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Cuts in legal aid will add more delays to adoption cases

Sir, A plan for the adoption of a child in care is often the best outcome for him, but it is a grave step that means he becomes a legal stranger to his birth family for the rest of his life. When the care court is asked to approve a plan for adoption against his parents' wishes, the judge must be able to evaluate fully the family's ability to care for their child before ruling them out. It is plainly in the child's interests as well as his parents' that there is a fair hearing.

However, there are unacceptable delays in achieving final care hearings. This is caused principally by two things: local authorities are still bringing 40 per cent of all care cases to court without even a basic assessment of the child's family, and the family courts are unable to hear the cases quickly enough because they do not have sufficient judicial resources to deal with the work.

As David Cameron gives his personal backing to your adoption campaign (report, Oct 31, letters, Nov 1, 2) his government is pushing through the Laspo Bill which will remove legal aid entirely from a further 34,000 families a year who are in court about their children. Although these are private family disputes, research establishes that half of them involve serious allegations of domestic violence or harm to a child or both. These families all live at or near the poverty line and an estimated 68,000 children are involved. They are currently flying just below the radar of child protection procedures. The parents do not know how to cope with the court process. Quite apart from the manifest unfairness of removing their access to legal advice and representation, without lawyers their cases take up huge amounts of judicial time. If this Bill is passed, these parents will flood the family



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID BEBBER

The Times adoption campaign has highlighted many problems in the system

courts as litigants in person, causing severe delays to the hearing of care cases, including ones where the plan for the child is adoption.

MARTHA COVER

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