

Daily Telegraph

By Ben Leapman, Home Affairs Correspondent 15/07/2007

A couple whose two baby daughters were taken away by social services have been told that they will never see their children again, despite being cleared of abuse allegations.

One of the girls was taken away shortly before her second birthday, the other removed only hours after being born.

Social workers have told the parents that the girls, now aged one and three, will not be returned because they have settled with a childless couple who want to adopt them.

The parents are fighting a legal battle to reunite their family, but have been warned by their lawyers that their chances are very slim.

Banned from being identified under strict secrecy laws, they nevertheless chose to tell The Sunday Telegraph about how their family has been torn apart.

The mother, a 26-year-old, from the south of England, said: "My older daughter knows who her mum is. We had a fantastic bond, it's something that can't be broken.

"I write letters to the kids that I keep in a book, so when they're old enough they will know I thought of them every day that they were away."

The father, a 32-year-old caretaker, claimed the family had been treated as "adoption fodder" to satisfy government targets. The case raises fresh questions about the financial incentives offered to councils which increase adoptions, and about the level of secrecy surrounding family court hearings.

In 2000, Tony Blair set a target for a 50 per cent increase in adoptions nationwide to reduce the time children spend in foster care. Councils were offered cash bonuses totalling £36 million for hitting their goals.

The family's ordeal began in late 2005 when they took their first daughter to hospital with abdominal pains. Doctors concluded she had been sexually assaulted weeks before.

Three days later, vanloads of police officers arrived with social workers at the couple's flat to seize the girl, who was placed with foster carers. When her sister was born just weeks later, she too was taken away.

Police launched an investigation, tearing apart the couple's flat in the hunt for clues. Suspects included a babysitter, some of the mother's relatives, and the couple themselves.

The parents even agreed to separate after they were told by social workers it would give the mother a better chance of getting the girls back. Yet even while the criminal investigation was going on, a family court judge agreed to a social services request for a forced adoption.

At the hearing last autumn, the judge concluded that the mother, who had been abused by her own family as a child, needed a year of psychotherapy before she could look after children safely, which, he said, would leave the girls in limbo for too long. He also told the children's father that they could not

live with him because he had left it too late to submit his application to the court. Police cleared both parents in January this year, telling them there was insufficient evidence to proceed. However, they have been told by social workers the outcome makes no difference.

That same month, the girls were moved from foster care to live with the prospective adopters, and the mother received a voicemail message from social workers telling her all visiting rights would cease.

She has kept a video of her last meeting with her daughters, at which the younger girl, who is just learning to speak, called her "Mummy" for the first and last time.

The couple, who are now back together, are braced for a final adoption hearing within weeks. If the adoption goes ahead, it will be irreversible and the parents will have no visiting rights.

The mother was told by a social worker that if she has further children, she may be allowed to keep them. She said: "You can't just replace children. If I can go on to have more, why can't I have these two?"

The father added: "I've only seen my youngest daughter for half an hour. We've been treated like criminals all the way through, and we're still being treated like criminals now. We were adoption fodder: they've seen an easy target, gone for it, got what they want and left us to it."

John Hemming, chairman of Justice for Families and Liberal Democrat MP for Birmingham Yardley, said: "Social services seem more interested in not upsetting would-be adopters than in the best interests of the child."