

**THE BEACON COUNCIL SCHEME:
ADOPTION**

OUTPUT 2 – REVIEW OF ISSUES AND RESEARCH

David Quinton & Kate O'Brien

The Hadley Centre for Adoption & Foster Care Studies
School for Policy Studies
University of Bristol
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The nature of Adoption Now

The characteristics of the children placed for adoption have changed markedly in the past two decades. Prior to this those adopted were usually the babies of young single mothers and the adopters usually childless couples. At that time the predominant philosophy underlying placement practice – the ‘permanency movement’ – was to promote a ‘clean break’ between children and their birth parents in order to facilitate the attachment of the children to their new families.

Since then birth control, abortion and changing attitudes to single parenthood have reduced the numbers of babies available for adoption. As the availability of babies for adoption declined in the 1970s and 1980s, developments in the USA and the UK led to the increasing use of adoption as a route to permanence for older children, children with disabilities, black and mixed parentage children and sibling groups. Children with these different kinds of ‘special needs’ now form the great majority of those for whom adoptive homes are sought: children who would previously have stayed in group-care or experienced a number of moves between foster families.

These changes, together with arguments on the importance of continuing contact between children and their birth parents now enshrined in the Children Act 1989, have led to a change in the tasks facing adoptive parents and of those trying to recruit them. The children frequently enter their new families with a host of emotional, behavioural and attachment problems consequent upon earlier maltreatment and placement instabilities, as well as issues relating to their heritage and identity. Adoptive families often need specialist help, sometimes over a substantial period, to help deal with these issues, which are often persistent.

The Government is committed to increasing the use of adoption as a solution to the permanency needs of these children. The best local councils will have: efficient methods of identifying and assessing children for whom adoption is the best option; effective ways of recruiting and preparing potential adopters; sensitive ways of matching children and parents; sophisticated ways of dealing with issues of contact with birth parents; and a flexible and responsive approach to providing post-adoption support.

Local Councils Duties

The Adoption Act 1976 outlined the duties and responsibilities of local council and voluntary adoption agencies. Minor amendments were made in the Children Act 1989 (Children Act guidance and Regulations vol.9, Adoption Issues), and further guidance given in the 1983 regulations and LAC 98(20). The Government published a new Adoption and Children Bill on 15 March 2001. The Bill fell when Parliament was dissolved on 14 May. The intention behind the Bill was to bring practice in line with the realities of contemporary adoption and to facilitate the use of adoption as a route to permanence. Local councils will be required to register prospective adopters and children awaiting adoption on a National Adoption Register. New National Adoption Standards will contain clear guidance in relation to the corporate and senior management responsibilities of councils.

Currently local councils, in partnership with voluntary adoption agencies, are responsible for providing a comprehensive adoption service to meet the needs of children, adoptive parents, birth families and adopted adults.

Local councils' practices should include: -

- Prompt assessment of children's needs, and the appropriate consideration of adoption.
- Proactive recruitment, training and assessment of prospective adopters to meet the identified needs of children.
- Skilled matching and placement services, with identified ongoing post-placement/post-adoption support for adopted families, including financial support via adoption allowances. Services provided in partnership with education, health and other specialist services.
- Services to adopted adults, including section 51 counselling (access to birth records) and support tracing birth relatives.
- Preparation of Schedule 2 reports, and associated advice in relation to step-parent adoptions.
- Assessments services for applicants who wish to adopt from overseas.
- Services for birth parents who are considering adoption, and birth families of children who are being adopted, or who were adopted.
- Planning and supporting contact between adopted children and birth families, and provision of indirect contact schemes.

Research evidence and issues

Numbers and trends in children adopted. The majority of children now available for adoption are children looked-after by local councils. They are usually past infancy by the time adoption is considered. Children adopted from care now comprise about 50% of all adoptions, the remainder being step-parent and inter-country adoptions (PIU, 2000). This is very different from the situation in the 1970s. At that time there were far more children adopted - in 1975 21,000 children were adopted compared with 4,100 in 1999 - but only seven percent of these were looked after by local councils.

The numbers of children looked-after fell from 100,000 in the early 1980s to 49,000 in 1994 but the percentage of these who were adopted increased from 1.5 % in 1975 to 5% in 1993. This proportion diminished somewhat in the mid-90s but there are signs that the numbers may again be increasing following the guidance '*Adoption - Achieving the Right Balance*' (LAC 98(20)), which drew attention to adoption as a positive option for children looked-after. In the year 1999-2000 2,700 children were adopted, an increase of 500 from the previous year, representing 5% of all looked-after children (DoH, 2000). The Government is committed to increasing by the year 2004/5 the overall numbers of looked-after children who are adopted by 40% (HM Government, 2000a).

Delays in establishing permanence and their consequences. Current policy is in response to data on the length of time young looked-after children can wait before adoption is considered. Children entering care at an average age of 1yr 2 months were still waiting an average of 1yr 4 months before a best interest decision was made (Ivaldi, 1998). Also the knowledge that children who become the long-term looked-after often suffer impermanent and unstable family lives, with well-documented adverse

consequences (PIU, 2000). In 1999 nearly half of the 58,000 looked-after children had been looked-after for more than 2 years, with a very low probability that they would return home.

Research findings have shown that outcomes for children who remain in care are poor: 70% of young people leave care without gaining any GCSE OR GNVQ qualifications; school attendance is poor for 25% of children aged the 14-16; between 14 and 25% of adolescent girls leaving care are either pregnant or have a child; and adults who have been looked-after as children are over-represented amongst the homeless and prison populations(39% of male prisoners under age 21 have been looked-after).

Long-term outcomes from adoption. The long-term outcomes from infant adoptions support the positive view of adoption (Bohman & Sigvardsson,1980,1985; Collinshaw, S., Maughan,B. & Pickles,A. 1998; Fergusson, D., Lynskey, M. & Horwood, L (1995; Howe,1997; Maughan,B., Collinshaw, S. & Pickles, A, 1998;). Outcomes from later adoptions are more problematic with disruption rates rising with the age at placement (Parker, 1999). Outcomes for later adoptions are related to the quality of early pre-adoption experiences (Howe,1997).

Despite the increase in difficulties with age at adoption, it should be pointed out that even for teenagers, disruption rates are no higher than for other kinds of placement. We do not yet know whether the long-term benefits for those adoptive placements *that remain intact* are greater than for other long-term placement options - e.g. long term fostering - but adoption has advantages as a placement option because of the parental commitment in adoptive placements and because the attendant flexibility and support over the transition to adulthood is likely to be greater.

Emotional, behavioural and attachment problems. The change in the population of adopted children has led to a recognition of the children's emotional, behavioural and attachment problems. These problems are very substantial affecting well over half of the children and include overactivity and restlessness, anxiety and depression, and poor peer relationships, as well as substantial educational difficulties (Quinton, Rushton, Dance & Mayes,1998). Because of an increasing recognition of these problems the assessment and preparation of adopters has broadened from questions of economic status and family structure to assessments of parenting skills and the preparation needed to meet the demands of the task (Triseliotis, Shireman, & Hundelby, 1997).

However, preparation and ongoing support of adopters with respect to the children's psychosocial problems has lagged behind the development of policies around cultural matching and contact. For these reasons, increasing the number of adoptive placements will provide local councils with the challenge not only in terms of finding parents willing to take on special needs children, but also in training staff to conduct assessments and to support adoptive parents through the trials of attachment and other problems (Howe, 1998).

The use of adoption as a route to permanence: International Comparisons

The Government is committed to the use of adoption as a route to permanence. In this the policies are most similar to those of the United States and least like those of Northern Europe, Australia and New Zealand, where foster care is the preferred option if looked-after children are not able to return home. In contrast the USA, like England and Wales, strongly advocates adoption for its looked-after children, whose number increased by 72% between 1986 and 1995 (Selwyn & Sturgess , 2000a). The age profiles of children

adopted out of care are roughly comparable in the USA and the UK, but with one major difference: in the USA 64% of children are adopted by their foster carers compared with about 13% of UK adoptions (Selwyn and Sturgess 2000 b, 1999; Ivaldi, 2000).

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (USA) 1997 defined the circumstances where re-unification is not to be pursued and set time limits to reduce delay in permanency hearings. Measures to increase adoptions included more radical recruitment activities such as: specialist teams to identify families previously known to the young person who might be interested in adopting them; a reduction in social work case loads; growth in post adoption services and adoption allowances; tax benefits; and increased post-adoption support. Federal monitoring of State child welfare programs has been strengthened and outcomes with respect to safety and permanency are reviewed. The intention has been to double the numbers of children adopted out of care between 1997 to 2002. There are indications that this may be achieved. In 1998 a report on 42 States gave a projected increase in adoptions of 7,859 compared with the preceding three years (Selwyn and Sturgess, 2000b).

Current policy developments and targets for local Councils

Local council adoption services are currently influenced by the 1983 guidance, LAC(98)20 and two SSI reports on Adoption: '*For Children's Sake*' (DOH,1996) and '*Adopting Changes*' (DOH,2000). In addition performance assessment and Quality Protects targets have been set to increase the percentage of children adopted from care (PAF C23) and the length of time children are looked-after before they are adopted (QP target 2)

The SSI 1996 report made the following recommendations to local councils:

- *Children* should have clear and monitored care plans and a detailed program of direct work.
- *Adopters* should be provided with comprehensive information and recruitment should be targeted on those children where adoption is the plan.
- *The Birth family* should be provided with a separate worker and communication with them should be clear and authoritative.
- *Placements* should be made only after detailed plans for introductions have been made and shared and detailed agreements reached concerning contact.

The SSI report (2000) continued to be concerned over the variations between councils in policy and practice; the lack of universal adoption policies, which makes the service vulnerable to 'local bias'; and the lack of universally available information for adopters and families. The report posed a range of questions for local councils. In brief these were: -

- *Strategic* - Does the council have a strategic plan for development of their services? How are adoption services and plans for children monitored? What tier of management has responsibility for this? Is there acceptance of corporate responsibility? And is the council working together with other agencies?
- *Policy and Management* Are there regular independently chaired reviews? Does planning effectively minimise delay? Do staff have access to training? Where is expertise located in the department? And is there good liaison with the courts?

- *Practice issues* - Are policies clear and do they cover practice issues e.g. the placement of siblings and transracial placements? Is recruitment reaching diverse groups? and is the process transparent? Is knowledge of the children needing placement used in recruitment, matching and preparation of adopters? Are there adequate staff resources to prepare children? Are there disincentives to foster carers applying to adopt?

The Adoption and Children Bill clarified and expanded local councils' duties to provide an adoption support service and included provisions giving new adoptive families a right to request an assessment for adoption support. The Bill also enabled the Secretary of State to establish an independent review mechanism for those adopters who feel they are being turned down unfairly.

Other aims of the Adoption and Children Bill were as follows:

- To align adoption law with the Children Act 1989 to ensure that the child's welfare is the paramount consideration in decisions relating to adoption.
- To make provision for the process of adoption and the conditions for the making of adoption orders.
- To provide for the regulation of intercountry adoption.
- To underpin the new National Adoption Register enabling it to expand and develop in the future.
- To oblige courts to draw up timetables for resolving adoption cases without delay.
- To amend the Children Act 1989 to introduce a new special guardianship order, intended to provide permanence for children for whom adoption is not appropriate.

The consultation period for the draft National Standards ended 23 March 2001 and a final set of Standards together with a draft Code of Practice will be published in July 2001. Based on draft National Standards local councils are already reviewing their adoption policies and practices in the light of these. The standards cover five main groups: Children; Prospective Adopters; Adoptive Parents; Birth families; and Councils and their Agency Functions.

An Adoption Register for England and Wales is currently being established. The Department of Health announced on 6 May 2001 that Norwood Ravenswood, an approved adoption agency, is the preferred bidder to run the Register. The first phase of the Register will be in operation by July 2001. The Register will provide a national infrastructure for adoption services. It will hold information on children waiting to be adopted and approved adoptive families across the country. This information will be used to suggest families for a child where a local family cannot be found, or if the child needs to move away from the area. The Register will thereby help tackle delay in finding suitable adoptive placements for children.

What is known about Good Practice?

The following description of good practice was researched using literature and in consultation with four local authorities in the South West.

GOOD PRACTICE WITH CHILDREN

Planning. There is ample evidence that placements and outcomes are more at risk the longer children are looked-after and the older they are at placement. It is also known that the chance of return home reduces with the length of time children are in care and that 2/3rds of adopted looked-after children enter the care system under the age of 12 months but spend on average 1 year 11 months (Ivaldi, 1998) before they are placed for adoption. It is reasonable to assume from these data that better planning is a key to reducing these delays and the consequent poor outcomes.

However, there is at present a shortage of evidence on what kind of planning makes a difference. For this reason it is necessary for plans and their outcomes to be systematically monitored. Broadly speaking we would expect good local council practice to incorporate permanency planning into all its children's plans, social workers to be trained and confident in making permanency plans and have access to managers with expertise. The council should, therefore, have management systems at a senior level to monitor planning for children who *may* not be able to return to their birth parents, and show evidence that it works with voluntary and partner agencies to maximise service delivery.

Contact Direct or indirect contact with birth parents and other significant family members, unless contact places the a child at risk of harm, is accepted good practice under the Children Act 1989. There are disagreements over the quality of the evidence for the benefits arising from contact (Quinton, Rushton, Dance & Mayes, 1998; Ryburn, 1998), beyond some evidence that contact is positively related to placement stability.

However, there is also little evidence that contact is, on average, harmful, although it may be so in individual cases. In this debate it is important to distinguish arguments about *effects* ('benefits') from arguments based on *rights*. Councils should not wilfully prevent people seeing each other if they wish to do so, unless the arguments against this are strong.

On the other hand, contact needs to be handled well if it is to be helpful to a child (Fratter, 1996). Unfortunately it is clear that both indirect ('letterbox') contact and direct (face-to-face or telephone) contact are often poorly handled (Lowe, N., Murch, M. & Borkowski, M., 1993). The key to good practice lies in a clear view of what the contact is *for* (Parker, R. (ed.) 1999) and the quality of the planning and monitoring of it both pre- and post-adoption. The assessment of the balance of benefits and potential harms will need to be transparent and take into account the child's age and relationships with different members of the birth family.

Sibling placements Eighty percent of children adopted between 1998-99 had at least one birth sibling with 56% having 2 or more (Ivaldi, 2000). The evidence is accumulating that placement with siblings can stabilise placements and bring other benefits (Rushton, Dance, Quinton & Mayes, 2000) and that lack of contact with siblings can cause children unhappiness. However, sibling placement is a complicated issue. It involves not only finding families willing to take more than one child but also the question of the reunion of

separated siblings and the separation of ones who do not get on well. Councils will need to have policies regarding sibling placements and staff skilled in assessing the relationship between siblings, as well as active recruitment of adopters who can take sibling groups.

Transracial Placements. There is evidence that black children wait longer for placement (Fein and Maluccio, 1994; Barth et al 1994; Ivaldi, 2000) but finding families for them is complicated by concerns about appropriate matching to meet children's cultural and ethnic needs. This has been a high profile debate since the 1980s (Rushton & Minnis, 1997). The 1998 guidance refers to a child's right to a permanent adoptive family and the difficulties that may arise if placement is delayed through waiting for an exact match. The White Paper states that children's birth heritage, and religious, cultural and linguistic background are all important factors to consider in finding them a new family. The National Standards recommend that the family of choice for the looked after child is one that respects his or her birth heritage, if this can be done without unnecessary delay.

Studies of outcomes for children placed transracially show little difference in disruption rates (Thoburn et al 1997), and studies in the USA showed that transracially adopted children scored similarly as same race placed children on scores of self esteem, but tended to have a less clear racial identity, which could hinder their ability to deal with racism (Simon and Alstein, 1987,1992; Johnson, 1986 quoted in Triseliotis et al. 1997). Thoburn concluded that caring for children who have suffered adversity is a commitment and having a parent of the same race may help a child develop a positive racial identity and ability to confront racism.

Local councils should have a clear policy regarding sibling and transracial placement, which should be owned by staff and available to service users, as well as diverse recruitment strategies to attract prospective adopters from varying ethnic groups and cultures. Councils should be proactive in monitoring their looked-after children to enable them to recruit adopters who can meet their needs. However, the child's welfare is paramount, and the council's policy should refer to unacceptable delay in meeting a child's need for a permanent family.

Preparation of children. The proper preparation of a child for adoption is clearly an issue of human rights, that is, it concerns the ways in which children should rightfully expect to be treated. However, preparation is also likely to affect a child's acceptance of the adopters as new parents. Barth and Berry (1988) concluded that preparation is fundamental to a child's sense that he or she can make a new attachment and to reassure them about what will happen to their previous attachments.

Preparation and direct work needs to be undertaken by social workers who are trained and have the skills and time to complete this task (Murch and Lowe,1999). Foster carers may have an important role in the preparation of a child and their attitude to releasing the child can be fundamental. Training and supervising social workers and foster carers who are undertaking direct work with children is an important function of councils.

GOOD PRACTICE WITH PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

Recruitment. Currently there are insufficient approved adopters who match the waiting children. This problem is particularly marked for some groups, especially black children and children of mixed parentage. This is reflected in the extended time it takes to match a black child with adopters (Ivaldi,2000). Older children, similarly, wait longer for an adoptive placement. In 1996 91% of children under one year of age referred to adoption

services were placed within a year, compared with only 20% of 3-5 yr olds, and 6-10-year-olds who waited on average more than 3 years for a placement.

It is essential for councils to recruit a diverse group of adopters to meet the needs of children waiting for families, and to provide opportunities for all social groups who may wish to adopt. Local councils often struggle to recruit adopters and may need to develop policies to attract previously untapped groups. For example, although there is evidence that single parents can be successful as adopters (Triseliotis et al 97; Owen,1999) they are often viewed as second choice and not actively recruited. In fact they can fulfil a special role with children who need one-to-one parenting. Similarly, policies on the recruitment of gay and lesbian adopters are rarely developed, even though their parenting is not different from heterosexual parents (Tasker,F. & Golombok,S. 1997), and initiatives to attract disabled adopters are not always evident.

Different recruitment initiatives in the USA have succeeded in increasing the numbers of adopters from minority ethnic communities. These include targeting support groups for ethnic minority elders, leafleting churches and amending assessment material to ensure it's culturally sensitive (Portland Girls and Boys Adoption Society, minority adoptive Family recruitment project 1997).

Advertising for parents for specific children is common in the USA, as well the use of 'federal locators' to trace members of the child's previous network. In England and Wales it is common practice for local councils and voluntary adoption agencies (the only organisations legally entitled to advertise) to advertise for adopters in the press. Individual children and sibling groups are regularly advertised in the BAAF publications 'Be My Parent' and 'Focus on Fives'. Strikingly, however, the success rates for such schemes are not known. The views of English and Welsh councils to recruiting a child's foster carer as an adopter have not been studied. However, since rate of foster parent adoptions here is so much lower than in the USA, it's unlikely that it is strongly encouraged.

Local council recruitment of potential adopters thus need to target diverse groups. Recruitment should also be transparent, with clear information regarding barriers to approval and the scope of the assessment process and information about the children needing placements. Good practice will demonstrate co-operation with the voluntary sector and with neighbouring councils to pool resources.

Assessment, matching and preparation. Assessment of prospective adopters has changed as the task of adoption has become more complex. In the past adopters were selected on the basis of their social and economic status, but now an assessment of their parenting skills is combined with education and preparation for adoption task (Triseliotis et al.,1997).

The assessment and preparation of adopters needs to take account of the diversity of applicants, and meet the needs of experienced parents, child less couples, single applicants and applicants from diverse cultures or with disabilities. Preparation needs to continue up to and beyond placement, as adopters may be more able to make use of information after the child is placed (Murch and Lowe, 1999) In order to provide these services councils may work in co-operation with other agencies and include experienced adopters as well as social workers and other professionals in the educative process.

Matching children with adopters depends on quality assessment of the child's needs, including, ethnic and cultural needs, needs for specialist services and post adoption

contact. These assessed needs then being matched with the adopters parenting abilities and expectations(Ward 1997) Adopters need to be given full information about a child before placement, the quality of information and preparation may have an influence on the successful outcome of the placement (Barth and Berry 1988, Quinton et al., 1998) Councils may have developed systems to improve the quality of matching e.g. 'matching meetings' and they may work co-operatively with other agencies to maximise the range of adoptive placements available e.g. organising local consortia.

Consideration should be given to inclusion of the child in selecting their adoptive parents. This will be dependent on the child's age and maturity. Children report that they don't feel included in the matching process, skilled social workers offering direct work with children can assist this preparation and increase the child's confidence in their new placement (Thomas & Beckford 1999; Barth and Berry, 1988)

Good practice depends on highly skilled assessment of the child and the adopters and an effective process to match the child's needs with the adopters. There will be evidence of good quality information passed to the prospective adopters about the child so that they can make an informed decision, and inclusion of the child and the birth relatives in identifying the best match. Preparation and assessment processes will meet the needs of a diverse group of adopters, and preparation and training will continue beyond placement.

Post adoption services. Post adoption services are a high priority in this new era of adoption, where a large proportion of children placed have special needs, and 40% of adoptive placements receive allowances (PIU, 2000). Adopters need to know what post adoption support services are available, and the policies for provision of services should be available from the outset, including the services of partner agencies and systems to access services in the future.(Murch and Lowe 1990).

There are various models for post placement support, including adoption support groups, buddying, post placement training, specialist post adoption workers and comprehensive post adoption contact systems.

Providing post-adoption services and financial support is a crucial role for local councils who are aiming to increase the numbers of looked-after children adopted. Prospective adopters and foster carers interested in offering adoptive placements will need assurance that multi-agency support services will be available in the long-term, and that the council will respond to their requests to access this help.

GOOD PRACTICE WITH BIRTH PARENTS

Working with birth parents whose children are being adopted from care is not always viewed as a high priority by council's who are conscious of the dictate of the Children Act 1989 i.e. that the welfare of the child is paramount.

In today's climate when most adoptions are of older children who have spent significant periods of their life with their birth family it's important that the birth parents needs are acknowledged (Logan, 1996). Both in recognition of their own loss, but also in recognition of the significant relationship they are likely to have with the child being adopted.

In 1998/99 over 75% of children adopted from care were subject to a care order, compared with only 22% who were accommodated voluntarily; 53% of parents contested

the plan for adoption (Ivaldi, 2000). This indicates that the majority of birth parents have not relinquished their children voluntarily and continue to oppose the adoption. The national standards will recommend that independent services are provided for birth parents to assist them with their sense of loss and to empower them to contribute to future plans for their children. Inclusion of parents in plans for their children, seeking their agreement for future contact arrangements, and the parent's ability to allow the child permission to form a new attachment, will be in the child's interests in many cases.

Very little has been written about work with birth parents, a study by Sinclair and Grimshaw (1997), showed that inclusion of birth parents in planning for children diminishes with time.

Good practice will achieve transparent plans with clear goals, drawn up and agreed by the courts and birth parents. Also recognition that parents go through a grieving process when letting their children go and that they can be helped in this by independent counselling, often being contracted from a separate agency.

GOOD PRACTICE BY COUNCILS

The Draft National Standards state: -

'A comprehensive adoption service to meet the needs of children, adoptive parents, birth families and adopted adults will be planned and provided in collaboration with other relevant agencies.'

The key features are working in collaboration with other agencies, and the courts. To have clear adoption policies, which are an integral part of the council's services for children and to ensure that adoption services are monitored at a senior level. To ensure that there are adequate numbers of skilled staff to provide a quality service, and that time scales for planning and placement are met, senior managers having responsibility to monitor individual plans. Councillors carry out their responsibilities as corporate parents.

The list of agency functions include: -

- Children's welfare and safety are considered first, their views are elicited, recorded and taken into account.
- Clear policies are made available to children, adopters and birth parents.
- Councils and agencies work together in co- operation.
- Permanence including adoption is considered at every review.
- Effective recruitment of adopters to meet the local need.
- Thorough and timely assessment processes.
- Thorough checks on adopters and their households.
- Adequate adoption panels to avoid delays.

Anticipated Barriers to Good Practice

The development of effective policies and practices needs to be seen in the context of the great complexity of the task of making decisions on adoption and in recruiting, matching and supporting the new families. The potential barriers outlined below are taken both from research literature and from our brief survey of south-west councils.

Children – There is at present an imbalance between the children needing adoption and the preferences of potential adopters. The children most in need of placements are beyond infancy and even older whilst the majority of applicants are childless couples who want younger children. There are some signs that this is changing with older applicants who have had their own children coming forward as well as applicants who have experience of working with children (Murch and Lowe, 1999).

Murch and Lowe's study (2001) of local councils use of adoption as a placement of choice, showed the child's age to be the main barrier to adoption plans, with children under four the most likely to have adoption as the plan. Gender was also a significant factor, with girls more likely to be placed for adoption than boys, and plans for direct contact with the birth family were also a barrier.

The mis-match between adopters desires and children needing placements will be a problem for local authorities trying to achieve their targets, as will the proposed time scales for placement. Older children are likely to need longer preparation time before they can be moved to a new placement, because of their problems and because of existing attachments. In addition efforts to match black and mixed-parentage children with appropriate parents are likely to create problems for councils with higher proportions of these children to place. Similar issues will arise around sibling placements.

One of the issues for councils will be how the target of 40% relates to their individual circumstances, e.g. one adopted sibling group will have a significant statistical influence on the rates of adoption in a small local council.

Recruiting and using potential adopters Local councils may struggle to recruit the diverse range of adopters they need but may, nevertheless, have conflicting views about interagency working, use of consortia and advertising children, due to the costs of interagency fees, and the lack of guaranteed services for a child placed in a neighbouring council. Conversely a council with more applicants than they require may be loathe to advertise this, because of the fear of increased demand on their post-adoption and other services once children are placed.

In addition, the supply of adopters may be limited by restrictive criteria for applicants or the failure actively to encourage applicants from some section of the population. The assessment and preparation of adopters may not meet the needs of potential applicants, e.g. applicants with disability, applicants who are experienced parents. Small local councils may struggle to provide regular or diverse recruitment campaigns and preparation courses, without joining another agency, or consortia.

The transition from foster carer to adopter is, as yet, rare in the UK. Councils may not encourage foster carers to adopt; as they may fear foster carers will 'by-pass the system' in order to adopt a young child; or because councils do not want to erode their foster care

resources. Foster carers themselves may not want to adopt if post-adoption allowances and support are restricted, or not guaranteed.

Social Work Barriers are likely to be caused by lack of time available for assessment, direct work and paper work. More importantly, a lack of experience, training and guidance from an experienced manager, may delay appropriate planning and decision making, or make the conflicts experienced in permanently removing a child from its birth family too onerous. South West councils were concerned that resources will be inadequate to meet the post-adoption requirements, and to provide birth parents with a separate social worker. Social work vacancies and a shortage of experienced staff were also seen as a problem as were large social work case loads that limited the time for direct work with children. There is currently a lack of training for social work students in permanency planning. The high turnover of staff results in the need to appoint newly qualified staff untrained in this complex work.

Courts At least half of current adoptions are contested although the contest seldom goes in favour of the birth parents. This inevitably causes delays and, indeed, delays may not necessarily be a bad thing if the issues are very complex. Court-based delays may also be caused by lack of available court time, or the courts requiring further re-unification attempts.

Councils A lack of clear policies integrating adoption into the overall children's plan. Budgetary constraints limiting the availability of post adoption services and allowances. There was also concern paradoxically that the needs of children may be overlooked in the struggle to meet targets. The more rural councils will struggle to run regular preparation courses to meet the assessment targets, even when co-operating with other agencies.

Other agencies Barriers may exist that are not directly under the control of the council. E.g. there may be a lack of partner agency time such as waiting lists for pre-adoption medicals.

Conclusions and the selection of Beacon Councils

There is clear evidence that children who remain in the care system are likely to lead fragmented lives in impermanent family circumstances that markedly affects life chances. Adoption is one route that local councils may employ to provide stability and a sense of permanence.

A local council applying for Beacon Status would need to demonstrate that *children* are at the heart of their adoption policies and practices. Evidence may include: -

- Permanence plans, including adoption are considered for every child who is in care. There are policies that encapsulate this intention, and systems, including monitoring systems that ensure that practices reflect the policies.
- Children are included in the planning process, and there are adequate, skilled staff who are able to work directly with children and represent their views.
- Children's culture ethnicity, attachments and relations with birth family are positively considered in the planning process, there are transparent policies, and evidence that these are widely available and they are utilised.

- Adoption will be viewed as part of a process, and not the end goal, with children being prepared for the change of placement, changes in relationships with their birth families and significant others, up to and beyond placement.
- Post adoption contact services will be flexible and 'child friendly', with adequate resources to maintain contact arrangements that meet the child's needs in the long term.
- There will be a clear commitment to providing the services a child needs up to and post adoption, and there will be evidence of good interagency, and inter council working to maintain these services.

Meeting the needs of the children waiting for placement depends on the local council having access to a wide range of adopters. This will entail active recruitment; ability to retain the interest of prospective adopters, and evidence of co-operation with other councils and agencies. A local council applying for beacon Status may: -

- Demonstrate that they monitor the range of placements required, and they actively recruit to meet the needs of the children waiting.
- Recruitment will be creative and reach a diverse group of prospective adopters, there will be evidence of co-operative arrangements with other agencies.
- Prospective adopters will be welcomed with clear information about the process and time scales for assessment and preparation. Any eligibility criteria will be available and explained.
- Preparation courses will be run frequently, and be sensitive to the varying requirements of potential adopters, this may involve interagency co-operation.
- Applicants will be included in the process and information will be shared at all stages, including the availability of children for adoption, and access to the adoption panel.

Once adopters are approved they may be matched with children and a placement made. The local council continues to have a responsibility for the adopter's preparation and training up to the point of the adoption. Services for *adopters* will include: -

- Comprehensive information regarding the children they wish to adopt, and the opportunity to consult with other agencies and significant people, before placement.
- Inclusion in planning introductions and in making post adoption contact arrangements, including a range of services to help facilitate contact arrangements in the long term.
- Ongoing training and development opportunities, up to and post adoption.
- Clear policies regarding the range of post adoption services, including financial help, and information about how to access these.
- Information about a complaint and representation system.

The services provided for birth families need to be sensitive, local councils may experience conflict balancing the child's need to be removed and placed with adopters, and inclusion of the birth family in the process. Inclusion of the birth family may rely on independent counselling services, to enable the relatives to reconcile their feelings of loss, and may develop positive post adoption relationships with their children. Services for *birth family* will include: -

- Inclusion of significant members of the birth family in planning the adoption and post adoption contact. Evidence that flexible working practices maximise inclusion.
- Birth family views are recorded on the child's file, and there is the opportunity for addition of information post adoption

- Post adoption contact arrangements are realistic and take account of the birth families circumstances.
- Independent counselling, or social work services are made available for birth relatives, once the plan becomes adoption

The *local council* will provide evidence that: -

- There are clear policies for the provision of adoption services, and that senior managers co-ordinate inter-agency services and promote the development of services.
- Councillors will carry out their responsibility as corporate parents
- The adoption panel is representative, independent, and that training of members and frequency of meetings meet the needs of the service.
- There are adequate resources to provide the above services for children, adopters and birth parents, and that provision of adoption services is seen as an integral part of the council's children's plan
- The council maintains a rigorous monitoring system for children's plans, including adoption, also monitoring of the services available, including quality of services
- There is evidence of co-operation with other councils and voluntary agencies to meet the needs of the children waiting for families.

Key Texts : Beacon Council Theme - Adoption

DOH(2000) ***Draft national Standards on Adoption***. Department of Health
www.doh.gov.uk

The draft national standards on adoption were written to ensure that looked after children; prospective adopters; birth parents the general public understand what they can expect from and adoption service so that all parties receive a fair and equal service wherever they live.

Howe, D (1998) ***Patterns of Adoption*** Oxford: Blackwell Science

Patterns of Adoption provides an overview of the factors that impact on children who are adopted, and offers a way of understanding the children's behavioural responses to these experiences.

Ivaldi G(2000) ***Surveying Adoption*** London: BAAF (British Agency for Adoption and Fostering)

Surveying Adoption analyses adoption statistics from England between the years of 1998-1999. It summarises findings relating to the population of children adopted in that year, the population of adopters and birth parents and the adoption process.

Lowe, N; Murch, M; Borkowski, M; Weaver, A; Beckford, V. & Thomas, C. (1999)
Supporting Adoption London: BAAF

Supporting Adoption provides a comprehensive overview of the adoption process including the legal background, the social construction of adoption and the organisation of adoption services. The book researches support provided during the adoption of older children (5 yrs+), adopted out of care. It considers the period from the time adoption was proposed until a year after the adoption order was complete, and includes adopters views.

Parker, R (Ed) (1999) ***Adoption Now: Messages from Research*** Chichester: Wiley

This book provides an overview of the main messages to emerge from research on adoption. It brings together the results of various studies and is intended to provide a relevant reference for practitioners and policy makers. The main areas covered are, outcome studies, preparation and matching, and support for placements, with references to what children say.

Prime Minister's Review Adoption (2000) London: DOH

This report was a result of the Prime Ministers request for a study as part of a major review of adoption of looked after children. Overall the report concludes the government should promote an increase in adoption of looked after children.

Quinton, D, Rushton, A, and Mayes, D.(1998) **Joining New Families: Adoption and Fostering in Middle Childhood** Chichester: Wiley

A study that looks at the factors that influence whether adoptive placements become secure during the first year of placement. The report also contains much information on the children's emotional, behavioural and educational problems, on the quality of social work input and the needs of adoptive parents.

Rushton A, Dance C, Quinton D, and Mayes D (2001) **Siblings in late Permanent Placements** London: BAAF

This is a study of sibling placements and researches a range of issues including, social workers decisions to place siblings together, the nature of sibling relationships when placed together, contact between separated siblings and the effect of sibling placements on placement stability.

Thomas C, Beckford V(1999) **Adopted Children Speaking** London: BAAF

Adopted Children Speaking is a study of children's and young people's views and experiences of the adoption process. It focuses on the experiences of older adopted children who have been previously looked after by local authorities.

Triseliotis J, Shireman and Hundelby M (1997) **Adoption: theory, Policy and Practice.** London: Cassell

This book provides a comprehensive guide to adoption, bringing together a descriptive framework for adoption policy and practice with practice wisdom about what constitutes 'good practice' and empirical data that underlie these concepts.

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