Elaine Farmer

Elaine Farmer is a Professor of Child and Family Studies at The Centre for Family Policy and Child Welfare in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol. She worked for several years as a social worker in the UK and Australia before moving into research and teaching. She has published widely on fostering, residential care, the reunification of separated children with their families, kinship care, and child protection.

Elaine was responding to questions from Caroline Thomas, Academic Adviser to the ARi. They talked about the findings from *An Investigation of Family Finding and Matching in Adoption*. This study explored current approaches to family finding and matching and compared their effectiveness, outcomes and costs. In addition, it identified the indicators of a good match and suggested ways in which matching can be improved.

The full report of *An Investigation of Family Finding and Matching in Adoption* is written by Elaine Farmer and Cherilyn Dance. A copy can be obtained by emailing Elaine at e.r.farmer@bristol.ac.uk

Caroline: What was the most challenging part of the study?

Elaine: **Well, one of the challenging issues was how to approach the whole issue of matching itself. Because there's been so little research in this area, there wasn't much to go on that was already out there so that, for example, we needed to find a way to conceptualise what would be a good match and what would be a poor match. And what we did in the end was once we had gathered information on all our 149 cases, we looked in great detail at what the children's needs or requirements had been for an adoptive placement. So things like, for example, their needs for a parent who could manage their particular kind of behaviours and so on. And we looked in detail at what the adopters' preferences were, which of course are clearly stated on the forms that you find on a file. Things like could they or could they not manage a child with attachment difficulties, would they or would they not take a child with developmental delay or a medical condition and what was their preference in terms of taking a single child or taking a sibling group.**

And with all that information, what we ended up doing was to have three categories of quality of matches, so the first category was the good matches where there were very few or no compromises on the child's needs or the adopter's preferences. The second category we called fair, a fair match, where there were some compromises made on one or the other but they were outweighed by other positive factors in making that placement. And then the final category, of which there were 13% of placements, was poor matches where there was quite serious compromise on either these children's matching requirements or the adopter's preferences. And each of the two main researchers separately rated all the cases - this is before we knew the outcomes, this is at the point of the match and that was an important thing – in using those three categories. And we then looked at whether that was what the relationship between the quality of the match and the outcomes was and found there was a very strong relationship both with stability – did the placement last – and the quality of the placement for the child.

So that gave us some confidence that we were measuring something that was real. It reaffirmed that matching is important, I think we all feel that but of course you don't know for sure. And also it's something that could be done by practitioners, you know, it's very much a judgement call when you look at the whole case in terms of, you know, really ticking off all the issues about what the expectations are going to be and what the capacities of adopters are to cope with this child.

Caroline: So a challenging aspect of the study for you but actually quite a useful practise tool that you've developed from the research

Elaine: Well, I hope so, yes. Yes, very useful.

Caroline: What do you consider to be the most powerful finding from the research study?

Elaine: I think for me that is that so much can actually be done to reduce delays in making adoptive placements. We had a lot of findings about what caused delays and therefore what can reduce them and it was very evident that some authorities were able to work more proactively and faster to place children and, as a result, had fewer delays than others and we can pinpoint what some of those issues are. We did find that, as you'd expect, that things like older age, ethnicity, health and developmental difficulties were associated with delay and we knew that already. However, we also found that there was a whole set of other delays that came in which we can do more about. Things like continuing to do all the tasks that are needed on time, being fast to look into inter agency options when a child has more complex difficulties and being willing to change requirements when needed and the other thing which I'll talk about later is court delays and that also made a big difference.

But in terms also of local authorities, there was more delay we found in county authorities because they were slower to pursue inter agency options because they wanted to use their in house placements first, even though it is true that sometimes an in house placement was made after quite an extensive search elsewhere. And also the authorities which used in house profiling events as their main, if not almost their only family finding method, tended to be associated with delayed placements and children not being placed at all because they waited from one profiling event to the next. But pulling those things together and a number of other of our findings, the positive important finding is that there is quite a bit we can do to cut out some of these delays. We can't obviously completely avoid because some children have such complex needs that it's gonna always take longer to find them a placement. But we can do more and if we do those things we would find placements faster for children and there would be fewer children who were kind of timed out of adoption, who basically become too old while they're waiting for a placement to ever get adopted.

Caroline: And Elaine, if you had to choose just one key message, a general message for the research, what would that be?

Elaine: **That would be that to have formal monitoring processes in place to keep adoptions on track can really make a big difference. So for example, for those authorities who used formal monitoring processes, they would have a meeting early on which would mean there was an early decision about the family finding strategy for a particular child, they would make a decision right then and there about widening the search and funding anything that involved widening the search, for example, using voluntary adoption agencies and so on. And that tended to mean that those adoptions were kept sort of on track, it helped to keep the various professionals involved proactive in undertaking and completing the tasks they needed to do of which there are many. And it also meant that if it wasn't easy to find a family, as could often happen for the children with more complex needs, health, development, inheritance, etc, then there was an ability for that group to review what to do next.**

So for example, the group could meet and they would look at should we change the requirements for this child. If we can't place this particular child who has very severe developmental needs and is also a child of mixed ethnicity, if we cannot find an ethnically matched placement, can we now look for one that is not in order to make sure that child gets an adoptive family. Can we change the requirements for this rather less complicated child to have but still with some particular needs to have a couple adopt. There's no particular reason, there may be some very good single adopters ready to go and so on. And having that, not resting alone with the children's social workers who tended for quite understandable reasons to want to hang on to a very notion of a kind of ideal match for the child even when it really wasn't proving possible, there was a lot to be said for having a group of professionals taking those kinds of decisions.

Another thing they might need to decide on is, should we now make a very careful decision to place a sibling group not all together because they're so big we can't find a placement, but in groups. And finally if we're using formal monitoring processes, it often means there's a formal matching meeting when the group decide on which prospective adoptive family to match with which child. And there was a suggestion in our finding that when that had happened, there were fewer adoption breakdowns than when it was done more informally with just a chat perhaps between the children's social worker, family finder and somebody's team manager.

Caroline: Right.

Elaine: **So although formal monitoring processes sound very dull, they actually seem to make quite a difference to the outcomes for children.**

Caroline: We're interested in having key messages for the different professional groups who are involved in the adoption process. Could you highlight first of all a main message or some main messages for those involved in the family justice system?

Elaine: Yes. The family justice system there are some very important messages for because we found that a third of the delays for all the children were actually caused by issues directly to do with the judicial system. And so really, if we are to reduce delays for children, it's very important that those are addressed. The sort of things that were happening – well, obviously there's things to do with the court time when a case comes up, when sometimes there are a lot of delays in respect of that. But also in relation to there were sometimes last minute requests from the court for further assessments of parents or relatives when it was pretty clear that a particular child needed an adoptive placement and those kind of further assessments could add really quite a great deal of delay. So there are real issues about getting the judicial system to move faster to help children gain adoptive placements.

Caroline: And what about any particular messages for children and families social workers?

Elaine: Well, there's a number of messages for children's and families' social workers and I do think it's important to say that they play a very important role in adoptions. But they are the ones for whom it's probably most difficult to be as effective as they'd like to be because they tend to have very high caseloads of urgent cases and they told us that. They told us that it was sometimes very hard to get round to writing the child's permanence reports because there was so much noise in the office and so many other demands on their time and many of them didn't have a lot of experience in doing so. So they need support all the way down the line, they certainly need support at the beginning in writing the child's permanence report and they also need to get the message that if they want to get a child who's their responsibility adopted, they need to be realistic and not over idealistic because what we found was that, understandably, children's social workers would write the requirements for the child in terms of a rather idealised notion of the family they wanted for the child. There needs to be two parents for this child, there needs to be ethnically matched for a mixed ethnicity child on both parents' background and so on and so forth. Things that when children had additional needs might be very difficult to achieve.

And so the general message is – try to set the requirements more broadly and be prepared to change them if an adoptive placement isn't found fairly quickly because some of these were very far from necessary for that child and, indeed, we had children who'd been refused because of the requirements of a particular placement who then 18 months later were still not placed and they'd go back to the original adopters who they'd turned down. So it makes no sense to be pitching for something you can't get. It means you may be prejudicing children's chances of ever getting adopted. So that's one set of messages.

Also, and difficult as it is, it's vital that all professionals, including children's social workers, do get each task done and I know it's a lot of work but done in good time because all the delays of getting not each task not done in time adds massively to waits for children.

And finally, they need to – in the authorities where they're not using what we call formal processes to track and monitor children, it's often left to the children's social worker to make some vital decisions in discussion with the adoption team about widening the search, about contacting a voluntary adoption agency or profiling the child or putting them in a magazine. And we found that they were often very hesitant to take those decisions, very worried about the cost implications for the authority and that's not their fault. But those delays are enormous. They need to grasp the issue and go wherever they need to to get those permissions if children are to be placed.

Caroline: Do you have any main messages for adoption services?

Elaine: Well, I think following on from what I was saying just now, it's very important because at the moment we have a split responsibility between the children's social worker, who's often the one who makes the final decision about which adoptive family a child will be placed with, it's very important that there are mechanisms to broker disagreements. Because the adoptive social workers are usually the more experienced in adoption – well, obviously – and they know very often when really it is time to make changes to the requirements for the child, widen the search or be realistic about this perfectly good enough adoptive family, this adoptive family is a good one for this family. And if that is being gainsaid by the children's social worker, then the adoption service needs a way to brokerage those disagreements. So very quickly it's sorted out. At the moment, that can lead to long delays while everybody's wondering who's gonna sort this out, etc.

In line with that, we had an interesting finding which was that in the authorities and I think it's about – in the survey, it was about 30% nationally – local authorities which use what's called early transfer of responsibility to the adoption team, that's to say the adoption team take the entire case over with case responsibility from usually the time the adoption recommendation is made or the placement order is made. When that happened, of course you haven't got those disagreements because the children's social worker is no longer in the driving seat. And we did find interestingly that there were more good matches made for those authorities who had that particular form of arrangements in place.

Caroline: And Elaine, when you say good matches, do you mean -

Elaine: **Quality. Sorry, good quality matches. Yes. In terms of outcomes. Yes. They were good – sorry, what I meant was good quality matching, not many compromises made for the children or the adoptive parents and working out well because good quality matching was associated with good outcomes for the children. So although I know it's quite disruptive if that's not the way teams have been used to working, it's got some definite advantages.**

And of course the other thing is just for the adoption team to move rapidly for the complex cases to widen the search and those are probably the main messages for the adoption teams.

Caroline: And what about messages for those with responsibilities for commissioning children's services?

Elaine: **Well, I suppose the big message for the commissioners is that the use of inter-agency placements does provide the widest choice of placements for children and it does reduce delay and, indeed, produce better quality matches. We found those things. And as Julie Selwyn and her colleague's research has shown, inter-agency placements are actually no more costly than in house placements when the overhead costs are taken into account and it's very easy when you're in the front line to forget that. But it's important that we have that kind of overall understanding that that particular thing which can be so important to place children with a variety of more complex needs isn't actually going to cost the authority more.**

Caroline: And are there any particularly important messages from your study for adoptive children and their families?

Elaine: **Well, there are and one of the things that is important to mention is that as a general finding in this study, it was obvious that it was very important to have good quality information about the children who needed to be matched and good quality information about the adoptive parents who might parent them. So for adoptive parents, the message would be, make sure you get all the information you can about the child and if you feel there's any gaps, push for those to be filled. Because we did find that in the few cases where adoptive parents had not been given full information about children's difficulties – so, for example, a child with really quite serious adoptive – sorry, attachment difficulties was placed when they weren't expecting it, those placements were vulnerable to disrupt or to be extremely difficult to keep together. So I mean, this is obviously a responsibility for the professionals to share the information but if you're not happy, you need to push to see you have as much information as is out there.**

A second message for adoptive parents I think is that sometimes the plan that's made for services or for financial allowances might prove not to be robust enough when it comes to the day to day challenges of managing a child. So if you do feel you need more services or indeed financial help than was originally agreed, ask for it and keep in touch with the adoption workers and there's a good chance that, you know, once the case is made, you will get those services, the ones you need. So, you know, make sure you keep in touch and get what you need in order to satisfactorily and effectively parent that particular child or children.

And finally, it was very clear that the adoptive parents, as well as getting on the whole rather good support from the adoption workers and other professionals, got enormous amount of benefit from their informal contacts, for example, meeting up with other adoptive parents and so on.

Caroline: And finally Elaine, in your view, what are the outstanding issues for further research in the area of family finding?

Elaine: **Well, I think that there is a great need for research in this whole area, particularly of matching and family finding, because there's so little already that it would be good if we could, for example, do some more fine-grain analysis of the links between children's requirements, adopters' preferences, which requirements, as it were, you can and can't afford to compromise on. So there's a lot more work possible in looking at that and indeed in family finding, if we are going to make big changes to our adoption services as is currently looks likely, then I think we need to look again in the light of this research at what – and in light of the changes – at what the key organisational arrangements are for family finding and make sure that we do research that again looks at which ones expedite and which ones – what other – expedite family finding and matching and which ones – what things are still holding things up.**

Caroline: Thank you very much.