRes. 2019. Home for Good Adoption Poll. Available [online](#).