Family finding and matching

A survey of adoption agency practice in England and Wales

This study is part of the Adoption Research Initiative (*AR*i), a group of major research projects commissioned by the former Department for Children Schools and Families (DfES). The dissemination of key messages from the initiative was funded by the Department for Education.

The study was led by Professor Elaine Farmer at the University of Bristol and Dr. Cherilyn Dance at the University of Bedfordshire[1]. Data were gathered during 2006.

This summary is based on a longer research brief and the full report of the study[2]. It reviews the methodology and findings and highlights the key messages from the research. Information about other resources from the study is available at the *AR*i website.

1. Background to the study

Children awaiting adoption need to be placed with appropriate families with the minimum of delay. Finding potential adoptive families and matching children with them are complex social work tasks which require a range of skills and a sound knowledge base. There are a variety of approaches and practice developments in this field, but these have developed in a piecemeal manner and little is known about their effectiveness. This survey therefore aimed to produce an overview of variations in family finding and matching practice across England and Wales. It is the pre-cursor to a more detailed study of particular practice approaches and their outcomes[3].

2. How was the study done?

The study was conducted through a questionnaire, completed by adoption agencies between July and October 2006. All Local Authority (LA) and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) who were engaged in placing children were approached. Seventy four LAs (44% of total) and 16 VAAs (55% of total) participated. This response rate is broadly in line with that of similar surveys.

3. Terminology used in this summary

In this summary, 'family finding' refers to the process of seeking prospective adopters for a child and then investigating their suitability. A 'link' refers to a family that has been identified, but not confirmed, as a possibility for a child. 'Matching' referred to the process whereby an LA comes to a decision that a particular family is suitable to adopt a particular child.

4. What were the key findings?
Case responsibility

- In 70% of agencies, case responsibility remained with the children's social work team throughout family finding and matching, with an adoption social worker connected to the case throughout the process.

- In 30% of agencies, however, case responsibility for the child was transferred to a specialist adoption or permanence team once the placement order had been made. Agencies which took this approach felt that specialist adoption workers knew the field better and could drive the adoption plan forward more effectively.

- Other agencies argued against this approach on the grounds that the newly allocated adoption social worker would not have in-depth knowledge of the child and his or her background. However, the high staff turnover generally experienced in children's services meant that the child's social worker might well have been new to the case at this point.

The assessment and preparation of children

- There was variation in who undertook direct work with children to prepare them for adoption. In 90% of cases, the child's social worker would have at least some involvement. But other workers also undertook elements of this task, usually because of time constraints on children's social workers.
- Experienced unqualified workers who had time available were sometimes seen as preferable to qualified social workers who might have to cancel appointments in order to deal with a crisis.
- Agencies that delegated this task tended to refer children to a specialist children's worker or to engage family centre staff.

Practice developments

The survey revealed some innovations in practice for the assessment of children:

- A number of agencies had consultancy in place to aid social workers and others in their assessment work with children (for example a clinical psychologist or multi-agency team). Nine agencies used a child psychologist to undertake individual assessments in complex cases.
- Psychologists or other specialists sometimes undertook sibling assessments
- Some agencies conducted assessments of the child's attachment status and a small number used Story Stem[4] narratives as part of assessing children's attachment patterns.
- Twenty-nine agencies had their own specialist worker to prepare children for adoption.

The placement of children with additional needs

- The proportion of children placed with a sibling varied across agencies from 14% to 80% of all placed children. While there might have been an impact of small numbers in some authorities, such a spread might indicate different policies on the separation of sibling groups, or the timing of taking children from the same family into care and moving them on to adoption.
- Similarly, the proportion of placed children who had special health needs or disabilities varied from none to 29%. This might have reflected different definitions of special health needs or disabilities or different policies or levels of determination to achieve adoption for such children.

The recruitment and preparation of prospective adopters

- Agencies reported 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, older children and/or those with special health needs.
- About a quarter of the agencies did not appear to operate targeted recruitment drives to find families able to meet such additional needs. This is consistent with findings from adoption agencies' inspections[5] where three out of ten LAs and one in ten VAAs had not developed strategies to recruit adoptive parents to meet the needs of children who were waiting.

Practice developments

The survey revealed some innovations in practice for the assessment of prospective adopters:

- Some agencies were exploring the attachment styles of their adoptive applicants during their assessments. This was done either through the Attachment Style Interview (ASI)[6] or through the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI)[7]. The ASI focuses on the interviewee's access to and use of support and their current experience of confiding relationships. The AAI explores the way in which interviewees recall childhood experience in order to assess their adult attachment status.

[4] Hodges J., Steele M., Hillman S. and Henderson K. (2003) *Mental representations and defences in severely maltreated children.* In Emde R., Wolf C. and Oppenheim D. (eds) Revealing the Inner Worlds of Young Children: The Macarthur story stem battery, New York: Oxford University Press.

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

[6] Bifulco A., Lillie A., Ball B. and Moran P (1998) Attachment Style Interview (ASI): Training Manual, London: Royal Holloway, University of London.

[7] Steele M., Kaniuk J., Hodges J., Haworth C. and Huss S. (1999) 'The use of the Adult Attachment Interview: implications for assessment in adoption and foster care. In Assessment, Preparation and Support: Implications from research, London:BAAF, pp30 – 37.

Although the AAI has an established evidence base, it is acknowledged to be time consuming. The results can be difficult to interpret[8] and the training required to administer it is therefore expensive. In contrast, the ASI has been developed specifically for adoption and fostering and training in its use is nationally available.

- One agency was routinely using two social workers to co-work every home study, feeling that this resulted in a more thorough assessment.

- One VAA described a tailor made training session for prospective adopters and their support network **after a child had been identified**. The child's behaviours and attachment needs were explored and parenting strategies discussed.

- A Metropolitan area had arranged 'foundation days' in which adopters could meet with a number of birth family members to gain information, photographs and videos. A memory box was produced for the child.

- Other developments were in the use of experienced adopters throughout the adoption process - as mentors, in a support role or as trainers or group facilitators.

Family finding

- Developing a profile for a child who needed an adoptive placement was generally the responsibility of the adoption worker[9]. 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.

- Four different mechanisms for identifying links were found and are described below. The first two of these might be described as 'professional-led' and the last two as 'adopter-led' approaches.

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[8] Farnfield S (2008) 'A theoretical model for the comprehensive assessment of parenting', British Journal of Social Work, 38, pp 1076 – 1099.

[9] In the main study, (see Summary 5 in this series), the researchers found that the quality of the children's profiles was variable with some not fully representing the full picture of the child. One LA used one of their adoption workers to write all the profiles, which ensured that they were of a uniformly good quality.

- First hand knowledge of a potential family assessed by the adoption team.
- An exchange of information between social workers in different agencies (for example through consortia or contact with VAAs) or through the Adoption Register.
- The presentation of a child's profile to the community of approved prospective adopters, for example, through features in the Be My Parent or Children Who Wait publications, in-house profiling events and regional adoption events.
- The presentation of a child's profile to the wider community through newspapers, radio or television features. This approach was rarely used.

- Half the agencies in the survey had secured matches through presenting the child's profile at regional adoption events or in-house profiling events. Featuring children on the internet[10] had provided possible families 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.

- LAs often proceeded sequentially in their search for links, beginning with their own resources, proceeding to seek a family from their agency consortium if necessary and only involving VAAs if they had no success with local resources.

- On average, just over 50% of LA placements were in-house, just over a quarter were secured through consortia arrangements and the remainder were inter-agency arrangements. Shire Counties were more self-sufficient in terms of in-house placements.

Matching

The issues which survey respondents regarded as most important in matching fell into two main groups.

Adopter related issues

- The adopters' characteristics, such as their parenting skills, support networks, the likely impact on their own children and their distance from the placing agency.

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[10] The use of the internet to feature children needing adoption was in its infancy at the time of this survey.

- The 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.
- Some agencies also mentioned: 'chemistry' - or a feeling of 'emotional connectedness' with a particular child.

Agency related issues:

- Having clear and accurate information about both the child and the prospective adopters (this issue was mentioned most often).
- Providing adequate preparation and support.
- Not 'stretching' adopters' preferences regarding the characteristics of the child they would prefer to adopt.
- Ensuring that all the relevant parties work together and involving foster carers in adoption plans.
- Having regard to the child's views on the proposed placement.

Barriers and dilemmas

The survey revealed that some social workers and managers were experiencing barriers and dilemmas in the process of family finding and matching for some children:

Barriers

- Difficulties in relation to finding families for sibling groups, contact plans and in adequately reflecting children's ethnicity in a proposed placement.
- Difficulties when children's social workers changed or when they 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 regarding the proposed match.
- The inter-agency fee. Some VAAs felt that the fee deterred LAs from considering their placements.

Dilemmas

- The balance to be struck between spending time trying to match on ethnicity and avoiding delay.
- How far contact plans should be shaped by what adopters think they can manage, rather than the previously identified needs of the child.
- How soon the matching criteria (or placement plan) should be reviewed if no match has been found for a child.

The family finding and 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.
- Most agencies followed up links initially through discussions with the workers for the families involved, rather than with the families themselves. But there was variation in whether or not the families were made aware that they were being considered for a child. There were also different practices regarding whether one family at a time was approached for a particular child or whether more than one family might be approached and then a choice made.
- In most agencies (76%), the decision about which family to proceed with was 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.
- Some agencies were trying to make the matching process more systematic and objective by using a matrix or grid to compare the characteristics of the child and potential families.
- All agencies used the Child's Permanence Report along with medical and other assessment reports to present information to prospective adopters, and 85% of agencies shared video or DVD images of children.
- 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.

The adoption panel

- There was substantial variation between agencies in the frequency with which panels requested further information before making a recommendation (from none to 30% of cases).
- 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.

Practice developments

The survey revealed some developments in practice connected with Adoption Panels:

- Joint training opportunities for panel members and social workers.
- Systems of feedback to panels from social workers, adopters and sometimes children.
- Prospective adopters bringing written notes about their strengths and areas for further work to the panel.
- The expectation that panel members come to meetings with prepared written comments.
- De-briefing for panel members after meetings.

The costs of adoption activities

An important component of the survey was to ask for broad estimates of the number of social work hours associated with adoption activities. The figures are approximate but in summary, the findings were as follows:

Activity	Social work hours (average)
Child assessment	55
Adopter's assessment	64
Preparing child's profile	6
Family finding process	16[11]

Areas selected for further study

From the analysis of the survey data, it became clear that there were four practice variations that merited further exploration in second stage of this project. These were:

- The stage at which transfer of case responsibility to adoption and permanence specialists takes place.
- The use of the Attachment Style Interview and the Adult Attachment Interview frameworks in the assessment of families.
- 'Adopter-led' methods of family finding.
- The use of matching tools and formalised matching and review meetings to track the progress of children towards an adoption placement.

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[11] The mean was 28.5 hours which came down to 16 when the most time-consuming case was removed and was close to the median (15), so the lower average has been used here.

5. Limitations & strengths of the study

Limitations

- The survey reflects practices in 2006 and the findings only give a 'snapshot' of what was happening during the study time period. Many agencies were developing their practice at this time or have subsequently done so.
- The survey describes practice variations, but does not evaluate the quality or relative effectiveness of different approaches. Later stages of this project have done so.

Strengths

- The proposal for the study was independently and anonymously peer-reviewed before the work was commissioned.
- The report was independently and anonymously peer-reviewed before publication.
- The project used an experienced research team with significant knowledge and skills in researching adoption. All data were cross checked within the research team.

Key messages

Overall, the survey revealed that there was significant variation in family finding and matching practice across agencies.

- A number of obstacles to making timely adoptive placements were identified, as well as areas of professional uncertainty which would merit further 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 practice in England and Wales. Adoption agencies might find it helpful to reflect on their own procedures and practice in the context of the survey and to debate some of the barriers and dilemmas that have been highlighted.