

# Strength in Numbers: LGBT people on Adopting Siblings

New Family Social Adoption Survey

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## Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people are fast becoming an essential pool of potential parents for adoption agencies in 21st century Britain. In 2015, 1 in 12 adoptions in England were to same-sex couples. Little is known, however, of LGBT people's experiences and expectations of the adoption process. Similarly, while sibling groups awaiting adoption are often described as 'hard to place' by social work professionals, there is scant information on whether approved adopters intending to parent siblings go on to do so.

Thanks to the kind support of the Department for Education, New Family Social last year surveyed its LGBT members for a snapshot of their intentions to parent siblings and their experiences in doing so. Our members shared their greatest concerns around adopting more than one child, and the issues that arose when they did so. We hope this will improve professionals' insight into the adopter's perspective of adopting siblings, and will inform adoption practice within the UK.

This report shows a clear disconnect between the number of LGBT potential adopters who actively consider parenting siblings and those who do so in practise.

The challenge to social work is how to better harness this interest and match more with sibling groups awaiting their forever family. Our members call for improved information before the adoption of siblings and enhanced support from agencies post-adoption. Finally, this research shows that while more LGBT people are successfully navigating the adoption process, incidents of discrimination still occur because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. All agencies must robustly confront every instance where anti-LGBT discrimination is found in their staff and practices, so that all prospective parents are confident that they will be treated equally.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tor Docherty', written in a cursive style.

**Tor Docherty**  
Chief Executive

## “Saints or Fools”: LGBT people adopting sibling groups

*“Sibling group adopters are spoken of as saints or fools”*

– LGBT adopters of a sibling group of three.

In the year ending 31 March 2015, there were

**69,540 children**

in the care of local authorities.\*

Research carried out by the Family Rights Group in Jan 2015, shows that

**49.5%** of sibling groups are separated when in local authority care – an act that is described by Tony Hawkhead, CEO of Action for Children, as having

*“an impact that will last a lifetime.”*

In 2015, New Family Social conducted a survey of its members, in order to gain a better understanding of LGBT experiences of adoption and the factors that go into deciding whether or not to adopt siblings.

According to CoramBAAF, on 31 March 2015,

**1,420 children**

who had a placement order and who were waiting to be placed, were part of a sibling group. This constituted

**51%** of all children on the adoption register, and is an increase from

**48%** on 30 September 2014 .

The numbers of LGBT adopters in the UK have been steadily rising. In the year ending 31 March 2015,

**8.5% (450)** of children were adopted by same sex

couples, which was an increase from 7% (340) during the previous

year. New Family Social's survey received 393 complete responses,

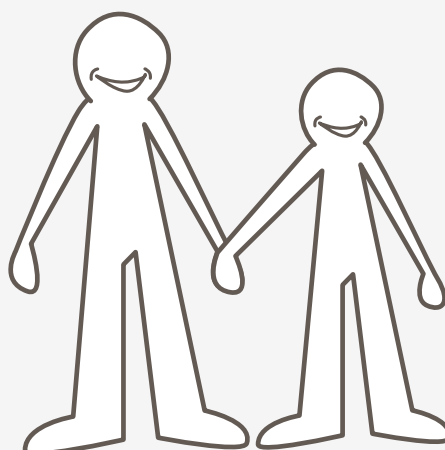
of which 103 responses (26%)

were from members who have adopted or have been placed

or matched with a sibling group

and 11 responses (3%) were from

members who had adopted birth siblings in separate adoptions.



# Main Findings of the Adoption Survey

Of those people surveyed, **76%** said that they actively considered, or are considering, adopting a sibling group.

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**27%** of all respondents said they were discouraged from adopting siblings, by social workers, at panel, or by friends and family.

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**55%** of those who were willing to parent siblings were matched with a single child first, with over **40%** of respondents saying 'no suitable match was found' or 'we were matched with one child first'.

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Respondents' main reasons for considering adopting a sibling group were:

**21%** Always knew they wanted more than one child

**19%** The importance of the sibling bond

**12%** Not having to go through the adoption process again

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Respondents' main concerns when considering adopting a sibling group were:

**35%** Will I be able to meet the needs of more than one child?

**18%** Will we get the support we need?

**16%** Can I afford it?

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Of those who did not consider adopting a sibling group, **27%** said that it was because they did not have enough bedrooms or space in their house, and **10%** said that it was because of financial reasons. **9%** said it was because they wanted just one child.

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## Did anyone ever try to discourage you from adopting siblings?

*"We have recently been matched with a sibling group of three - generally people seem to pull a 'good luck with that' face!"*

*"Our social worker was very honest about the challenges of adopting siblings - but didn't try to put us off."*

*"Not really, our social worker did ask if we would consider siblings but fully respected our decision to have one boy under two."*

*"No, but friends and family show more concern/worry about us taking on too much. Social worker thoroughly explored additional complications/issues siblings can bring."*

*"No, we have been actively encouraged to look for siblings."*

*"No but should have done! The attachment issues have been awful and the sibling rivalry very difficult."*

*"Not specifically. Plenty of people tried to discourage us from adopting altogether between our first application in 1992 and July 1995 when our eldest daughter was placed with us."*

*"No, was just warned our life would change completely."*

*"No, although I remember the family finder social worker being concerned that we'd be able to meet their needs, as both boys were always on the go."*

*"Not really - we were encouraged to go for two as it would be 'easier' - they'll entertain each other. That was not true!!"*

*"No but we were strongly encouraged to ensure that we could both take at least three months' adoption leave (which wouldn't be feasible for many couples)."*

*"Family were a little surprised, but no one discouraged us."*

*"My parents. They felt the needs of the children would be too demanding for a gay couple with limited experience of parenting."*

*"Our social worker advised that adopting more than one child was really hard work and advised against it."*

*"Yes, despite writing the report that got us approved for a sibling group at panel, our social worker repeatedly tells us how siblings will be more difficult, more expensive etc."*

*"Yes, my sister thinks we're crazy and one child is more than enough."*

*"Yes, our social worker continues to highlight the difficulties associated with adopting sibling groups, focusing primarily on the financial pressures it'll create."*

## What were the main reasons you decided against adopting a sibling group?

*"The social worker felt one child would be best due to it being our first child."*

*"No sibling groups came up - we are constantly told there is a shortage of children for adoption in the south west."*

*"Not approved due to size of house."*

*"Mainly due to the cost and our capability to look after more than one child at the point we adopted our first child. We are currently in the process of adopting our son's brother though."*

*"It was decided for me - I was single and they matched me with a single child. She and I were the best match."*

*"We were considered to be a good match for our son, who was harder to place than the sibling groups. So, after much discussion, we decided that this was better for all."*

*"Couldn't feel chemistry with the profiles and then fell in love with our little boy when we started looking at single profiles."*

*"We talked to other adopters and parents and got a good idea of the main challenges. In the end we decided to initially go for one child."*

*"In the end we were matched with a single child who complemented us both perfectly. We would still want to adopt a second child."*

*"We were never linked with siblings, despite numerous enquiries to Be My Parent etc."*

*"Unsure if we could meet their needs, advised against it by social workers."*

*"It was more a positive decision in favour of our daughter who was one child, rather than us actively deciding against siblings."*

*"Got a good match with a single child in the end although approved for two first time round. We then went on to do a second (separate) adoption six years later."*

*"We were looking for the right child or a sibling group and we found our son."*

## What has been the most challenging thing about adopting siblings?

*“Initially it felt like we’d had twins. No honeymoon period, we hit the ground running. Their differing needs that have emerged over time and accessing support to meet their needs [is difficult]. As is finding time for ourselves.”*

*“Meeting the needs of two very different attachment styles.”*

*“It’s exhausting. Most of the time is spent cooking, cleaning and dealing with their individual crises as well as ongoing sharing wars.”*

*“They fight! And they are jealous of each other with me.”*

*“The fact that they can be very antagonistic with each other and especially when they were first placed the need for attention was constant.”*

*“Maintaining our energy levels!”*

*“A multiple adoption means that you have to learn to deal with all of the children simultaneously, rather than take time to build a relationship with one child at a time. It is important to make sure every child has one on one time, even if one in particular is being more demanding.”*

*“You need three hands!”*

*“Nothing has been especially challenging.”*

*“When they both are having challenging behaviour at the same time.”*

*“Managing their different needs, demands and behavioural responses in particular, especially when needing to employ different strategies.”*

*“Lack of support post-adoption and a difficult sibling relationship.”*



## What has been the best thing about adopting siblings?

*“The fact that they do support each other and that they are both so different.”*

*“Their companionship and joy in each other’s company. Also the different perspectives of two distinct little people, and their very different personalities.”*

*“An instant and complete family.”*

*“Seeing the bond between them develop is wonderful. Being able to nurture that bond between them and know that they will always have each other is very fulfilling. It is joyful and life enhancing to see their relationship blossom because of the stability, care and guidance we are able to offer.”*

*“Only going through the adoption process once. Also they have a shared history which we are sure will help them in the future as they process and come to terms with the fact they are adopted.”*

*“The support and understanding they give each other; the fun and chaos they bring.”*

*“It is amazing to see them grow together. They support and understand each other in ways that we don’t because they have both been through the same things.”*

*“Strength of bond, ability to entertain each other, ability to be there for each other, stronger link to birth history, shared history. Far less work than two separate children I think.”*

*“Twice the hugs!”*

*“Watching the relationship they have with each other. They are great friends and have a lot of laughs together. Even though they were really young, their relationship has given them a lot of security and resilience. I feel complete as we have a sibling group and I don’t feel a need for more children - although never say never!”*

*“Knowing that when they are older and we are not here they’ll have each other.”*

*“They have a common bond and get on well together most of the time!”*

## How could the process of adopting siblings be improved?

*“As much information about the children as possible to be available to adopters, as well as an assessment of the children’s future needs and support likely to be needed.”*

*“Social workers can at times be over cautious in regards to placing sibling groups. My partner and I have some professional knowledge in regards to issues that present in some adopted children and that helped us ensure we fully understood the risks we took on.”*

*“More preparation work for how to manage two different children with differing needs.”*

*“Perhaps more training at prep stage, however I’m not sure you can really truly prepare for the impact of adopting siblings.”*

*“More support provided by LA as a given, not after it had been requested.”*

*“Greater financial support. I know that all authorities are under financial pressure, but so are families and any family which adopts a large sibling group should automatically qualify for financial assistance.”*

*“Activity days reaffirmed to us that we really wanted two kids. It makes it easier for everyone, adopters and children, as you get to see and interact with them rather than seeing cold profiles.”*

*“Demystifying it. Sibling group adopters were spoken of as saints or fools in our introduction training and also in general parlance.”*

*“Support needs to be in place for placement. Not months and months afterwards. Local Authorities need to listen to the concerns of the adoptive parents and act sooner in a proactive and responsible way.”*

*“We get adoption allowance which helps a lot but a lot of other people don’t get that.”*

*“Don’t know. I think there’s a lot of horror stories and I’m sad we’re too private to not shout more about our two who are truly a credit to adopted siblings.”*

*“Support from placing authorities is grossly inadequate. At the time of placement, home-help for a few weeks; specific, detailed training on attachment style parenting, that’s repeated periodically, to readdress learning. Possibility of built-in respite/baby-sitting service.”*

## Were there any stand-out moments of good or bad practice you experienced because you are LGBT throughout your adoption journey?

### Good Practice

*“We were treated really, really well by everyone involved. Our boys’ social worker said she would actively seek same sex adopters in future.”*

*“The foster carer did an amazing job of introducing mum and mummy and had a whole doll play scene going on including houses, cars and even the dog!!!”*

*“We were the first gay couple that our social worker had assessed. But she was fine, possibly a little nervous of us.”*

*“We had a very positive experience throughout and never felt sexuality mattered. On our training were two other gay couples which really helped and most of the social workers were very good at covering all aspects of gay/straight in their talks. We had a gay adopter come and do a talk on the training which was good.”*

*“Our agency is a Catholic agency but they have gone above and beyond to ask if there’s anything more they can do for us. They’ve now started asking us to be a link family for other LGBT couples coming through the process too.”*

*“We had a great social work team and experienced a very straightforward journey. Being LGBT wasn’t an issue.”*

*“Our adoption social worker was very good we felt throughout the assessment and [the social worker] did explore with us in a sensitive and respectful way specific issues in relation to same sex adoption. It helped that there were other same sex couples on our adoption training and we have become friends with one of the couples and meet up regularly with our children so that has been very positive.”*

## Were there any stand-out moments of good or bad practice you experienced because you are LGBT throughout your adoption journey?

### Bad Practice

*"We were told that a child's social worker at our approving agency would not consider us for their child solely because we were a gay couple. We were told this with a shrug. This attitude was tolerated by the agency."*

*"Our first assessor was told to ask us what we did in bed!!!"*

*"Discrimination on the basis of our sexuality. Currently part of an independent review into how we were treated and the subsequent delay for our children."*

*"We were told at an agency's adoption information evening that we would be 'second rung of the choice ladder' behind straight couples but ahead of single adopters. They punctuated this point by asking us to look around the room at the 'competition'."*

*"We had a few comments from social workers, one who thought as gay men we might be best adopting a boy, as we might not manage a girl."*

*"We had a devastating experience when we were not matched with a sibling group last year and we strongly suspect this was due to the fact we were two men; we experienced what we believed was an 'unmatching interview'. Having been told for more than three months we were to be matched with a sibling pair, a senior social worker carried out a matching interview that was challenging, aggressive and as a social worker myself I would suggest unprofessional. After the matching interview we were told we would have to wait two weeks during which time the borough, or the senior social worker, found a heterosexual couple and put them forward to panel. The reasons we were given for not being matched were farcical and our own social worker was powerless to challenge the decision."*

*"Yes - being asked fairly abrupt questions by an inexperienced and insensitive social worker - such as 'what would happen in the morning if the kids woke up and then came into the bedroom?' I don't know what they were expecting, but apart from 'wake up!!' we were unsure as what to say. Some really dodgy practice I am afraid."*

*"Being asked by the social worker our opinion of sex with children and animals. Of the seven couples we trained with, it was only the three gay couples that received this line of questioning. Out of order."*

*"The only negative experience we had was being told by our adoption agency that we would have to provide the results of a HIV test, which was not required for straight adopters. They explained that it would be difficult to place children with us otherwise. In the end, the local authority placing the children were shocked that our agency had imposed this requirement and said it was something they would never have considered asking."*

## Were there any stand-out moments of good or bad practice you experienced because you are LGBT throughout your adoption journey?

### Good and Bad Practice

*"We were valued as potential parents - which was good enough for us! We met one social worker who was insistent that the children in question needed a female figure (for no good reason). His homophobia was quite clear. He was overruled by his senior management team."*

*"Generally our sexual orientation was not a particular issue in either a positive or a negative way. However, in our assessment weekend couples were split along gender lines - partly to give individuals a chance to talk separately from their partner but an equivalent opportunity was not offered to us."*

*"Yes, after our son was placed with us, his social worker let us know how much she had fought for us to adopt him, as senior management in the local authority were not in favour of a same sex couple."*

*"Generally they were very good and it was treated as a complete non-issue. We were very pleasantly surprised by this - good on them! The only bad moment was when we were asked to fill in a form asking how being gay would affect the way we would approach parenting - I am pretty sure the straight potential adopters were not asked to fill one in saying how being straight would affect the way they parented."*

*"Yes - the team leader said she loved same-sex couples as they tend to come with a much more open mind (no pre-conceived ideas as to what a family looks like) and much less baggage (the biological kids they couldn't have). We were told by many that the child would only attach to one parent so one of us would have to stay home and one go to work. We felt this was a very "straight" norm and not true. Hopefully we will prove that theory wrong!"*

### Other comments

*"The worst experience throughout my adoption journey - and still occurring every day- is the fact that as a single parent I am totally invisible in my LGBT identity. I am very tired of people assuming I am straight because I am a single mum."*

*"Being gay helped birthmother. She felt a sense of relief that she was not being 'replaced' and so she did not contest the placement and therefore the adoption. We see the future as the boys being able to tell their story: that they have a mum but they live with their dads, particularly as birth dads were not around."*



## What do you think might encourage more adopters to consider sibling groups?

*“Post adoption support is patchy across the country. Sibling groups are a big undertaking and clearer guidance on post adoption support would be helpful.”*

*“Guaranteed adoption support funding that the adopter has some control over. For those that are hardest to place. Money to help with child care if necessary, money for respite, holidays, educational help. Money perhaps also paid into a trust fund for the children. Some might find this all unpalatable, but if it can reassure potential adopters and make the new adoptive family's life easier, more enjoyable, and less financially stressful, then hopefully more successful hard to place adoptions can happen.”*

*“Training on how to manage more than one child at a time.”*

*“Confidence that expert and sustained support will be there for both parents and children to help manage issues arising from early neglect and trauma. Financial considerations may also apply as there may be a reduced capacity to work when providing the necessary level of therapeutic parenting to a sibling group.”*

*“Financial help. It's a big commitment and the cost of care is given to long term foster carers because families can't be found. Why not give a little financial help to the adopting families to help sibling groups get a new family.”*

*“I think it's a very personal choice, not one that should either be encouraged or discouraged. But I think there's limited awareness of sibling adoption as an option so people just default to one child.”*

*“Support - there needs to be a realistic understanding of what adopters are being asked to take on and therefore what support is needed, financially and physically - suddenly having a family of three under-fives would have been difficult for anyone and needed much clearer thinking about and not just an expectation that we would manage.”*

*“Show them examples of other families that have done it. Outline the benefits of sibling adoption: the support and entertainment they provide for each other; the emotional support they give each other through the trauma of introductions and dealing with their life story; the fun and chaos that comes with siblings! Also you don't have to deal with social workers multiple times!”*

## Conclusions

Findings from the national adoption register (2012) showed that LGBT people are more willing to consider adopting children frequently viewed by social work professionals as 'harder-to-place'. Our members echoed those findings and this survey's results suggest that many LGBT potential adopters are willing to consider adopting siblings.

### Family-finding

1 in 4 (27%) of our respondents who initially considered adopting siblings were discouraged by others, including social workers and adoption panel members. Despite an obvious need for adopters of sibling groups, 6 in 10 (55%) respondents who were willing to adopt siblings didn't go on to do so. Rather than this being an active decision on their part, it was often due to them being matched with a single child before a suitable sibling group was identified for them. The impact is that a much-needed resource – potential adopters keen to adopt sibling groups – is currently used to adopt single children, at a time when siblings form a large proportion of children waiting for homes.

#### Recommendation

Where LGBT approved adopters express an interest in adopting a sibling group this should be the first focus of family-finding for these adopters. By doing so, social services can support more children to stay with their siblings in the same forever family.

### Post adoption support

In this survey, some LGBT adopters who had adopted siblings spoke of how well family life was going. But others shared how difficult the sibling relationship was, how the children competed for parental attention and how hard it was for the parent(s) to meet the needs of both children.

Post adoption support was a concern for 2 in 10 (18%) of our members when considering adopting a sibling group and was a greater concern than the financial impact of adopting more than one child. It's essential that clear and balanced information should be provided to potential adopters of siblings with specialist training and preparation given.

Financial support was identified as crucial by 16% of respondents. Some respondents who considered adopting siblings, were put off because they were worried they couldn't afford siblings or lacked the space at home for them. For those who had adopted a sibling group, some said financial support – or the support they could buy-in if more money were available – would have made life easier.

#### Recommendation

Specific pre and post-adoption support is needed for adopters of siblings. Adopters of siblings need the tools to manage the conflicting demands for their attention from siblings. Similarly, adopters of siblings need targeted support to help siblings develop their relationships with one another.

### Tackling discrimination

Our members have again shared deeply concerning anecdotal accounts of prejudice and discrimination against them during the adoption process because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The discrimination our members outline in this survey is often illegal and - where condoned by agencies - fails vulnerable children if they are not matched with suitable LGBT adopters because of discrimination.

LGBT adopters now represent an essential and substantial resource for adoption agencies seeking families for children with placement orders. If an agency is known to condone anti-LGBT practices by their staff, it becomes difficult for that agency to successfully recruit further LGBT applicants as the agency's reputation will be tarnished as word spreads through LGBT networks and friendship groups.

#### Recommendation

It's essential that agencies robustly confront every instance where anti-LGBT discrimination is found in their staff and practices. Discrimination can lead to financial and reputation costs to agencies, whereas equal and non-discriminatory practice will help LGBT adopters to become powerful advocates for adoption, further opening up the pool of potential parents.