An investigation of family finding and matching in adoption

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

　The study was led by Professor Elaine Farmer at the University of Bristol and Dr. Cherilyn Dance at the University of Bedfordshire[1]. It builds on an earlier stage of the project involving a survey which mapped family finding and matching practice across England and Wales[2]. Data were gathered between 2007 and 2009.

　This summary is based on a longer research brief and the full report of the study[3]. 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

Finding potential adoptive families for children and deciding whether a child should be placed with a particular family are major social work responsibilities. However, there has been little research on what contributes to good family finding and matching or how these processes relate to adoption outcomes. This study addresses this gap by further exploration of two important issues which were highlighted by the mapping survey mentioned above. These issues are, firstly, that practice in family finding and matching varies widely across the country and, secondly, that some practice approaches might be contributing to delay in achieving adoption for some children.

2. What was the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study was:
- To examine the process, costs and outcomes of family finding and matching in different local authorities (LAs).
- To examine the effectiveness of the following practices[4]:
  - Early transfer of case responsibility to adoption workers.
  - Using in-house profiling events as a primary method of family finding.
  - Using formal monitoring processes to plan family finding strategies and track the progress of each case.
- To explore the costs and effectiveness of post placement services.

3. How was the study done?

The study was conducted in 10 English LAs, selected because they used one or more of the practice approaches identified above.

　The sample consisted of 149 children who had an adoption decision. Eighty two of these cases were examined retrospectively up to two years after the adoption recommendation. Sixty seven cases were followed closely in 'real time' from the point of their panel recommendation. Children for whom family finding and matching were likely to be more problematic were deliberately over represented in the sample.

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[4] The use of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) in assessing prospective adopters was also identified for examination. However, this tool was used too infrequently for the analysis to be viable. Henderson, K., Hillman, S., Hodges, J and Steele,M (2003) 'Attachment representations and adoption: associations between maternal states of mind and emotion narratives in previously maltreated children', *Journal of Child Psychotherapy,* 29 (2), pp187 – 205.

Data were gathered from the following sources:

- The files of all 149 children.
- For the 67 children followed up in real time, interviews were conducted with their social workers shortly after the adoption recommendation and also with 27 of their adoptive parents shortly after the match; and again with both, six months into the adoptive placement. Case progress was also tracked periodically with social workers until the match.

4. What were the key findings?

Family finding

- For young children without complex needs, most authorities swiftly identified families from their own approved adopters or via their LA consortia. For children with more complex needs, useful sources were regional profiling events and magazine advertising. A smaller number of families were also found from the Adoption Register, through the media, by sending fliers to Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs), and in other ways, such as chance conversations between family finders and workers in other agencies.

The quality of the matches

- Using *only* the knowledge available when the match was made, two researchers independently assessed the quality of the matches by rating the extent of compromise on both the matching requirements for the child and the adopters' preferences. Almost three quarters (73%) of the matches were rated as 'good', 14% were 'fair' (involving some compromise) and 13% were felt to be 'poor' (involving serious compromise).
- Of the poorly matched placements, significantly more were made in-house (33%) compared to inter-agency (18%). In addition, significantly more 'poor quality' matches were arranged by county authorities which made greater use of in-house placements. This practice may, therefore, have involved some compromise in fully meeting children's needs, since the choice of families was narrowed to those available within the authority, although at times these matches did follow an unsuccessful wider search.

Placement outcomes

At the end of the six month follow-up period, 131 (88%) of the children had been placed for adoption. The large majority (124) of these placements were continuing at follow up.

- Of the 18 children who had not been placed, 11 had a change of plan to long term foster care and 7 were still waiting to be placed for adoption. Children from Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, those who had significant health or developmental difficulties, or were older were more likely to remain waiting and were also more frequently diverted from the adoption path.
- The researchers also assessed the stability of the placements. The findings showed that 40% of the placements were continuing at follow-up and were positive in character. In 45% there had been challenges but these had not threatened placement stability. However, 5% of the placements were assessed as being at risk of breaking down and 5% had disrupted[5].
- The researchers also assessed the quality of the placement for the children. They found that 87% of the placements appeared positive for children, 8% were adequate (with some problems in parental management or responses to children), whilst 5% (the disrupted placements) were rated as a poor experience for the child.

Issues associated with poorer outcomes

The researchers identified some issues that were associated with poorer outcomes, although it should be noted that any of these issues could also have been present when there were positive outcomes.

- Children who were older or had behavioural difficulties at the time of the match.
- Some Panel members expressing reservations about the match.
- The matching decision having been taken informally rather than through a formal matching meeting which might have allowed a fuller discussion of whether the match really was suitable. In four cases where a formal matching meeting had not taken place, the placements had disrupted by follow-up.

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[5] Outcomes not known for 5%.

- A poor quality match (see 'The quality of the matches', above)
- Lack of adequate child assessments or inadequate information given to the adopters.
- Pre-existing difficulties for the adoptive parents.
- Serious 'stretching' of the adopters' preferences, in terms of the type of child they envisaged parenting. In three cases where this had occurred, the placements had disrupted by follow-up.
- Children not wishing to be adopted or having serious attachment problems.

- Placements with VAAs were just as likely to go smoothly as other placements. 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.
- There was no statistical difference in outcomes according to whether a match was instigated by professionals (80% of the cases) or by adopters (20%). Stable and good quality placements were clearly associated with the quality of the match (i.e. the extent to which child's needs and adopters' preferences were congruent). In two thirds of disrupted or unstable placements, the match had been categorised as poor.

Delay in achieving adoption

Nearly three quarters of the children (71%) experienced delay at some point in the adoption process[6]. After panel recommendation, 30% of the children waited over a year for a match.

- Predictably, older age, ethnicity and health or developmental difficulties were all significantly related to delay in achieving a match. Of the 30 BME children who experienced delay, attempts to find a family of similar ethnicity was a factor in the delay for most (70%).
- Indecision about whether to separate siblings with diverse needs also led to substantial hold-ups. There could be differences of opinion regarding how long to search for a suitable family for a complex sibling group. These

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[6] Delay was defined as children waiting more than 8 months from last entry to care to adoption recommendation or more than 6 ½ months from recommendation to match.

differences took time to resolve and fruitless searches lost further months.

- After the panel recommendation, delays could be due to waiting before inter-agency options were explored, the time taken to assess potential families, tasks not being achieved in a timely way and very specific search requirements. Additionally, court and legal delays occurred in 34% of cases although these were unevenly distributed across authorities.
- There were no statistically significant differences between individual LAs in terms of the speed with which matches were identified. It took longer to find families for children with complex needs in all of them. There were, however, considerable differences in the *proportion* of children waiting over 18 months for a match. In some LAs, for instance, all children with complex needs waited over 18 months, whereas in others this figure was only 33%.
- A key reason for these differences was the LA's willingness to pursue inter-agency placements. A reluctance to do this affected 70% of delayed cases in three county authorities and featured rarely in the other LAs. County authorities were more able to place in-house than smaller, urban agencies and so tended to use fewer inter-agency placements. However, this could lead to greater delay in finding placements for children with complex needs in the county authorities.

Practice approaches

The three identified practice approaches were investigated in terms of their effectiveness. Did they reduce delay and did they result in better placements?

Early transfer of case responsibility

- This meant that full case responsibility was transferred to an adoption worker either when the adoption recommendation was agreed by the agency decision maker or when the Placement Order was granted. The adoption social worker took responsibility for preparatory work and for finding and choosing the family for the child. Early transfer of cases did not affect how quickly a match was made but it did avoid delay in referring cases to the adoption team. In addition, there were significantly fewer poor matches when early transfer was practised (none), compared with poor matches when there was no early transfer (18%).

- In the authorities where the children's social workers took decisions on the suitability of adoptive families, they were sometimes unwilling to change the matching requirements for a child, even when this was jeopardising the chances of finding a family at all.

Formal monitoring processes
- Some local authorities held a formal planning meeting at the beginning of the family finding process. This meeting agreed a family finding strategy, with timescales and included agreement on expenditure for profiling and inter-agency fees where necessary. In some cases, this plan was then formally monitored and there were further 'tracking' meetings after which the search would be widened or the plan for the child re-considered. Although not statistically significant, this approach appeared to reduce the time taken to find families in complex cases and there was also some evidence to suggest that it assisted in making good matches.

In-house profiling events
- The two authorities which used periodic in-house profiling events as their *primary* means of family finding were county agencies and they were attempting to find families for the most complex children. However, the delays for children with complex needs were greater in these authorities and often no match was found.

Support
- Post-placement adoption workers were often described by adoptive parents as 'brilliant' or 'very helpful', although they reported 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. Support groups were also useful.
- The researchers judged that sufficient support was provided in 84% of adoptive placements. Although numbers were small it appeared that cases of unmet support needs were distributed unevenly across the LAs and occurred less frequently where placements had been sourced through VAAs.

Costs
Family finding and matching
- Four case examples illustrated the wide range of activities which need to be taken into account in estimating costs (without overhead costs) for family finding and matching. Estimates ranged from £4,430 for a child who was placed reasonably quickly, in house, to £5,835 for a case which involved a wider search. However, these figures are all likely to be under-estimates because of the difficulty in obtaining complete data.

Post-placement services in the first six months
- The estimated average cost of post-placement services (without overhead costs) for the first six months of placement was £2,842, excluding financial support, with a range of £980 to £6,270. The average cost of all services plus financial support was £6,604. Financial support accounted for over half (57%) of the total support cost. There were large differences in the cost of the support packages, with the highest cost package being over six times more expensive than the lowest.

5. Limitations & strengths of the research
Limitations
- Practice within authorities was changing and developing throughout the data collection period, with various approaches being introduced or adjusted along the way. No single approach to family finding and matching was used consistently and solely and the research reflected this reality.
- The study cannot provide definitive findings about the relative effectiveness or costs of these chosen practice approaches, because sample numbers and/or available data were insufficient.

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 its publication.
- The data for the project was gathered from multiple sources.
- The project used a highly experienced research team with significant experience of researching adoption. All data were cross checked within the research team.

Key messages

This study found evidence of much dedicated and effective work at every stage of the adoption process. It also provides some important indicators for reducing delay and improving the overall quality of matches. To these ends, adoption agencies might consider the following steps:

- Establish a formal system for monitoring all children awaiting the Adoption Panel. This will enable a phased approach to family finding: possible in-house matches or cases likely to need inter-agency placements may be identified prior to Panel and first steps can be taken. More focussed family finding can proceed after the 'to be placed for adoption' decision, although in cases where there is doubt about whether a placement order will be granted, only general enquiries should be made. After the placement order, intensive family finding activity can begin with minimum delay.

- Consider ways in which partnerships can be forged between the child's social worker and the adoption social worker, in order to reduce delay and improve placement quality. This might include providing training in adoption issues, establishing mechanisms to broker disagreements, and ensuring that workers with adoption experience hold responsibility, or are able to guide key decisions.

- Establish a formal system for planning and monitoring the family finding process. This should include an early planning meeting at which key decisions regarding the family finding strategy and funding are made.

- Review the family finding plan regularly and frequently if no placement is found. A formal meeting for this brings together a wider range of perspectives and specialist adoption experience. This should promote flexible and creative thinking about the plan and the matching criteria.

- Consider all possible types of placement from the outset and ensure that the matching criteria for each child are as broad as possible. There may be a need for the sharing of research on issues such as ethnic matching and adoption by single people and same sex couples to ensure that all who are working with the child have similar, evidence based understandings.

- Widen the search as early as possible. The use of inter-agency placements provides the widest choice of placements and reduces delay. Inter-agency placements are no more costly than in-house placements when overhead costs are taken into account [7].

- Use in-house (or regional) profiling events as one element of the family finding plan, but not as the sole element.

- Use formal matching meetings, attended by those who know the child well, to choose an adoptive family, to discuss fully the strengths and limitations of the proposed placement and formulate a detailed and comprehensive support plan (including financial support), where appropriate.

- Arrange discussions between senior managers, the judiciary, magistrates and CAFCASS in order to examine how Court delays can be minimised.

[7] See Summary 1 in this series.