

Dr Julie Selwyn

Adoption and the Inter-agency Fee

Julie Selwyn is the Director of the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster care Studies in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol. Before joining the University Julie worked as a social worker and residential worker for 15 years. She has published widely on substitute care including studies of young people's view of foster care (2008) older children placed for adoption (2006), contact (2006) and the recruitment of minority ethnic adopters (2005).

Julie was responding to questions from Caroline Thomas, Academic Adviser to the ARi. They are talking about the *Adoption and the Inter-agency Fee* study. This study explored the costs of arranging adoptions by local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. It estimated the costs for adoption agencies in the statutory and voluntary sectors of recruiting and preparing adopters, and placing children in adoptive families. It also looked at the costs of providing adoption support.

Adoption and the Inter-agency Fee is written by Julie Selwyn, Joe Sempik, Peter Thurston and Dinithi Wijedasa and was published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Caroline: Julie, what would you say was the most rewarding part of this research project for you?

Julie: There were many rewarding aspects to this study. When we first began, there was concern expressed by many people working in adoption about the use of the inter agency fee. Everyone talked about the fact that the fee was lower for local authorities but no one seemed to know why or how the fee had come to be established. One of the things I really enjoyed about the study was going back through all the minutes of the meetings, doing that detective work and finding out how it had come about in the 1970s. And I was rather surprised to find that it's initial purpose had been to aid inter agency working and to encourage partnerships. However, our research found it had never worked as it had been originally intended and in fact it was having the opposite effect and was working as a disincentive.

I also really like working in a research team with people from very different backgrounds to myself. The team was made up of Joe Sempik from the University of Loughborough and Peter Thurston who was the former Deloitte partner and a chartered account. And it was also rewarding to find that so many agencies were willing to share their financial information with us and they also spent quite a lot of time explaining it to me.

Caroline: What would you say was the most challenging aspect of it for you?

Julie: The study aimed to find out what it cost to provide an adoption service. So our challenge as researchers was to make sure that all the costs were included for the local authorities in our sample and for the voluntary adoption agencies and that included everything, all the costs – from running adopter preparation groups to things you might not think about – things like paying for the window cleaning or mowing the grass outside. We also needed to be sure that we weren't double counting. By that, I mean counting the same person twice. For example, the adoption team manager, their salary costs were in the salary budget but the team manager also went to Panel meetings and therefore it was important not to count them twice in the two places. Of course, it was also important when we looked at the budgets to disentangle the costs that were only related to adoption. So some teams were also doing kinship assessments or Special Guardianship Order assessments or there were combined adoption and fostering teams. So we had quite a task of separating all these different costs out because we had to compare like with like.

- Caroline: Thinking of the findings, what do you think is the most powerful finding in the project?
- Julie: One of our most important findings was that because a local authority has to pay about 10,000 more if they use a voluntary adoption agency approved family rather than one of their own, many people have assumed that that makes adoption placements provided by the voluntary sector more expensive and, for some agencies, not affordable. But our research found that once all the local authority costs were included, the cost of a placement were very similar for both agencies. Indeed, it could be argued that the voluntaries were providing better value for money because they found families for harder to place children. Whichever way we costed it though, the true cost was much higher than the inter agency fee. None of the agencies were recouping all their costs and this funding gap is of real concern because it is putting a great deal of financial pressure on local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies and there is a real risk that agencies are going to be forced to reduce their services or close altogether.**
- Caroline: If you had to choose one key message for practice from your findings, what would that be?
- Julie: My one key general message is that the way adoption services are commissioned and funded needs a major overhaul to ensure that the inter agency fee doesn't continue to act as a disincentive to using adoptive families approved by voluntary adoption agencies.**
- Caroline: Could you highlight first of all some messages for professionals who are working in children and families social work?
- Julie: It's really all about good practice and that workers need to be able to choose the family that is most likely to meet the needs of the child rather than a family that's budget-led.**
- Caroline: How about messages for professionals working in adoption services?
- Julie: I think I was surprised to find that team managers often didn't know how much their team cost or how effective they were and it's important for managers to be able to link costs with outcomes. What are they delivering for the children that they're providing services for? For example, after the study was completed, one team manager contacted me because she wanted to be able to use our findings to argue that the proposed staff cuts for her team shouldn't go ahead. When we looked at the way her team was performing, they were already placing more children at a lower cost than any of the other local authorities in the sample. As a team manager, she hadn't been effective at knowing how successful her adoption team was.**

Caroline: Are there messages for professionals who're involved in commissioning children's services?

Julie: There have been one or two examples of voluntary adoption agencies and local authorities working in partnership but there has been very little strategic commissioning of adoption services. There is scope for much more work in this area and for voluntary adoption agencies to work closely with local authorities to provide the services that local authorities need.

Caroline: What would you say are the outstanding issues for more research in this field?

Julie: Adoption has changed significantly since services were established. The sorts of children who we need to find families for are very different from the kinds of families that were needed 20 or 30 years ago. So in terms of research, there's a need for further scoping work to be done to consider alternative options of providing adoption services. How could we replace the fee? How might services be better delivered?

Caroline: Thank you very much.