
An investigation of family finding and matching in adoption – briefing paper

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Executive Summary

An Investigation of Family Finding and Matching in Adoption

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Background

Finding families for children whose care plan is adoption and deciding whether a child should be placed with a particular family – or matching – are major social work responsibilities. However, there is little research information on what contributes to good family finding and matching or how this relates to adoptive placement outcomes. This study aimed to begin to fill this gap in our knowledge.

Aims and Research Design

The objective of the study was to examine the effectiveness, outcomes and costs of different family finding methods and matching practices in adoption. The use of post-placement services was also explored. The research was funded by the former DCSF, now the Department for Education, and was based on 149 children who had an adoption recommendation at panel (82 sampled retrospectively¹ and 67 sampled prospectively in 'real time'²). The study was conducted in 10 English local authorities, selected because they used one of the four *different approaches* to family finding and matching, identified in the preliminary survey which formed the first part of the study (Dance *et al* 2010). These approaches included:

- early transfer of case responsibility to adoption workers (see Family Finding section)
- using in-house profiling events as a primary method of family finding
- using formal monitoring processes to track the progress of adoption cases.

¹ Recommendations made November 2004-April 2006

² Recommendations made November 2006-June 2007

The fourth category for selection was the use of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (Henderson *et al* 2003) in assessing prospective adoptive families. However, in practice, this tool had been used in too few cases within these authorities for analysis of its impact to be viable. Cases were purposively selected to increase the proportion of children with characteristics which were likely to make the family finding task more complex, since these cases would cast most light on the research questions. *This should be borne in mind when considering the findings.*

The case files of all 149 children were reviewed. In addition, for all the 67 children in the 'real time' sample, interviews were conducted with the relevant social workers after the adoption recommendation and also with 27 of their adoptive parents after the match (where possible before placement); and again with both six months into an adoptive placement. Periodic contact was also made with the children's social workers and family finders in the 'real time' sample until a match was made.

Limitations of the study

Because of insufficient data or numbers, the study cannot provide definitive findings about the relative effectiveness or costs of these chosen practice approaches. In addition, practice within authorities was developing naturally throughout the data collection period meaning that distinctions between practice approaches became increasingly blurred.

Characteristics of the Sample

In keeping with over-sampling children with additional needs, a third (31%) of the sample were black or minority ethnic (BME) children, 19% were aged over 5 at the adoption recommendation and over a third were to be placed with one or more siblings. A quarter of the children had a disability/health problem and in 11 cases (7%) these were severe. Twenty seven children (18%) showed developmental delay or learning difficulty. All in all, just under half (48%) of the children had complex needs which were likely to complicate family finding. Age at last entry to care ranged from birth to ten.

Key Findings

Quality of Information

Children need to be fully and accurately described in adoption paperwork if appropriate matches are to be made. However, many of the Child's Permanence Reports (CPRs) – prepared by the children's social worker and a main source of information for family finding – contained errors and a third did not accurately reflect children's difficulties. Adoption panels returned the papers presented to them with a request for further information/work in 13% of cases. In addition, only two thirds of the profiles for featuring the child in publications or profiling events corresponded fully with the whole picture of the child revealed by the files.

Family Finding

Generally, family finding did not begin until a Placement Order had been made, but for half the children these orders were obtained at least two months (and often much longer) after the adoption recommendation. Placement Orders, which may be made in care proceedings or in subsequent separate proceedings, provide court agreement with the adoption plan and give a local authority legal clearance to place a child with approved adopters. In two authorities which practised *early transfer* of cases, full case responsibility was formally

transferred to a specialist adoption worker when the adoption recommendation was agreed by the agency decision maker or the Placement Order was granted. In the others, a family finder from the adoption team was allocated to a case but the child's social worker remained involved in, and often responsible for, the decision as to the suitability of adoptive families.

In most authorities families were swiftly identified for young children without complex needs from the agencies' own pools of approved adopters or via local authority consortia. For children with more complex needs, authorities frequently needed to look further afield. It became clear that finding families for these children often required extensive work and a range of imaginative family finding techniques were employed, such as distribution of profiles to agencies specialising in the recruitment of specific groups of adoptive parents (e.g. BME families) or involvement in regional or in-house profiling events (Cousins 2003 and 2008). There were, however, local authority variations in terms of how the family finding task was managed. Some held planning meetings from the start to agree a family finding strategy (including agreement on expenditure for external profiling and inter-agency fees where necessary), sometimes tied to deadlines after which the search would be widened or the plan for the child re-considered. But in other authorities without early agreement on finance or *a formal structure to track and monitor cases*, there could be much delay/difficulty in taking key decisions. In addition, (as will be seen in the section on delay) authorities which used periodic *profiling events* as their primary family finding approach and shire counties, because they could often place in-house, were especially slow to widen the search.

Apart from delay in widening the search, other obstacles to successful family finding included a lack of realism about the prospects of finding suitable families for particular children. Children's social workers often strove to find a notional 'ideal' family for children, and were sometimes unwilling to alter the requirements (eg. insistence on an adoptive couple or placing a large sibling group together) even when no family could be found. Another obstacle was inadequate sharing of information about children's difficulties, so that some adoptive parents found that the children placed with them had more profound difficulties than anticipated.

In practice, the authority's own database was searched for a suitable family for most children (95%), with three also featured on the agency's own website, whilst contacts were made with other agencies including the consortia and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) for 61%. Referrals were made to a database shared with other agencies for a third of the children, 9% (13) were featured at a profiling event for the authority's own adopters and 13% (19) at a regional profiling event (Exchange Event). Four children were featured on the internet, 41% in magazines such as *Be My Parent* and six in the minority ethnic or faith press, whilst 61% were referred to the Adoption Register.

Of the 112 children for whom this information was available, the family chosen for the child was found within the authority's own database of adopters for 52% (58), from within the consortium for 10% (11), from in-house and regional profiling events for 10% (11) and from a database shared with another agency for one child. Families were also found from featuring children in magazines for 9% (10) or in the media (2), by sending fliers to VAAs for 5% (6), from the Adoption Register in 5% (5) and in other ways for 8 children, such as serendipitous contact between family finders and their individual contacts with workers in other agencies.

Matching

The ability to make a good match depends critically on the provision of good quality information about the child and the prospective adoptive family, and the appropriateness of the family finding strategy employed (including the use of wider searches), so that families able to meet the child's needs are found without undue delay.

Decisions about which family to proceed with were taken at formal Matching Meetings for 62% of the children, but informally for 38%. In all but one of the disrupted adoptive placements the matching decision had been taken *informally*. Also, in 17% of cases panel members had expressed reservations about the match and the proportion of placements with poorer outcomes (see later section on outcomes) was higher in this situation, although numbers were too small for statistical tests.

In a number of cases the expressed preferences of the prospective adopters were not met, including where adoptive parents had asked not to have a child with a family history of mental health problems (6), attachment difficulties (7), a risk of having an inherited medical condition (14), learning difficulties (11) or who had been sexually abused (8). In three of the eight cases where real 'stretching' of the adopters' preferences had occurred the placements had disrupted by follow-up.

In our sample, 29% of BME children were placed with families whose characteristics did not match their ethnicity, often in order to secure a placement for children with complex needs, where the need to place was considered more important than finding an 'ideal' match.

The quality of the matches made

Using only the knowledge available when the match was made, two researchers independently rated the quality of the matches, in relation to the extent of compromise on either the matching requirements for the child or the adopters' preferences. Almost three quarters (73%) were considered good matches, 14% involved some compromise outweighed by other positive factors (fair matches), whilst 13% (16) involved serious compromise on either the matching requirements or on adopters' preferences (poor matches).

There were significantly more poor in-house matches (33%) compared to inter-agency ones (18%). In addition, significantly more poor quality matches were arranged by county authorities, suggesting that their greater use of in-house placements may sometimes have involved compromising on fully meeting children's needs. (However, it is important to note that while some poor quality in-house matches were made swiftly, others occurred only after an extensive search had failed to identify a suitable family). There were no cases of poor matches when early transfer was practised, as compared to 18% among other approaches. This was a significant difference which runs counter to the anxiety that early transfer of cases results in new workers not knowing children well enough.

Delay

Nearly three quarters of the children (71%) experienced delays at some point in the adoption process (ie. waited more than 8 months between last entry to care and adoption recommendation or waited more than 6 ½ months for a match after recommendation). After recommendation, 30% of the children waited over a year for a match, for one in three of whom no match was found within the study timescale.

As would be expected, older age, ethnicity³ and health or developmental difficulties were all significantly related to delay in achieving a match (with some children in the latter group needing time for assessment and clarification of their problems).

Of the BME children in the sample who experienced delay (32), attempts to find a family of similar ethnicity was a factor in delay for most (70%). Successful matching on ethnicity generally involved the local authority being prepared to move rapidly to widen the search beyond their in-house families (see also Selwyn *et al* 2010). Although not statistically related to delay, indecision about whether to separate siblings could lead to substantial hold-ups and sibling assessments by other professionals such as psychologists often proved helpful. Timely and pragmatic decisions needed to be made to separate siblings if a sibling placement could not be achieved and/or in some cases when one sibling had serious difficulties.

Aside from children's characteristics, post-recommendation delays were caused by lack of proactive work by the children's social worker or family finder (41%) which was often associated with delays in exploring inter-agency options (30%); slowness in assessing potential families (18%) and rigidity in the search requirements (14%). Additionally, court and legal delays, often involving further assessments of parent/s or relatives or guardian opposition to the adoption plan, occurred in 34% of cases.

There were no statistically significant differences between individual local authorities in terms of the speed with which matches were identified and it took longer to find families for children with complex needs in all of them. There were, however, considerable local authority differences in the proportion of straightforward (0 to 60%) and complex cases (33% to almost all) waiting over 18 months for a match. Court delays too were very unevenly distributed across authorities.

A key difference was in local authorities' willingness to widen the search for adoptive families and place out of area. A reluctance to pursue inter-agency placements affected 70% of delayed cases in three county authorities and featured rarely in the other seven authorities. County authorities, which were more able to place in house than smaller agencies in urban areas, used inter-agency placements less, which led to more delay in finding placements for children with complex needs (although they were good at achieving swift matches for children without complex needs).

The relationship between practice approaches and delay

Early transfer of cases did not affect how quickly a match was made (but avoided undue delay in referring cases to the adoption team which occasionally occurred elsewhere). The use of *formal monitoring to track cases* appeared to reduce the time taken to find families in complex cases. The two authorities which used periodic *in-house profiling events* as a primary means of family finding were county agencies and placed children without complex needs swiftly, but greater delay occurred in placing children with complex needs and more often no match was found. However, they more than other authorities attempted to find placements for hard to place children. It should also be noted that none of the differences mentioned here in relation to practice approaches were statistically significant.

³ Despite our attempts to over-sample on children with minority ethnic backgrounds, numbers in the main study sample were too small to permit statistical comparison by different ethnic groups.

Failure to Match and Diversion from Adoption

Children from BME backgrounds, those who had significant health or developmental difficulties or were older not only more often remained waiting for a match but were also more frequently diverted from the adoption path altogether.

As just noted, the two authorities which used periodic *in-house profiling events* as a primary family finding approach showed a greater likelihood of no match being found (but were attempting to place a wider range of children than other authorities). Moreover, in six local authorities the chances of an alternative permanence outcome other than adoption were between two and five times higher than in the other four.

Support

Post-placement adoption workers were often described by adoptive parents as '*brilliant*' or '*very helpful*', with adopters having a more mixed experience of children's social workers. Informal sources of support, such as talking to other adopters, friends or the previous foster carers played an important part in helping adopters to cope and support groups were also useful. However, by the six month follow-up interviews, 35% of the adopters had not yet received their child's life story book because it had not been completed.

The researchers judged on the basis of all the available evidence that insufficient support was provided in 16% of adoptive placements. Although numbers were small it appeared that cases of unmet need for support were distributed very unevenly across the local authorities and occurred less frequently where placements had been sourced through VAAs.

The Costs of Family Finding, Matching and Post-Adoption Support

Family finding and matching

Four case examples illustrated the wide range of activities which need to be taken into account in estimating costs for family finding and matching. These ranged from a total of £4430 for a child who was placed reasonably swiftly within the local authority's resources to £5835 for a case which involved a wider search. The inter-agency fee was payable in one case, raising the costs to £13,369. These were all likely to be under-estimates because of the difficulty in obtaining complete data.

Post-placement services in the first six months of placement

Post-placement service use in the sample of 19 children used for cost estimation showed that the mean cost of post-placement services for the first six months of placement for the sample was £2,842, excluding financial support, within a range of £980 to £6,270, with a large part of this accounted for by the cost of provision from Children's Services Departments. Only around a third of the families received any financial support from Children's Services. The average cost of all services plus financial support in this study was £6,604. Financial support accounts for over half (57%) of the total support cost. There were large differences in the cost of the support packages for the families in this sample, with the highest cost package more than six times more costly than the lowest.

The Outcomes of the Adoptive Placements

At the end of the six month follow-up period, 18 (12%) of the children had not been matched with adopters. There was an eventual change of plan to long-term foster care for 11 (7%) and 7 (5%) children were still waiting to be placed for adoption. Where placements had been made (131), most were continuing at follow-up (124) and seven had disrupted.

Our first outcome measure of **stability** showed that 40% of the continuing adoptive placements (n=131) were positive with no issues reported by participants or evident from the case file notes, 27% had some problems and in 18% there had been significant challenges but these had not threatened placement stability. However, 5% of the placements were at risk of breaking down and seven had disrupted (5%)⁴. The second outcome measure concerned placement quality **for the child**. Most (87%) placements were judged by the researchers on the basis of all the evidence to have been positive for children, 8% were only adequate (with problems in parental management or responses to children), whilst 5% (the disrupted placements) were rated as a poor experience for the child.

Younger age and lack of behavioural problems at the time of the match were associated with better placement outcomes on both outcome measures (placement stability and quality). More compromises were made when matching children with complex needs and by follow-up these placements more often showed difficulties (such as in establishing relationships within the new family and with children's behaviour). There was no statistical difference in outcomes according to whether a match was instigated by professionals (80%) or by adopters (20% of the cases). The researchers' judgements about the quality of the match (which excluded consideration of ethnic matching) showed a very clear association with both types of placement outcome (placement stability and quality). In two thirds (63%) of disrupted or continuing but unstable placements the match had been categorised as poor, whilst disrupted or continuing but unstable placements occurred in only 5% of good or fair matches. Similarly, only 31% of poor matches were rated as positive placements for children, as against 93% of good or fair matches.

There were some difficulties in establishing relationships with adopters' own children in 40% of the relevant cases, even where there was a considerable age gap, but no significant differences in outcome at six months between placements made with childfree and established families. In a few cases, where it had been agreed that children would move on, they remained attached to their foster carers after the adoptive placement and at times the foster carers' difficulty in letting go may have contributed to this.

Some disruptions could be traced back to lack of adequate child assessments or not giving information about their problems to the adopters. Others involved pre-existing difficulties with the adoptive parents. A number involved stretching the adopters' preferences, whilst occasionally children had not wished to be adopted or had serious attachment problems. As previously noted, only one of the disrupted placements had involved a formal Matching Meeting which might have allowed a fuller discussion of whether the match really was suitable.

⁴ Outcomes not known for 5%.

Placements with VAAs were just as likely to go smoothly as other placements, even though they often provide families able to take more difficult to place children. The finding that 15% of children overall, and 20% of those with additional or ethnicity needs, were placed with VAAs reinforces the sector's continued importance as a source of families for children who are harder to place.

Conclusion

Overall, the study findings showed evidence of a great deal of dedicated work by Children's Services staff and others at every stage of the adoption process. Nonetheless, delays at each stage of the process were widespread. Willingness to widen the search early was vital to avoid delay, as was flexibility and readiness to revise the requirements for matching when necessary. Children's social workers usually made the final decisions about the requirements and which adoptive family was chosen, but workload pressures and their lack of adoption experience sometimes led to delay and an unwillingness to change the requirements for children, even when these were jeopardising the chances of finding a family for a child. Sharing these decisions with adoption workers or in meetings might be a better way of bringing a wider range of perspectives and greater adoption experience to bear on such decisions. Formal processes to track and review adoption work (including Matching Meetings) for children with complex needs can help not only to avoid delay but also ensure that a group of professionals make key decisions, especially about widening the search or revising requirements, so that inflexibility or lack of proactive work by individual workers (evident in 41% of delayed cases) does not derail the process.

Reluctance to widen the search for families was more common in county authorities, which as a result evidenced more delays in making adoptive placements for children with complex needs and more poor quality matches.

The study reiterates the greater difficulty of placing BME children, those who are older or have significant health or developmental problems, whilst at the same time providing examples of some very successful placements for them when intensive efforts to widen the search had been made, including promoting children and making inter-agency placements.

Specific issues suggested by the study include that formal reconsideration of cases might be beneficial where panel members express serious reservations about a match. Local authorities which experience frequent court delays might want to build on discussions between senior managers, the judiciary, magistrates and CAF/CASS in order to examine how cases can be expedited. There also appears to be a need for life story books to be completed more rapidly and for more training and support for foster carers in facilitating the transition to adopters.

Most of the children for whom adoption was planned were placed very successfully. However, poor quality matches were significantly associated with poor outcomes in adoptive placements. Post-placement support proved very valuable and there was room for further improvements to ensure that those adoptive parents who particularly needed such support (including financial assistance) received it. However, the children who were least well served were those who were kept waiting a long time for a placement either because of a lack of family finding activity or an insistence on matching requirements that could not be met, such that they were eventually diverted away from the adoption route to alternative long-term care.

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Additional Information

This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.