
ADOPTION AGENCY LINKING AND MATCHING PRACTICE IN ENGLAND AND WALES: SURVEY FINDINGS

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The research

Linking and matching in adoption is the process of identifying an adoptive family which might best be able to meet the needs of a child who is waiting for an adoptive placement. More specifically, linking refers to the process of investigating the suitability of one or more prospective adoptive families who might meet the needs of a certain child or sibling group, based on their prospective adopters reports (Form Fs). Matching refers to the process whereby a Local Authority decides which prospective adoptive family is the most suitable to adopt a particular child. This family will be brought forward as a 'match' for the child or sibling group at the Adoption Panel.

Little is known about how linking and matching are approached and which models of practice are currently in use. This area has not been investigated systematically before. The survey therefore aimed to identify and categorise variations in practice and policy in linking and matching across England and Wales, and to estimate broad costs for some of the related adoption activities. The survey is the first part of a larger study on linking and matching in adoption, funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families under the Adoption Research Initiative.

The survey was conducted by means of a self-completion questionnaire, which could be completed on the internet or manually between July and October 2006. A total of 168 Local Authorities which undertook adoption work and 29 Voluntary Adoption Agencies were approached and of these, 44% of Local Authorities and 55% of Voluntary Adoption Agencies agreed to participate. This response rate is broadly in line with that from other similar surveys.

Profile of participating agencies

Analysis of the statistical information provided by agencies suggested that there was considerable variation in the proportions of children adopted by their existing foster carers (from none to over a third of agency placements), whilst placement with single, same sex or disabled adopters was uniformly rare. There was considerable variation in the proportion of agencies that were able to place children with their own adopters, from some which placed all their children with adopters recruited by them to a few which placed almost all children through inter-agency means. Shire Counties in particular were more self-sufficient in terms of being able to place children with families recruited 'in-house'. Respondents from many other types of local authority commented that various features to do with their geographic position or local population profile impinged on their ability to place within their own resources.

Across all participating local authorities, agency statistics showed that on average just over half the adoptive placements they made were 'in house'. Placements made through consortia arrangements accounted for just over a quarter and other inter-agency arrangements secured placements for the remainder. The Adoption Register was used by the majority of agencies and was reported as being a particularly important source of links for some of the agencies, which were not readily able to place children within their own resources. On average, agencies reported inter-agency fees being payable for around 35 to 40% of cases. Local Authorities often proceed sequentially in their search for links, beginning with their own resources, proceeding to use families from their agency consortium if necessary and only involving Voluntary Agencies if they have no success with their own or local resources.

It was also interesting to find that the proportion of children placed with a sibling varied from 14% to 80% of placed children. Such a spread might indicate differential policies on the separation of sibling groups, or indeed on the timing of taking children into care and moving them on to adoption. Similarly, the proportion of placed children who had special health needs or disabilities was reported as varying from none to 29%. This might reflect different views about the definition of a special health need or disability but equally might indicate greater determination to place such children for adoption in some agencies than others.

Assessment and preparation of children

There was variation in the extent and the timing of transferring case responsibility from one section of service to another. In 30% of the Local Authorities case responsibility for children moved to a specialist adoption or permanency team once the placement order had been made. Nevertheless, many agencies pointed out that an adoption worker was 'linked' to a child's case even where the main responsibility remained with the child's social worker.

In terms of developments in this area of work, sibling assessment was frequently cited and several agencies mentioned joint working with, or opportunities to refer to, mental health specialists where necessary. Eight agencies conducted assessments of the child's attachment status and two used Story Stem narratives as part of assessing children's needs. (In a Story Stem assessment children are asked to respond to a set of story stems where they

are given the beginning of a story highlighting everyday family scenarios with an inherent dilemma and their attachment patterns are assessed based on the children's responses).

In addition, a number of agencies had consultancy in place to aid social workers and others in their assessment work with children (for example from a clinical psychologist or multi-agency team), whilst nine used a child psychologist to undertake individual assessments in complex cases.

There was also some variation as to who undertook direct work with children to prepare them for adoption. Although in the majority of cases (90%) the child's social worker would, at least to some extent, be involved in this, many agencies also mentioned the involvement of others to undertake these tasks because of time constraints on children's social workers. Agencies that delegated this task tended to refer children either to a specialist worker or to engage family centre staff or social work assistants.

Recruitment and preparation of prospective adopters

Agencies told us that there continued to be difficulty in recruiting sufficient adopters for children with additional needs, particularly families able to consider children with disabilities, those with a black or minority ethnic background and to some extent for older children and those with special health needs. Perhaps surprisingly, about a quarter of the agencies did not appear to operate targeted recruitment drives to find families able to meet such needs. This is consistent with findings from adoption agencies' inspections (CSCI 2006) where three out of ten Local Authorities and one in ten Voluntary Agencies had not developed strategies to recruit adoptive parents to meet the needs of children who were waiting.

The practice approaches most commonly mentioned by survey respondents were attachment style or status assessments which were incorporated, in full or in part, into the home study phase of adopter assessment by 14% of agencies. (The Attachment Style Interview and the Adult Attachment Interview are used to assess the attachment style of prospective adopters). The other notable developments were in mentoring and support for prospective adopters by more experienced adopters in the preparatory phase, and the use of support groups.

Family finding

Developing a profile for a child who needs an adoptive placement was generally the responsibility of the family finding or adoption worker. In the majority of agencies the worker would meet with the child before embarking on the family-finding task, but in 14% of the responding agencies the child was rarely or never seen by the family finder.

Agencies exploited a variety of mechanisms to locate families for children but service level agreements were rarely used. From agencies' responses, we identified four different mechanisms for identifying links, the first two of which might be described as 'professionally-led' and the latter two as 'adopter-led' approaches.

- i. first hand knowledge of a potential family assessed by the adoption team.
- ii. links through an exchange of information between social workers or, since the establishment of the Adoption Register and some databases run by consortia, by computer.
- iii. presentation of a child's profile to the community of approved adopters by, for example, features in the *Be My Parent* or *Children Who Wait* publications, 'in-house' profiling events and exchange events.
- iv. presentation of a child's profile to the wider community through newspapers, radio or television features. (This approach was rarely used).

In recent years there have been significant moves towards the further development of adopter-led approaches. Half of the agencies in the survey had secured links through presenting the child's profile at regional adoption events or video evenings, whilst featuring children on the internet had provided some links for 17% of agencies. Specific family finding magazines such as *Be My Parent* (BAAF) and *Children Who Wait* (Adoption UK) had been used by over 90% of the agencies, although this route accounted for a relatively small proportion of the placements made in most agencies.

Deciding which family to proceed with

For most respondents the highest priority factors in matching were meeting children's emotional, behavioural, attachment and health needs, in concert with the suitability of the adopters'

parenting style. Other considerations, including needs in relation to ethnicity or contact, children's interests or talents and birth family wishes, whilst important, when set against the needs just mentioned, generally came slightly lower down the priority list.

From agencies' reflections on key factors in matching we identified four groups of issues. First there were those related to practice, processes and organisation within agencies, such as providing adequate preparation and support, not stretching adopters' preferences, ensuring that all the relevant parties worked together and involving foster carers in adoption plans. Second, there were factors to do with the adopters' characteristics, such as their parenting skills, support networks, the likely impact on their own children and their distance from the placing agency. A third set of considerations were adopters' attitudes and understanding of the adoptive parenting task, including their understanding of the child's history, having realistic expectations of adoption and being comfortable with contact plans. Finally, two other issues were mentioned: 'chemistry' - or a feeling of 'emotional connectedness' with a particular child - and having regard to a child's views on the proposed placement. The analysis of these responses showed how matching is about balancing relative strengths and vulnerabilities and the importance of the wider context, that is the way in which an agency operates and the experience and knowledge of the workers directly involved. However, the issue that was mentioned by far the most in this context was the importance of having clear and accurate information about both the child and the prospective adopters.

In looking at barriers to matching, the primary problems that respondents identified were those resulting from the attitudes of some children's social workers who kept looking for the 'ideal family', difficulties in relation to the placement of siblings, contact plans and complications in adequately reflecting children's ethnic heritage in a proposed adoptive placement. One further concern, particularly raised by Voluntary Agencies, was finance. Several respondents felt that the inter-agency fee was frequently an obstacle to effective matching, particularly as the fee for a family approved by a Voluntary Agency is considerably higher than that for a family approved by another Local Authority.

This exploration of adoption professionals' views on matching issues also showed that there are contrasting views in the field on a number of

contentious issues. These include very varied opinions on: the balance to be struck between matching on ethnicity and avoiding delay; how far contact plans should be shaped by what adopters think they can manage; how soon the matching criteria (or placement plan) need to be reviewed if no match has been found for a child and whether adopter-led matches lead to better outcomes than those which are led by professionals. In addition, the responses highlighted the crucial role of the child's social worker in knowing the child well and the accompanying difficulties when workers changed or refused an apparently suitable match. This suggests a need for further consideration of the appropriateness of the role of the children's social worker as the final decision-maker.

The matching process

Agencies said that they would generally follow up one, two or more commonly three links at any one time, although a minority reported more. The majority of agencies followed up links primarily through discussions with the workers for the families involved, rather than with the families themselves but there was variation in whether the families were made aware that they were being considered for a child. The survey responses did illustrate continuing tensions around how many, and at what stage, families are approached directly to explore whether they may be able to meet a child's needs.

In terms of the matching process, in most agencies (76%), decisions about which families to proceed with were taken in a formal matching meeting. When formal meetings were not used, children's social workers (sometimes with their managers) would liaise with family finding workers or adoption team managers in order to reach a decision. Most respondents emphasised that the 'decision' about matching ultimately rested with the children's worker (or their team).

One of the survey respondents commented that matching as a task is, as yet, relatively unexplored and conceptually underdeveloped. In line with this, there appeared to be fewer developments in the matching process than in other aspects of adoption work in many agencies. Some agencies (4-5) were trying to make the matching process more systematic and objective by using a matrix or grid to compare children's and families' characteristics.

All agencies used the Child's Permanence Report along with children's medical and other

assessment reports to present information to prospective families and 85% of agencies shared video or DVD images of children. Sight of the child's case file was available to families in only 55% of the agencies, but all the agencies involved the foster carers and other professionals in sharing information with prospective adopters. At the time of the survey Life Appreciation Days were being used (for some children) by 55% of agencies but many other respondents expressed an interest in developing this practice in their own agencies.

The adoption panel

There was substantial variation between agencies in the frequency with which panels requested further information before making a recommendation. Before recommending that a child should be placed for adoption, further information was requested by the panel for between none and 30% of cases. Panels can also refuse to make a recommendation. Agencies reported that panels refused to recommend the plan for adoption in between none and 18% of their cases and that they refused to recommend a proposed match in between none and 10% of cases, with this never occurring in 35% and 50% of agencies respectively. Data were available for relatively few of the busier panels but there was a tendency for these agencies to report a higher proportion of papers being returned with requests for further information in order to consider whether a child should be placed for adoption.

Examples of practice development in terms of working with the panel included the use of checklists and practice guidance tools to assist panel members in making their decisions, joint training for panel members with social workers, and panel members attending external courses. There was also mention of the use of feedback systems to panels from social workers, adopters and sometimes children, expecting panel members to come to meetings with prepared written comments, and de-briefing after meetings.

Cost estimation of adoption activities

There is no doubt that the processes that are undertaken to place a child for adoption are both time-consuming and costly. On average, each child assessment takes 55 hours to complete over a four-month period at a cost of £2,500. Although completing the assessment form for prospective adoptive families absorbed slightly more social work time (64 hours) the average cost was slightly lower at £2,200 and took place over about six months. It is not clear why this cost was lower although it is possible that the costs of

some child assessments are elevated by the use of specialists. Preparing a child's profile cost an average of £147 and took 6 hours to complete. Talking to children, families and professionals as part of the linking process absorbed a further 3.5 days, on average, at a total of £1,200. The number of hours spent on each of these activities was broadly in line with other research (Selwyn *et al.* 2006) and the average cost of the four processes amounts to over £6,100. Our work in the second stage of the research will provide further validation of the costs estimated to date as well as estimates for some other adoption-related activities, such as for adoption support in the first six months of placement, further strengthening the evidence base on the costs of adoption.

Developing a typology of practice approaches

One of the purposes of the survey was to try to identify distinctive variations in adoption practice which might lend themselves to further investigation in terms of their effectiveness and their associated costs.

As the analysis of the survey data progressed, it became clear that there were four identifiable practice variations that were likely to be amenable to grouping for the purposes of the comparative study planned for the second stage of this project. Other variations might have been included but a larger number would have made later statistical analysis difficult. The practice variations by which we have selected agencies for the second stage of the study are:

- a) The stage at which transfer of case responsibility to adoption and permanence specialists takes place.
- b) Utilisation of the Attachment Style Interview and the Adult Attachment Interview frameworks in the assessment of families.
- c) 'Adopter-led' methods: that is where a variety of media are used (for example, using written profiles, children's artwork, photographs, DVDs) to introduce profiles of children needing adoption to prospective adopters. Prospective adopters are then asked to identify children to whom they feel they are likely to respond well.
- d) The routine use of matching tools and formalised meetings.

Conclusions

Overall, the survey reveals that there is significant variation in adoption practice across agencies and there is also much innovation in practice, although relatively little of it is at present directed at matching. The report highlights a number of novel ideas and developments; although very few have been subject to any evaluation. We have also identified a number of issues which were identified as obstacles to making timely adoption placements, as well as areas where there are still diametrically opposed views or that are in need of further research. Some of these questions will be addressed by the planned second stage of this research.

Whilst it would not be appropriate to draw implications for policy or practice from this kind of survey, the results do provide an interesting snapshot of current practice in England and Wales and guidance on where attention might be focused in future research.

References

CSCI (2006) *Adoption: messages from inspections of adoption agencies*. London: Commission for Social Care Inspection

Selwyn, J., Sturgess, W., Quinton, D. and Baxter, C. (2006) *Costs and outcomes of non-infant adoptions*. London: BAAF

Additional Information

The full report of the research will be published in book form by BAAF.

A fuller summary of the research will be published on the Adoption Research Initiative website: <http://www.dass.stir.ac.uk/adoption-research/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from:

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