

**Finding the right match:
a survey of approved adopters' experiences
of agency support in the linking and
matching process**



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Thanks are also due Adoption Link who provided funding to conduct the survey and complete the preliminary analyses and to several colleagues who provided very helpful feedback on both the format of the survey and early versions of this report.

Finding the right match: a survey of approved adopters' experiences of agency support in the linking and matching process

Chapter 1. Introduction

This research study was commissioned by Adoption Link to explore approved adopters' experiences of agency support in their search for a child or children who they felt able to parent. The impetus for the research came from Adoption Link's awareness, as a result of contact with their users and posts on various adoption forums, of some level of dissatisfaction with the ways in which processes for linking and matching were operating for approved adopters. By way of setting the scene for the study findings, this introduction looks briefly at the policy background as it relates to linking and matching in adoption; the current situation, particularly in England, regarding the numbers and profiles of waiting children and approved adopters; provision of adoption agency services and how links and matches are achieved. It is important to note that much of what is covered in this introductory section applies to England only. While there is some shared legislation across the four countries of the UK, each implements elements of distinct legislation and policy in relation to looked after children and adoption and up to date statistics for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are rather difficult to come by. Although the policy context in different parts of the UK might be distinct, adoption practice in relation to children in care is similar. The focus here on England is in part pragmatic – because information about the situation in England is easily available and in the public domain – it also reflects the fact that the majority of responses to the survey reported were from adopters in England and space precludes a detailed discussion of the similarities and differences between countries.

1.1 The policy context (England)

The adoption of children from care as one of the options available for those children who cannot return to their birth families has had a central position in government policy for many years now (PIU, 2000). Historically, the numbers of 'looked after' children for whom adoption has been deemed in their best interest have far exceeded the numbers of approved adopters waiting to have a child join their family. This situation led to some children 'drifting' for indeterminate periods with placement orders¹ but little hope of being placed for adoption. For the most part, this situation involves those children who were older, those with disabilities, those with minority ethnic backgrounds and those who need to be placed with brothers or sisters: children who are described as 'harder to place'. The government response has been to seek to increase the number of people approved to adopt with the most recent measures being outlined in 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay (DfE, 2011). These measures included the introduction, in July 2013, of a new 'two-stage' process for the approval of prospective adoptive families: one which had clear targets for the

¹ 'A placement order is an order made by the court authorising a local authority to place a child for adoption with any prospective adopters who may be chosen by the authority.' This order is made by the court when specific conditions are met. Adoption and Children Act 2002 Section 21:1. Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/38/section/21>. Accessed 20th February 2015.

time each stage should take. Funding was also made available to increase recruitment of adoptive families.

1.2 Numbers and profiles (England)

The timing of this study coincided with a period in which, for the first time since adoption from care became a routine practice, the numbers of children waiting for adoptive families and the number of approved adopters seeking a child or children to create or complete their family came close to parity. While the number of approved adopters has been increasing, much of this change in the balance is related to a sharp fall in the number of children who have Placement Orders

As of 30th September 2014, the National Adoption Leadership Board's agency level data suggested that across England there were 2,830 approved adopters waiting to be matched with children who needed an adoptive family (ALB 2014a).

The same organisation, in its 'Headline Measures' update, reported 3,470 children waiting at 30th September 2014. In the same report it is noted that the number of adoption decisions at agency level (ADM decisions) and the number of placement orders made have each fallen significantly, indeed have almost, or actually, halved since September 2013. In the quarter ending September 2014 just 990 agency decisions were recorded and only 780 placement orders were made in the same period. Much of this decrease occurred however between September and December 2013 where there was a very steep drop in both measures. This drop in the number of children with adoption decisions can be set alongside an increase of four percent in the number of adopter families approved BUT a 21% decrease in the number of people registering interest between quarter one and quarter two of 2014-15. (ALB 2014b).

These changes in the numbers of adoption decisions and Placement Orders are widely presumed to be a consequence of misinterpretation of some court of appeal judgements such as that outlined in for example *Re B-S (Children)* (EWCA, 2013). Nevertheless, news of the rapid fall in the number of children with adoption decisions led to a flurry of publicity toward the end of 2014 with headlines such as 'Is our adoption system in crisis' (The Telegraph, November 2014) which clearly have the potential to alarm people who have been approved, or are being prepared, to adopt. Subsequently, the ALB issued a 'myth busting guide' for local authorities (ALB 2014c) it remains to be seen whether, and how quickly, this situation might stabilise.

Interestingly, the manager of the National Adoption Register for England (at that time NAR for England and Wales) reflected in the 2012-13 Adoption Register annual report that he had detected a slowing in the number of referrals of children needing placement and an increase in the number of families being referred in that year (Stott, 2013).

1.3 Adoption agencies and adoption services

In the United Kingdom, there are two types of agency offering adoption services. Voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) operate independently: many of them have been involved with adoption work for many years and some have traditionally been allied to religious or other philanthropic organisations. Local authorities also operate adoption agencies as one of the services provided (usually) by individual local authority children's services departments (LAs) (some LAs operate combined

adoption agencies). Both types of agency recruit, prepare and approve prospective adoptive parents. Both types of agency also offer a range of support services to adoptive families and others affected by adoption. However, only LAs are responsible for children in care who need adoptive placements and this responsibility continues after placement. Local authority adoption agencies were formalised under the Adoption Act 1976 and are funded with public money by local government. VAAs in contrast rely on charitable donations, fundraising and the fees they receive from local authorities when children are placed with families approved by the VAA (CVAA, nd). Fees are paid whenever a child who is looked after by a given LA is placed with a family approved by another agency, however, in some parts of the UK the fees due to VAAs have in the past been higher than those due to other LAs. Over the years this payment of fees has been identified as a major issue in the swift placement of children (Famer and Dance et al 2010; Selwyn et al, 2009) where LAs have been perceived as reluctant to spend additional money to secure a placement when they are recruiting to their own pool of adopters. The introduction, in 2013, of equalised fees in England was designed to remove the barrier faced by VAAs of being 'more expensive' than another LA when an inter-agency placement was needed. However, at a cost (currently) of £27,000 for one child and up to £80,000 for a sibling group of five children (BAAF 2014) and given the constraints and cuts on local government budgets under the austerity measures at the present time, any local authority's ability to fund inter-agency placements of any description might well be limited (Audit Commission 2014). Nevertheless, work undertaken by Selwyn (2009) has shown that the fees, even at current rates, significantly underestimate the cost of achieving adoptions in both local authority and voluntary agency contexts.

1.4 How links and matches are achieved

Much has been written in fairly general terms about family finding and matching but there is relatively little research that has focussed specifically on this crucial element in the adoption process (Quinton, 2012) and even less which has set out to explore approved adopters' experiences. One study which did address this process identified that agencies used a variety of mechanisms to feature children who need an adoptive placement and to consider which adoptive families might best meet a child's needs (Farmer and Dance, et al 2010). In general however, the process tends to be one where a child is matched, internally, with a family approved to adopt by the same local authority's adoption agency or children or, if there is no suitable family available the child's details are shared outside of the local authority via a number of established routes. These routes include the sharing of children's profiles directly with other adoption agencies, referring children to the relevant National Adoption Register, featuring brief profiles in purpose specific magazines (Children Who Wait and Be My Parent) or more recently featuring children's profiles on secure access internet sites, or in 'profiling events' where approved adopters are able to see video footage of children, read hard copy profiles and talk directly to the social workers responsible for the children. Finally, a further innovation can be seen in the growth of 'adoption activity days', where waiting children (with their carers and social workers) take part in an activity day which is also attended by waiting adopters. These days are thought to offer an opportunity for adopters to see the 'real' child 'in the round' and BAAF reports that 19% of children attending these events have been matched with families (BAAF, nd).

Some of these mechanisms rely heavily on the role of social workers spotting families who might be able to meet a child's needs. Others invite adopters to consider information about children and put

themselves forward to be considered as potential adoptive parents for a particular child or sibling group.

This increased focus on adopters' active involvement in the family finding process is one which has been encouraged in government policy (DfE, 2013).

We believe that a great deal more pragmatism in matching and a greater role for adopters in initiating matches would not endanger placements. That is not to argue that the suitability of a child for adopters can be established only by the adopters themselves. But we need to trust adopters more to start the process.
(DfE, 2013. P34)

1.5 Aims and objectives of the study

Given the recent changes in policy and in the profile of adoption, this study aimed to better understand the contemporaneous experience of approved adoptive parents in the pre-placement stages of adoption – particularly in the linking and matching process. It had the following specific objectives:

1. To establish the time taken for different parts of the approval and linking stages and explore adopters' perspectives on this.
2. To examine adopters' experiences of the pre-placement stages of adoption – particularly the linking and matching stage
3. To explore the support needs of adopters in relation to approval and linking/ searching for a child (family finding)
4. To identify good practice in supporting adopters in the pre-placement stages of adoption.

1.6 The format of the report

Chapter two outlines the methodology employed for the study and discusses the survey tool, the sample characteristics and ethical issues. Chapter three presents the survey findings and draws on responses to both open and closed questions to consider the timing and experience of the assessment process; adopters' experiences of agency support in the linking and matching process; their experience of liaising with children's social workers and considers participants' views of what constitutes 'best practice' from their perspectives.

Chapter four summarises the findings and outlines elements of good practice in terms of social work support and communication as identified by adopters participating in this survey.

Chapter 2. Methodology

2.1 Procedure and sample

The questionnaire was developed for online use only. Although there was no time available in this rapid and small scale study to engage an advisory group, drafts of the questionnaire were commented on by academic colleagues, members of the Department for Education research staff and piloted by three adopters.

The questionnaire had four main sections:

1. Demographics – including previous experience of adoption
2. Experiences during the preapproval stage – including key dates in the application and approval process
3. Desire for, and experience of, agency and adoption worker support in the post approval searching and linking processes
4. Experience of liaising with children’s workers and agencies

The questionnaire comprised pre-coded questions for the most part but several open questions were included, which invited participants to explain the detail of their experience and to offer suggestions about how support might be improved. The approach taken to analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data was largely descriptive although comparisons between sub-groups of the sample are used where relevant. Overall the analysis aimed to identify the range of experience and indicators of good practice.

Other than the question permitting entry to the questionnaire, which functioned as an indication of informed consent, none of the questions were made compulsory.

An information sheet about the study, along with the link to the online questionnaire, was mailed to a total of 1,181 approved or recently matched adoptive families, across the UK, who were registered with Adoption Link.

The questionnaire was live online for two weeks (2nd to 16th November 2014) and in that time 514 adopters started the survey, representing 44% of those invited. Not everyone completed all the questions. A total of 460 people provided sufficient information for their response to be usable (equating to 39% of those invited and 89% of those who had started).

2.2 Ethics

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, the information sheet clarified the purpose of the study and outlined processes for withdrawal of data should a participant change their mind. The questionnaire itself was entirely anonymous requiring no personal information or detail that would identify any particular adoption agency. Participants were advised that any potentially identifying information they might inadvertently include would be anonymised before publication. Data were downloaded from the server hosting the online survey and stored securely whilst being analysed.

2.3 Sample characteristics

The profile of survey respondents was compared to the profile of Adoption Link users in order to estimate whether the sample was biased in any obvious way. The patterns in the sample data were, on the whole, very similar to the profile for all Adoption Link users at the time the survey was conducted. These data are presented in tabular form in Appendix 1.

Adoption Link is available to adopters across the UK, respondents to this survey therefore might reside anywhere in any of the four countries represented. In fact almost all of those contributing to the survey lived in England (97%). This however is not dissimilar to the geographic spread of Adoption Link's registered users (see Appendix: table /figure A1).

The distribution of family types across the survey was also similar to the profile of all registered users of Adoption Link, with 72% being male-female couples and 13% approved as single female adopters. Same-sex male and female couples accounted for slightly less than 15% of the sample (8 male couples and 6.5% female couples). Just two respondents to the survey were single male adopters (0.4%).

The majority of adopters were between 30 and 49 years old and 86% of family units were White British or from another white background. A variety of ethnic backgrounds were represented in the remaining 14% of adoptive families with the largest single grouping being families with a mixed heritage (5%). (The ethnic backgrounds of each adopter was considered (where appropriate) and coded to indicate ethnicity on a family, rather than an individual, basis).

Most respondents (69%) did not have children at the time they registered with Adoption Link. One in five (20%) had birth children resident in the family home and the remaining 10% had children who lived elsewhere or had adopted or fostered children living at home.

Nearly 60% of participants had no previous experience of adoption, although 34% reported having friends or colleagues who had adopted a child and 17% had personal experience with adoption.

For detail on the demographic characteristics of the sample please see Appendix 1, table A2.

Further descriptive data which is relevant to the analysis in subsequent sections of this report includes:

- Where people were in the linking and matching process at the time they completed the survey.
- Whether they had worked with a voluntary adoption agency or a local authority and
- Whether they registered their interest, or applied to adopt, before or after July 2013.

The data related to each of these variables is presented in table 1. The majority of the sample (57%) were making enquiries and following up profiles, but nearly half the sample had progressed to discussing links, had been linked or had been matched. In fact 35 adopters reported that their child had been placed with their family at the time of the survey.

As can be seen in table 1, 72% of participants had been approved by a local authority while 28% had worked with a voluntary agency. Just over 40% of the sample had applied to become adopters before July 2013 and just under 60% applying after that date.

Table 1. Adopters' stage in the process and type of agency (N=460)		
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Stage of the matching process		
Making enquiries and following up profiles	261	56.7%
Discussing potential links	58	12.6%
Linked with a specific child or children	81	17.6%
A match has been approved or introductions are in progress	23	5.0%
A child or sibling group has been placed with me/us	35	7.6%
<i>Missing</i>	2	.4%
Adopter/s approved by:		
Local authority	330	72%%
Voluntary agency	130	28%
Applied to adopt or registered interest:		
Before July 2013	194	42.2%
After July 2013	262	57.0%
<i>Missing</i>	4	0.8%

Chapter 3. Findings

3.1 Timing of preparation and approval processes

For the sample as a whole, the mean time taken from applying to adopt (or formally registering an interest in adopting) to being approved to adopt was 48.8 weeks (around 11 months, range 2-278 weeks, $sd=33.7$). An indication that the minimum time from application to approval took only two weeks (for one applicant) sits a little oddly against a process which is expected to take around six months. It is possible therefore that some people misinterpreted what was being asked for – or made an error when entering dates. Fourteen of 456 people provided dates which indicated that it took them less than 20 weeks to move from application (or start of stage 2) to being approved. However, while it is possible that people entered erroneous data, it is also the case that six of fourteen people were applying to adopt for a second time, which does permit a ‘fast-track’ process (First4adoption, nd). Similarly, data provided by some respondents suggested very protracted periods of assessment, again it is possible that this was a result of data entry errors but it might also reflect personal circumstances which interrupted peoples’ involvement with the process which were not captured by the questionnaire.

Accepting the potential for error, figure 1 provides an illustration of the distribution of raw data on this measure according to whether participants applied to adopt before or after July 2013. This separation regarding the timing of application is relevant since, as of July 2013, the two-stage process for preparation and approval of adopters came into force [in England] and the adopters responding to this survey could have experienced either the old or the new process. As outlined above, of 454 adopters who provided a date of application or registration of interest, 194 (42%) did so prior to July 2013 and would probably have experienced the old process, while 262 (57%) would have experienced the new systems.

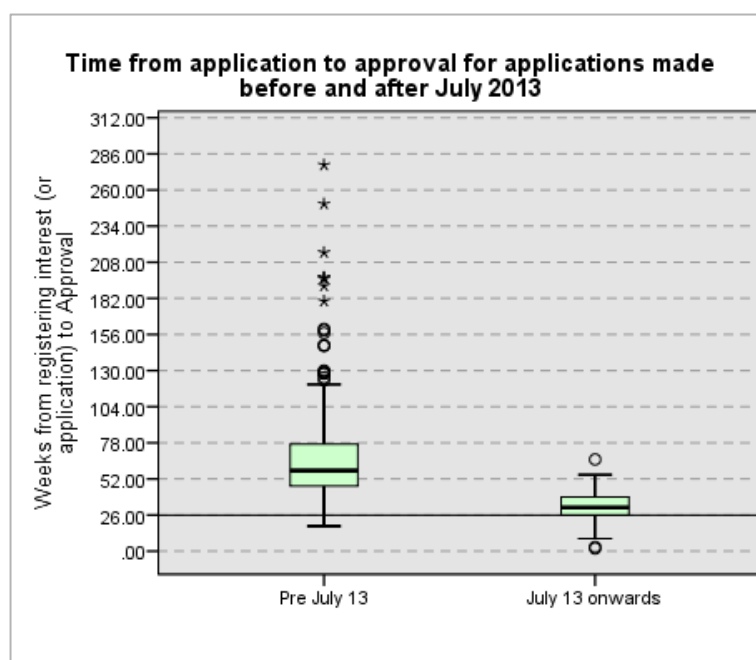


Figure 1²

² How to read a box plot: The box itself contains the middle 50% of the data. The median value is indicated by the solid black line in the box. The horizontal ends of the vertical lines show the minimum and maximum data values for the main body of the data in each group, and any points outside of these are outliers or suspected outliers.

The chart demonstrates very clearly, notwithstanding the potential for data entry errors, that this change in the process appeared to be associated with a significant reduction in the length of time taken between application and approval for most adopters. Although there are limitations with this sample in terms of the extent to which it might represent the experience of all adopters, even with the caveats outlined above, it does represent the experience of several hundred adopters drawn from different agencies across the UK. For this sample, the difference in timelines between these two groups suggests a statistically significant change in the time taken to navigate the period between ‘registration of interest’ (application) to approval. The average time (mean) for pre July 2013 was 71 weeks and after July 2013 33 weeks³.

For the 35 adopters, mentioned in table 1, for whom placement had occurred, the time between application and placement ranged from 41 to 317 weeks (just under 10 months to almost six years – mean 87 weeks, sd=54.7). The time between being approved to adopt and placement ranged from 1 to 82 weeks (well under a month to almost 20 months; mean 31.8 weeks, sd=17.2)

The time taken to find a match was calculated using the date of approval and the date the survey closed. The time looking for a match ranged from one week to 175 weeks. Table 2 illustrates the way these waiting periods were distributed across the sample.

Table 2. Time since approval (at survey close)	Number	Percent
Less than 3 months	107	25.3%
3-5.99 months	130	30.7%
6-12 months	125	29.6%
Over 12 months	57	13.5%
Missing	4	.9%
<i>Excludes 35 participants who have had a child placed with them.</i>		

³ Analysis of variance between groups (those approved under old or new arrangements) for the time taken from application to approval was statistically significant (F= 205.4, df=1,454, p<.001)

3.2 Experience of the assessment process

Participants reported on their experience of the pre-approval period and the distribution of responses to questions is provided in table 3. Just over four fifths of people indicated that they had worked with the same adoption worker throughout their pre-approval period. Of the nearly 20% of people who had experienced a change in worker about a quarter reported the change to have been well managed with no delays or disruption with another quarter reporting only minimal delay. However, nearly one in 10 people reported significant delays or disruption as a result of changes in their allocated worker in the home study or stage 2 part of the process.

Table 3: Experiences in the pre-approval stage (N=460)	Number	Percent
Same social worker throughout assessment period?		
Yes	372	80.9%
No, no delay or disruption	19	4.1%
No, minimal delay/disruption	24	5.2%
No, significant delay/disruption	43	9.3%
Missing	2	.4%
Experience of working with adoption worker pre-approval		
Very helpful – a positive experience	221	48.1%
A positive experience if challenging (at times)	139	30.3%
More challenging than expected	58	12.6%
Very challenging – a difficult experience	41	8.9%
Missing	1	.2%
Perceptions about speed of pre-approval period (application to approval)		
Very rushed – too quick	1	.2%
Felt rushed (at least at times)	13	2.8%
Felt about right	203	44.1%
Felt slow at times	121	26.3%
Felt very slow and drawn out	121	26.3%
Missing	1	.2%
Continued with the same adoption worker following approval?		
Yes	285	62.0%
No but the change was managed well (no delays)	56	12.2%
No but there was minimal delay disruption	54	11.7%
No and there was/is significant delay or disruption	63	13.7%
Missing	2	.4%

The majority of respondents indicated that their experience of working with their adoption worker pre-approval had been positive (even if challenging at times). However 13% reported this period to be more challenging than expected and a further 41 families (9%) chose to describe this period as 'very challenging' or 'a difficult experience'. (See row 2 of table 3).

Respondents were not specifically asked to explain what might have made their stage two (home study) experience particularly challenging but one or two respondents mentioned elsewhere in the questionnaire that they had not been happy with the way their prospective adopters report (PAR) had been prepared and some at least felt that their report may have precluded a potential link:

Because our assessing social worker in house meddled so we were overlooked.

Out of [area] the child's social workers have been put off by our PAR. (76)

I was turned down initially for the child that is now placed with me because my PAR was so badly written by my social worker (I came across as a completely different person) (90)

[We] have a PAR that was prepared by the first social worker, and which is biased and inaccurate. We feel that we are constantly battling against this PAR, and indeed some children's social workers have told us this directly (119)

Following an interview with social workers when we were not the selected couple, one of the child's social workers fed back to us that our PAR was not a good representation of us. Our PAR had been written by a contract social worker who had left. We were subsequently able to revise our PAR with our new social worker. (374)

The other experience that was mentioned which might have had an impact on people's perceptions of their stage 2 assessment concerned changes in organisation and staffing. Of the 43 people who reported a significant delay or disruption as a result of a change in worker during the stage two (or home study) period, almost half (49%) reported their stage two as a difficult experience with a further 30% saying it was more challenging than expected. In people's narratives it was often clear that there was an understanding that things 'happen' that are sometimes unforeseen and beyond anyone's control, but there was nevertheless frustration:

There has been support for us within the agency. Some people have been supportive but unfortunately there have been so many and on-going changes in the department and also within the lives of our allocated Social Workers with illness, change of employment, reallocation of resources and under staffing having all added up to an extremely drawn out, very frustrating and unhelpful experience so far. (265)

Comparing across sub-groups of the sample, experiences of pre-approval support were similar for those approved as single or two parent families – although there was a slightly higher proportion of single adopters who felt their agency had not been very helpful in supporting their search compared to couple adopters (54% as opposed to 38% respectively ($\chi^2 = 8.5$, $df=3$, $p<.05$)). Group sizes become quite small when comparing across family type, but the experience of same sex couples in terms of their agencies' support seems largely similar to mixed sex couples.

Exploring the quantitative data in more depth revealed an important difference in experience according to whether participants had been assessed and approved under the new or the old process (pre or post July 2013). Under the new arrangements smaller proportions of people reported their stage 2 as difficult or challenging (5% compared with 15%) and fewer reported changes of worker as being significantly disruptive (19% pre July 13 and 3% post July 13). In similar vein there was also a decrease in the frequency with which people reported their adoption worker as 'not at all' or 'not very' helpful during their stage 2 (assessment) period (18% pre July 13 and 7% after). As will be discussed in more detail later, similar patterns were also seen in relation to people's perceptions of agency and adoption worker support in the post approval period.

Staying with the pre-approval period for the moment, figure 2 presents data for each of the three variables considered above according to the type of agency participants worked with. Separating the data in this way revealed that the change in experience subsequent to July 2013 was far more marked for people working with local authorities: patterns for voluntary agencies also showed some improvement, in the main, but less so than local authorities. Of particular note however, was an

increase in the proportion of people working with VAAs who reported their adoption worker as being 'not very' or 'not at all' helpful – although this still represents a small number.

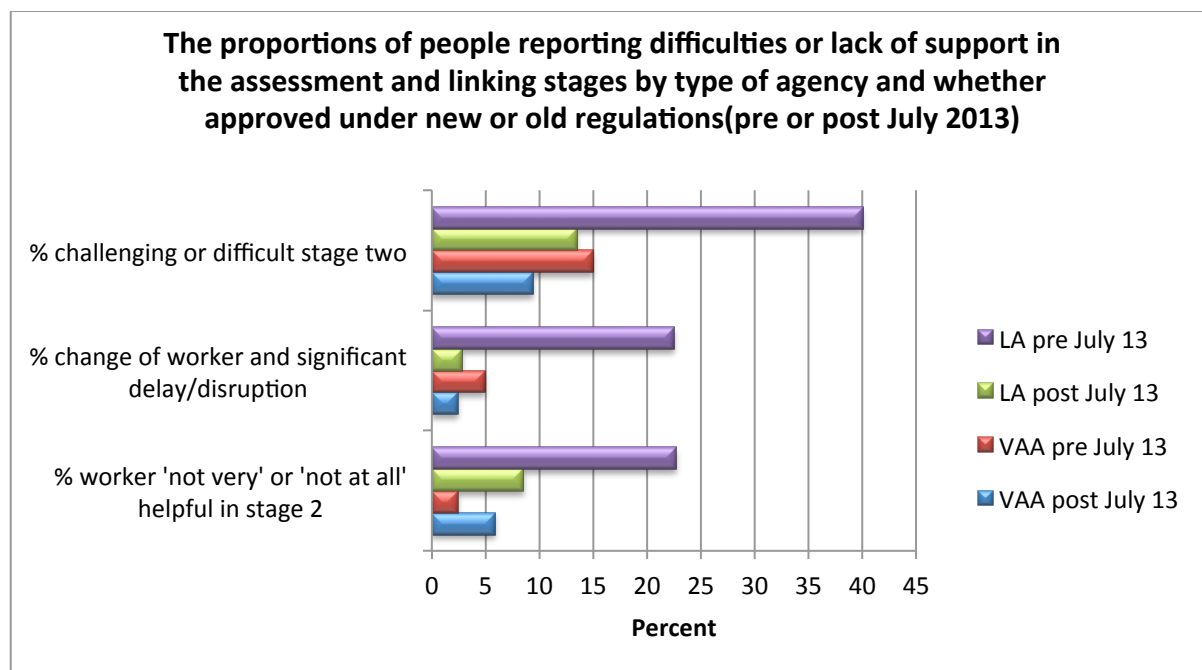


Figure 2

Thus, prior to the changes implemented in July 2013, the support experiences of adopters approved by LAs were quite different to the experiences of those working with VAAs but the magnitude of these differences between the two types of agency was seen to have reduced for those coming through the process more recently.

In considering people's perceptions of support retrospectively, it is important to bear in mind that those starting the process before July 2013 would very likely have been approved and searching for a child for some time by the time they completed the survey and time passing might be influential in many ways.

In relation to the perceived speed of the assessment process, very few people felt this had been too quick, only 14 (3.2%) respondents gave any indication of this. Nearly half of respondents felt the pace had been 'about right' but over half felt things had gone rather, or very, slowly. (See row three of table 2). There are indications in the responses of this sample that those who embarked on the adoption process after July 2013 were less likely to feel the process to be 'very slow and drawn out' than those who started earlier (true for 14% of those starting after July 2013 compared to 44% of those starting earlier – a statistically significant difference⁴). Prior to July 2013, participants working with a voluntary adoption agency were less likely to perceive the process as drawn out than those working with local authorities. However, this difference between types of agency was not evident for those applying under the new process (post July 2013).

⁴ Those starting the approval process after July 2013 were statistically less likely to feel the process to be slow than those starting under the new procedures ($\chi^2 = 54.4, df=4, p<.001$).

Table 4. The proportion of adopters experiencing significant delay or disruption when worker changed after approval			
Local Authority		Voluntary Agency	
Pre July 2013	Post July 2013	Pre July 2013	Post July 2013
26%	10%	10%	4%

A substantial proportion of respondents (61%) reported that they continued to work with the same adoption worker following approval, although there had been a change in support worker for nearly four in ten prospective adoptive families. Of this latter group most reported that changes in support worker were managed reasonably well but 66 people (13.9%) felt that this change had led to significant delay or disruption in their progress toward becoming adoptive parents. (See row 4 of table 3). Again, delays and disruption were reported less frequently among those starting the process after July 2013 (22% of all respondents starting before the new process and 8% of those starting afterwards). For both LAs and VAAs the new process appeared to be associated with an improvement in performance in this regard although some differences between the two types of agency remained in terms of the frequency of disruption when workers changed. (See table 4).

3.3 Encouragement to widen (and be proactive in) the search

A particular point that the survey aimed to explore was adopters' experiences of finding links and potential matches. Table 5 provides the detail of respondents' responses to five questions related to this topic. As can be seen from the table, experience was mixed.

Current guidance (DfE, 2014) indicates in section 3.26 that: *'The agency must refer prospective adopters to the Register as soon as possible and no later than 3 months from approval unless they have identified a particular child whom they are considering placing with the prospective adopter. The agency must also have obtained the consent of the prospective adopter before referral. Prospective adopters may choose to refer themselves to the Register, three months after approval, using the Adopter Self-Referral form (AD02)'. (DfE, 2014. p48).*

It is clear that the intention of the guidance, rightly, is to maximise the chances of matches for children who need an adoptive family –but perhaps, as a by-product, also maximise the chances of approved families finding a match. With this in mind, it is of concern that some 29% of respondents (nearly a third) felt that they were not encouraged to search widely for a match – or, if they were, this was only several months after approval (see table 5).

Table 5. Widening the search (N=460)		
Question and responses	Number	Percent
At what point were you encouraged, by your agency or your worker, to search widely for children?		
Before approval	62	13.5%
Immediately after approval	172	37.4%
2 or 3 months after approval	91	19.8%
More than 3 months after approval	53	11.5%
I/we have not been encouraged to search widely at all.	81	17.6%
Missing	1	.2%
Do you know if, and when, your details were shared with your agency's consortium?		
Immediately after approval	107	23.3%
Within a month of approval	62	13.5%
Within 3 months of approval	62	13.5%
More than 3 months after approval	46	10.0%
I/we are not aware that our details have been shared with the consortium	160	34.8%
Before approval	20	4.3%
Missing	3	.7%
At what point were your details sent through to the Adoption Register?		
Immediately after approval	68	14.8%
Within a month of approval	70	15.2%
Within 3 months of approval	83	18.0%
More than 3 months after approval	79	17.2%
My/our details have not been sent through to the Adoption Register	51	11.1%
I/we don't know	107	23.3%
Missing	2	.4%
At what point were you encouraged to register with Adoption Link?		
Immediately after approval	89	19.3%
Within a month of approval	61	13.3%
Within 3 months of approval	56	12.2%
More than 3 months after approval	80	17.4%
I/we have not been encouraged to register with Adoption Link	161	35.0%
I/we don't know	11	2.4%
Missing	2	.4%

It is important to note (row 2 of table 6) that 35% of respondents were not aware of whether their details had been shared with their agency's consortium and that only 48% of respondents indicated that they were aware that their details had been shared with the relevant National Adoption Register within the three month period stipulated in the guidance (row 3 of table 5). This lack of information provided to adopters about what is happening within the agency emerges again later in this report.

It is relevant to mention that, as in previous discussions, there was a difference in experience according to whether people had been assessed and approved under old or new regulations. Restricting analysis to only those working with local authorities (because for voluntary agencies there is no vested interest in retaining a pool of adopters for children they need to place) it is clear that a greater proportion of those applying under the new regulations reported having been encouraged to search widely at an earlier point in time. However, it remains the case that 26% of those assessed prior to July 2013 and 20% of those assessed under new regulations reported that their LA had not encouraged them to search widely at all.

With regard to registration with the consortium (row 2 of table 5) there was less effect of the time difference, but here well over a third of adopters were not aware of whether their details had been shared or not.

The narrative responses provided a little background to the raw data provided here and revealed that adopters often felt they had to 'push' to be referred to the Adoption Register. In fact there were sixty three people who indicated one way or another that it was something that had to be requested. The following quotes give a flavour of the contexts in which this occurred:

We repeatedly requested it but were told they did not officially have to do anything wider than in-house until three months was up. So I went ahead and found Adoption Link and cracked on. (69)

The sharing of details/obtaining information from Adoption Register and the Consortium is a mysterious process which we are not kept in the loop about, despite asking often.(397)

Both of these [adoption register and consortium] we had to request and both have been a bit of a shambles. Our SW admitted that the consortium does not work in any real sense and that she has no coverage of children in other areas. With moving onto the register, this was marred by constant promises [or excuses]: [first] that it had been done, but something else (unspecified) needed to be done first. Then, it was done, but there were no suitable children on it. Then, it was done, but the old social worker's details were connected to ours, etc. (324)

We asked after the consortium and national register after 3 months. We were told the register had nothing to do with them and we had to do it ourselves. As for the consortium there were numerous problems: our LA lost the password - then other LAs apparently had problems, then the member of staff dealing with the consortium left and apparently that meant we couldn't be put on the list. We were told there were loads of other couples who were in exactly

the same boat as us and waiting to go on. We think this was meant to be reassuring. We think we have been put on 9 months after approval (429)

Clearly what are supposed to be seamless processes do not always appear that way to those at the coal-face. It was also clear that for some people, information about these linking mechanisms had not been provided – or had not been provided in a way which made sense to them:

We knew nothing about the adoption register until we were lucky enough to be put in touch with a friend of a friend who [.....] was kind enough to inform us about what should happen following approval and what events were up and coming. We then asked our SW to register us with the Adoption Register. She said she would, 3 months later when I contacted [the Adoption Register] to ask for an invitation to attend an Exchange Event we were told that we had not been added to the register. At this point because we had been approved for 3 months we were able to add ourselves. Our SW said it must have slipped her mind. (472)

One thing that does need to be addressed in this report, although it was not a focus of the study, is how disconcerting it was for adopters to experience a problematic period in terms of access to the National Adoption Register at the point at which the survey was conducted. Direct access to the Adoption Register for approved adopters from September 2014 was publicly announced in July 2014 (DfE, 2014) although at the time of writing that has not come to pass (Puffet, 2014). There were a few people who included comment on this:

We've had to request and it's very frustrating not to be able to look at the adoption register ourselves (110)

They mentioned it but I had to chase - it has not helped that the NAR website seems to be crashing all the time and my social workers can't access it very often. She does speak to the staff at NAR but they are fed up with it as well! (190)

As for the Adoption Register - whilst the site makes it appear that as potential adopters we can register independently, we were initially given mixed messages saying we could, then we were told there was a problem with the website. Now we are lead to believe that only our Social Worker can access and it is not something that we would do? (204)

Adoption Link is a service which is primarily aimed at making it possible for approved prospective adoptive parents to take an active part in their search for a match. Data related to perceived levels of encouragement to engage with Adoption Link are presented in row four of table 5. Here it can be seen that over one third of respondents (all of whom accessed this survey through Adoption Link) felt they had not been encouraged to register with this service. That said, experience was very mixed: as illustrated in the quotes below, some adopters were encouraged to engage with the service while for others it was not mentioned:

My Authority use Adoption Link but aren't really up to speed with it, i.e. they don't really know how it works but they are linked to me on it and get the emails etc (163)

I became aware of Adoption Link through twitter & held off applying as my agency made a big thing about how good their matching process was through our pre-approval work with them. [However] there was an article in the agency newsletter which mentioned the website, so I registered following that. (198)

We were approved months before Adoption Link became live but we were excited to begin using it as our social worker at the time had heard a lot about it and really thought it would be the best idea for us to find our forever family (282)

As we had no match going forward after 9 months, we asked what more could we do. We pointed out that we had read on forums about other registers, consortiums or agencies and we asked how we could go about this. We found out about Adoption Link, however, ourselves through Google. Adoption Link was never suggested to us; only the National Register, [our] Adoption Consortium and Be My Parent. (338)

In considering whether adopters had been made aware of Adoption Link, it is important to remember that the service had only been running for six months or so at the time the survey was undertaken. It is therefore not altogether surprising that many practitioners and agencies may not have been up-to-speed and would still have been discovering it for themselves.

The relevance of exploring this area relates to the issues outlined in the introduction which are associated with in-house and interagency matches. It has long been known that agencies vary in terms of their preparedness to consider, or encourage, inter-agency matches (Farmer and Dance 2015; Selwyn 2010). Research has shown that some local authority agencies, particularly large county authorities, prefer to try to match as many of their children as possible with adopters who have been approved 'in-house' and may well be anxious to 'hold onto' the adopters they approve. A number of benefits are often cited by proponents of 'in-house' matches, particularly around issues of distance from the child's home authority, knowledge of or links with local support services and knowledge of agency practice (Dance et al, 2010). That said, the dangers inherent this approach in terms of potential delays in identifying appropriate placements for waiting children has been demonstrated by research (Famer and Dance, 2014) and, as can be seen here, also has repercussions for people who are anticipating building their families through adoption.

3.3.1 Advantages and disadvantages of Inter-Agency matches

The survey asked a direct question about participants' experiences of discussions about inter-agency links and matches. As can be seen in table 6, of the 330 survey respondents who had been approved by a local authority just over half (n=156) indicated that their adoption worker or agency had discussed interagency matches with them. Almost all of these respondents also provided a written response to an open follow-up question about what they had been told about the advantages and disadvantages of matching outside of their approving LA.

Experience was again mixed. There were a few people (6) who indicated that they (and their LA) had always anticipated an inter-agency match either because the agency did not place children with its own adopters, because the adopter's matching criteria were unlikely to be met with an in-house match or because the adopters' profile was unlikely to match the needs of the children the LA had to

place. From adopters' perspectives, the advantages of searching widely and exploring inter-agency matches were perceived to be that it allows access to 'a wider pool of available children' and 'opens up your [an adopter's] profile to be seen by more people' (409, 338).

Table 6. Advantages and disadvantages of an inter-agency match		
Question and responses	Number	Percent
If you were approved by a local authority, has your agency or worker mentioned advantages/disadvantages regarding and inter-agency match?		
Yes	156	33.9%
No	177	38.5%
Not applicable (I/we have worked with a voluntary agency)	122	26.5%
Missing	5	1.1%

However, adopters reported that a number of disadvantages had been discussed and the most frequently occurring comments in terms of what adopters had been told about inter-agency matches related to issues around distance from home (or their home authority). Many of these comments concerned the problems associated with the number of meetings that they would need to attend in the course of agreeing the match and the amount of travel and disruption to routines that might be needed during introductions. Depending on adopters' circumstances this could be more, or less, important. Some mentioned that, because they had children, travel and disruption were considerations that needed to be taken into account although others seemed less concerned: 'if it's the right child for us then it's worth it' (297).

The comments of some adopters, however, went beyond this and also linked to the disruption, cost and inconvenience that distance would mean for agencies and adoption workers, since a social worker would need to accompany adopters to many of these meetings. On occasion respondents' comments revealed some incredulity that this should be a problem:

[We were told that] SWs don't really have the time and energy to drive up and down motorways; support could be an issue if we have to drive for it etc. We thought, 'I'd drive to the ends of the earth to find the right children, though'. And also we have both driven and [travel] both nationally and abroad with our jobs so we couldn't really understand that attitude. Surely it's your job to? (69)

.....Since approval another reason has been geographical. The team manager doesn't want her social workers being away from the office for longer than a day (185)

Once past the introduction stage and following placement, the main burden of social worker travel would however, seem to apply to the worker from the child's agency if the family lived far away. This survey has no information that can speak to that point directly.

Distance was also mentioned in relation to maintaining contact with foster carers, possibly with a child's brothers or sisters or other members of their birth family. Conversely, some distance was also perceived as an advantage in so far as it 'reduces the chance of [the children] bumping into birth family' (313).

The second major theme concerned the quality of support that might be available. Some of this had links with distance, in so far as the social workers placing children with adopters a distance away may not know of local services and may not be in a position to provide support themselves.

As I live just outside of our very small LA, an in-house link is more likely to be problematic geographically, so my LA discussed inter-agency matches throughout and the benefits of being local (but far enough for safety) including reasonable distance for intros [introductions] - and the placing agency providing Post Adoption Support being easier if closer rather than far away. (42)

However, there were other under-currents in the narratives concerning support. There were a number of participants who had been given the impression that the post-placement support they would receive from their approving agency would be better than that they would experience if they chose an interagency match. The number of comments of this nature was quite surprising and raises some serious questions.

Our concern is the support on offer in the first 3 years. It restricts us from making that move. It's a huge challenge and gamble in itself without the fear of being left hanging. (86)

There was evident frustration in the comments of some, in so far as it would seem reasonable that agencies could cooperate in the interests of children:

Advantages of staying within our LA were described as that there would be more consistency and support available. We take on board that this may be the case but felt that it shouldn't be beyond two areas to co-operate in the transfer of information and referrals to any specialist services required. (213)

There were also some concerning comments about suspicions of limited disclosure of information about children's needs and several adopters had the impression that 'it was the most difficult to place children that were offered up for interagency adoption' (429). These understandings are summarised in the words of one participant who wrote:

We learned about the importance of looking out for the other agency hiding information and trying to 'dump' problematic children and the importance of agreeing a support package post-placement (at the other agency's expense). (409)

As will be seen later, there was actually significant scepticism among adopters taking part in this survey. To sign off on this discussion of the importance of support in relation to inter-agency matches the following quote highlights how the advice can change:

Initially we were led to believe that more post-adoption support would be available to us if we adopted a child from within our local authority area however this viewpoint seems to have changed due to the current situation regarding availability of children. On making enquiries with others who have experience of adoption, it is apparent that there are different interpretations of what support is / is not available. (463)

An other issue that people had been alerted to was the likelihood of a protracted matching process. Some respondents indicated that they felt that the LAs that had prepared and approved them were trying to hang on to them – to keep them for themselves.

We were told that they would like to keep us to themselves at least for the first three months but pointed out that going outside of the agency can sometimes lead to protracted matching, as the new LA might want to go over some of the things that they would already know about us if we had pursued an in-house match. Basically, they tried to discourage us from looking elsewhere initially (9)

People had also been warned of problems occurring because of agencies using different processes and not knowing each other.

We were told that it was much easier if the child came from the same agency, that other agencies worked differently (and the implication was that other agencies did not work as well), and most of the various social workers assigned to us have said that they have never had a successful match using the Adoption Register. With hindsight we now feel this was a ploy to ensure that the agency placed the children in their care, and that we were not advised accurately or appropriately. (119)

There was definitely an impression given that Inter-agency placements are harder for the agency – involving more paperwork and liaison, that in house placements are easier and quicker, with established teams working together and that there would likely be problems in relation to support, legal (and other) costs associated with an inter-agency placement.

It was explained very well, and initially I accepted these reasons. However, in hindsight, it comes across as very lazy and very impractical. It should be easy once approved to adopt a child from anywhere. You shouldn't be discouraged due to it possibly causing more paperwork. (15)

The impression we were given by our social worker was that a match from a different agency would be a huge hassle for her and we couldn't trust other agencies to tell us the truth about any potential children. (8)

The impressions formed by adopters about the ways in which agencies work – and particularly the implications concerning trustworthiness are really important messages for policy to take forward in relation to practice in both local authority and voluntary agencies. The next section of this report considers adopters' experiences of searching for children.

3.4 Adopters' experiences of searching for and enquiring about children

As outlined in chapter one, there are a number of services available to approved adopters which feature, in one way or another, profiles of children who need an adoptive family and invite adopters (or their adoption workers) to make enquiries as to whether their family might be suitable for the child. The services range from profiles of children available within an adopters' approving authority or consortium through to profiles which are featured on a regional or national basis. A profile might take the form of a written description of a child – usually with a photograph or might include video of the child and/or the child's carer/s. Profiles might be shared with adopters individually by their adoption workers or published in magazine form (Be My Parent and Children Who Wait). Exchange events are meetings, where adopters are able to see children's profiles and meet the children's social workers. Activity days are a fairly recent innovation in linking services which involve waiting children, their carers and their social workers attending organised 'fun days out' which are also attended by approved adopters who are seeking a child to join their family (BAAF n.d.).

Another fairly recent development is the ability for adopters to search for profiles of waiting children on-line. The Adoption Link service additionally allows social workers to search profiles of prospective adopters nationally and within consortia, while some consortia operate their own services.

The survey asked participants to indicate the extent to which they had experienced each of these 'linking mechanisms' and how useful they had found them. The results are presented in Figure 3, which illustrates how varied people's views were. For most of these mechanisms opinion as to their usefulness was quite spread across the three options of 'very', 'fairly' and 'not very' useful.

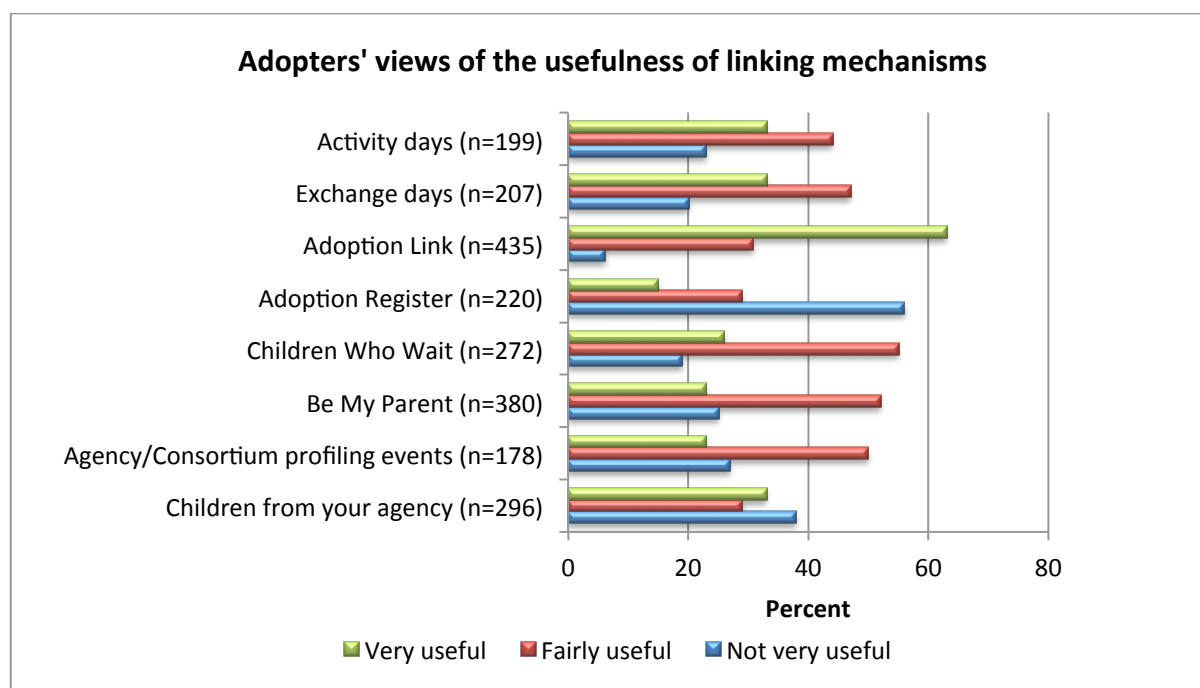


Figure 3

Notes to figure 3: It should be noted that the chart is based on the opinions of those who indicated they had used the service and had a view – hence the variation in sub-sample sizes indicated in parentheses on the chart.

One of the features of the profiling resources or linking mechanisms that adopters are able to access is that adopters are sometimes able to instigate an enquiry themselves. Even when this is not possible, adopters have more ability than hitherto to identify profiles of children who they think might suit their family and request that their social worker initiates an enquiry. The extent of searching activity undertaken by adopters is illustrated in figures 4 and 5 which provide simple counts of the numbers of enquiries and the numbers of information exchanges which participants had been involved in since their approval.

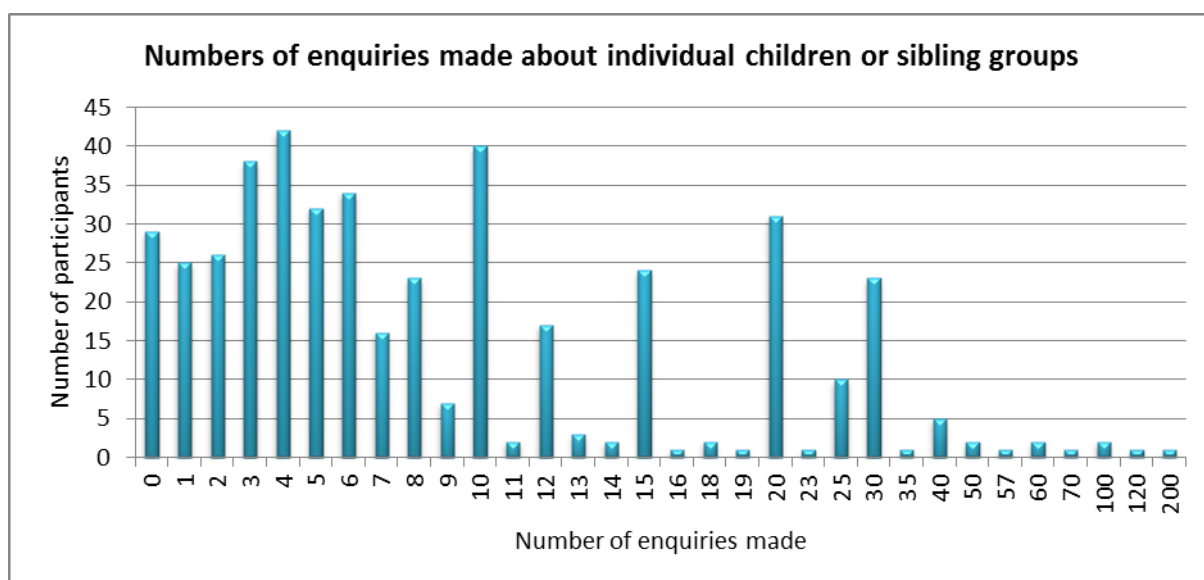


Figure 4

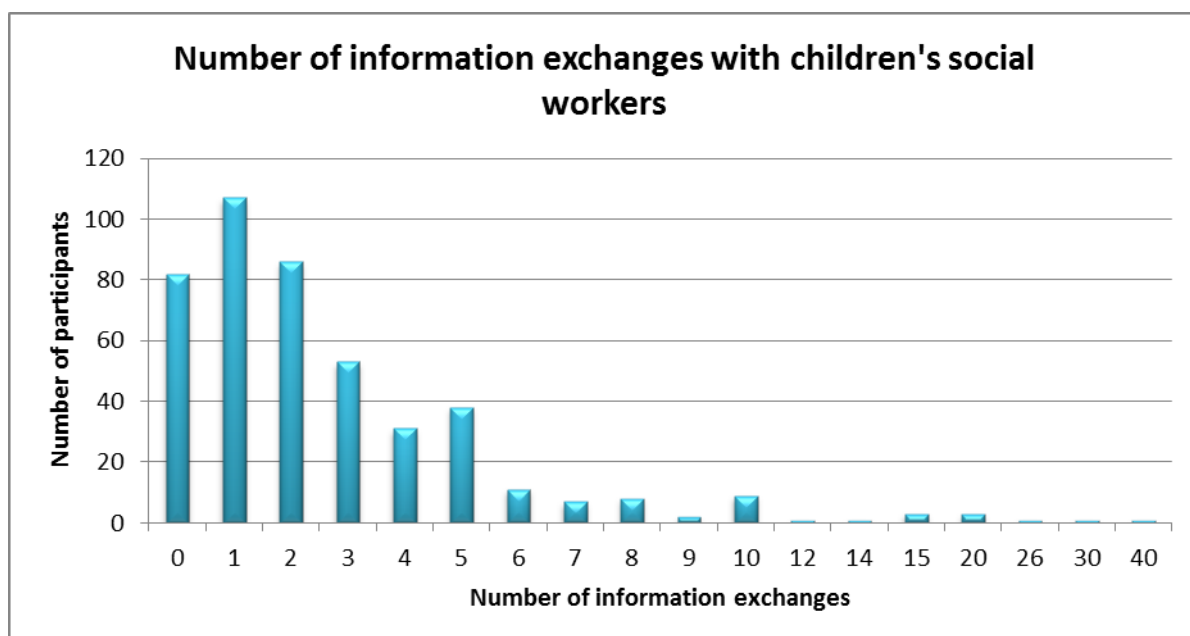


Figure 5

A total of 445 of 460 people indicated an approximate number of enquiries made about individual children or sibling groups (participants were asked to include those made by their adoption worker

on their behalf. The number of enquiries made ranged from none to 200 (mean =10.9, median=6 and mode=4 – see figure 4).

Participants (n=445 of 460) indicated getting to the point of serious exchanges of information about children between none and 40 times (mean=2.8, median 2 and mode 1 – see figure 5). Interestingly, while there was a correlation between the number of enquiries and the number of information exchanges ($r=.6$) neither of these counts were correlated with the length of time people had been approved. (It is important to bear in mind however, that because the questionnaire was self-completed it is possible that people may have interpreted the question differently - despite efforts to be clear in the wording).

It is also important to remember that the people who comprised the sample for this study were contacted via Adoption Link, which is a service to support adopters who wish to be proactive in their search, therefore high numbers of enquiries might be expected.

The questionnaire asked specifically about agency and adoption worker support of adopters' proactivity. The responses to these questions are presented in figure 6, which again sets out the findings for LAs and VAAs separately. The visual display makes it immediately obvious that people working with VAAs felt there was much more support for proactivity than those working with LAs. Nevertheless, it is interesting that even for VAAs only 54-58% chose 'very encouraging' as a response.

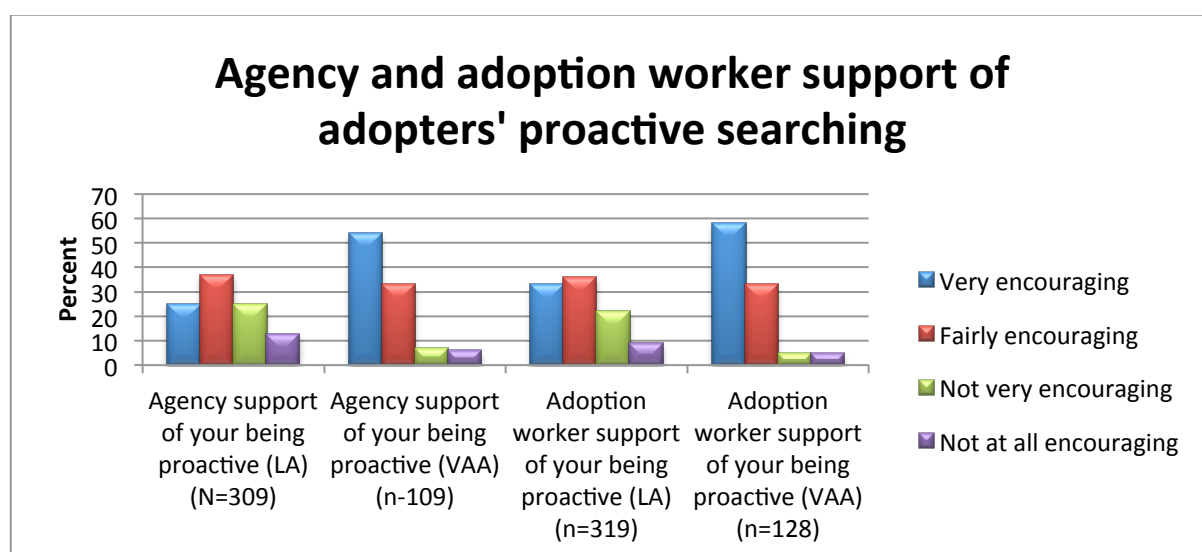


Figure 6

A follow up question asked people to indicate the extent to which they had been able to speak directly to children's workers when following up on enquiries. As can be seen in table 7, over two thirds of people reported that all early communication was through their adoption worker. Interestingly, there were no differences in the patterns of response to this question in terms of the type of agency that people had been approved by.

The narrative data contributed via open survey questions that related to this topic provide a good deal of further information about the sorts of issues that might help in understanding what informed people's choices of response. There were three overarching themes identified in the analysis of qualitative data related to this subject. These were 'everything happens through adoption workers', 'contact with children's social workers', and 'the system is dysfunctional'.

Table 7. Ability to liaise directly with CSWs	No	%
To what extent have you been able to speak directly to children's social workers when following up potential links?		
All early communication with children's social workers has been through my/our adoption worker	310	67.4%
We have sometimes been able to speak directly with children's social workers when first following up links	97	21.1%
I/We have always been able to speak to children's social workers where those workers were happy to talk directly to me/us	25	5.4%
Missing	28	6.1%

To begin with 'everything happens through adoption workers', evident in the narratives was consternation, uncertainty and frustration about the way the system works. Many people indicated that they had the impression that all negotiations needed to be processed through their adoption worker. Some trusted their worker and saw this as protective or supportive. While there were many statements which indicated that people understood how it might be overwhelming for children's social workers to receive multiple enquiries, nevertheless their responses indicated that having to communicate via their adoption worker was frustrating and disempowering. Furthermore the tone of a number of the responses suggested that adoption worker involvement in this phase could be experienced as controlling rather than supporting:

I have now met my child's social worker. My social worker was present at this meeting also. All communication has gone through my social worker. This is not my preferred style of working and I believe copying me into any emails would be respectful, but this doesn't happen. This is not empowering. However, I am following the process. (21)

Participants talked about being unable to have sight of all Child Permanence Reports (CPRs), about being scolded for making too many enquiries:

We had a situation where we had linked to 2 sets of sibs from the same agency but with different SW and had asked for a bit more information on both via our SW. That led to a bit of a mess as the agency didn't like the fact we appeared to be acting in a non-linear fashion enquiring about 2 sets of sibs simultaneously. We called the agency to smooth things over. That is one of the risks of the Adoption Link - it encourages people to explore and link to multiple options, but perhaps the rest of the "physical system" hasn't caught up with the virtual one. (354)

There were also problems for some people who were frustrated that they did not have a copy of their own Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) or, if they did, they were not supposed to forward it when they did receive a response from CSWs – and again getting a ticking off if protocol wasn't followed:

We made an enquiry about a child on Adoption Link who appeared to match our profile; her social worker created a link almost immediately and the guidance was that we should get our PAR to her as soon as possible. Since our own social worker was on holiday I did this directly - only to get a ticking off from our own social worker, when she got back, about not following protocol (152)

We have been actively discouraged by systems and protocols to talk directly to any social worker. We have found that we have received one single sentence negative declines to enquiries which have been seriously discouraging. We believe that social workers have no idea how stressful the process is currently for adoptive parents and receiving a one line negative decline without any explanation is not acceptable. Our social worker has not actively encouraged us to go outside our Local Authority and we feel is not doing enough and/or communicating enough with us. We only hear any news (mostly bad) when we enquire, otherwise, we might not hear from our SW from one month to the next. (85)

Elsewhere in the survey participants mentioned the importance of their having a sense of some control over proceedings:

The links we have progressed with adoption link when you get a fast response from the social worker or family finder which allows us as a couple to feel even if this is not the case that we have some control of the process. (474)

Participants mentioned that they had been described as too pro-active and one discussed how this had been seen as ‘being pushy and ‘worrying’’, when the adopter felt it was eagerness and tenacity.

One of the biggest issues people mentioned in relation to having to go through their adoption workers to enquire about children was the delay that this could involve when AWs were not as responsive as they might be. There were many comments which indicated that people understood how over-worked both children’s social workers and adoption workers were and how time consuming it could be dealing with queries and questions, but there were also numerous references to AWs being slow to respond for a variety of reasons. Many adopters at various points in the survey mentioned the current situation regarding the balance of waiting children and waiting families and made reference at this point to feelings of being in competition: one referred to something akin to a ‘feeding frenzy’. In this context delays and the need to conform to protocols that could be experienced as obstructions can only add to the frustration, anxiety and disappointment.

One person introduced another important question which concerned the way adopters and their interest in a child might be presented by a third party:

*My social worker *really* wants me to go via her. I'm sure it must take a lot of time to respond to multiple prospective parents, many of whom may be asking far too many anxious questions! I get that. She is also a really nice person and a calm, experienced social worker, so as my ambassador I suspect she is good. However, to be honest I'm not sure how it all plays out - does a child's social worker need to "experience" my enthusiasm for the child? Will that make a difference? Is it like "being different" to get a job? I don't know. (164 – original emphasis)*

One thing that was clear from the data is the variation in practice between agencies and workers within agencies with some workers supporting proactivity on the part of adopters and others not.

Our social worker has accepted that we wish to play an active part in our search for a match, but it is clear that this is not the 'ideal' way of working for them or the agency. (65)

The further theme under this section is one that was explicitly mentioned by relatively few, but perhaps encapsulates all of the frustrations above: the theme is that of system failure or system dysfunction. From the data presented above, it is clear that protocols exist, but that these do not seem to be common across all agencies – or even routinely implemented within an agency. Some people were able to contact CSWs directly, others not. Some AWs accepted, or even encouraged, proactivity on the part of adopters others did not.

No real guidance given as to acceptable approach, our SW wanted to filter everything through her, so CPR's not passed on unless she "approved". Very hard to judge what correct approach should be. (196)

One participant went so far as to suggest a central resource was necessary:

We have had four social workers since our approval in less than a year. The communication, just with social workers 2 and 3, has been very poor. We registered with Be My Parent, the National Register and Adoption Link. We know the national register has sent possible links to our LA and they have not been passed on. Our 4th and latest social worker is trying to play catch up- we think many replies from children's social workers have not been passed on. It's a shame there is no central adoption finding service - I think the different places is adding to the confusion and social worker work load. (429)

So it seems, while adopters have the ability to search and identify profiles of children, they are often frustrated in their efforts to pursue things further. In part this seems to be because of what appear to be poorly specified protocols or etiquette about 'how things should be done' and often because 'following due process' leaves adopters dependent upon the ability of their adoption worker to prioritise their requests and their interests.

Turning attention to direct communication with children's social workers (CSWs), participants identified that children's social workers were generally quite difficult to contact and there was a lack of clarity about process evident in the data. There were a number of people whose comments suggested that CSWs do not appreciate direct contact from prospective adopters, several reported that they had only had email contact with CSWs and, as discussed above, some had been told that they shouldn't try to contact CSWs directly.

Many social workers for children including family finding social workers have been very reluctant to take calls or respond to direct email communication. Several social workers have also told us on the phone that they do not speak to approved adopters as a matter of course. This is disappointing and simply adds to delay in the process. (87)

Frequently – far too frequently – CSWs did not respond to enquiries. Many people spoke of how they had been left waiting without knowing whether their enquiry would lead anywhere

I have found it frustrating getting no response from the children's social workers, even if it is an 'I don't think your suitable' at least you know to move on and look elsewhere. (263)

A number of people talked about having had direct contact with CSWs at activity and exchange events and that this had been helpful although some participants felt that family finders knew more about the children and their needs than did the allocated social workers.

Some had managed to have direct contact with CSWs outside of organised events and again this had been helpful in terms of up to date and relevant information:

The direct contact has been useful and we were able to get UP TO DATE information where this sometimes was lacking (204)

One person, who had experienced direct contact at the point of initial enquiry, indicated that this allowed them to make an informed assessment and counsel themselves out:

On one occasion, through Be My Parent, a social worker communicated with us at the very start which was very helpful and as a result of that conversation, we were immediately able to rule ourselves out (338)

Even though there was a general sense that CSWs don't like to be contacted directly and, as has been seen, adoption workers and agencies did not encourage this either, there is a clear contradiction in the current process since CSW contact details are available on many linking services to which adopters have direct access.

I registered with the 'Be My Parent' website and it changed my life as all of a sudden I had access to social workers' contact details. This is how I managed to get hold of the social workers who were managing the case of the child I was subsequently matched with. I didn't need any help from my social worker and this made for a better experience / smoother process. I have found that my Social worker was not very responsive at times and it was really helpful to be able to interact with professionals directly. (475)

3.5 Adopters' experiences of on-going liaison with children's social workers

The survey explored adopters' experiences of communicating with children's social workers further down the line, about their ability to meet children's needs. The feedback from participants regarding this aspect of the process indicates a very mixed experience. Table 7 illustrates that almost two thirds of adopters felt their liaison with children's workers was at best mixed and over a quarter felt it had been poor.

Row two of table 8 focuses in on the timeliness and tone of the initial response received from children's social workers. Here almost a quarter of people indicated dissatisfaction with this aspect and a further 44% (almost) reported a mixed experience. (It should be noted that these figures would be higher if those who had no experience (missing) had been excluded).

Table 8. Experience of liaising with children's social workers	Number	Percent
What has been your general experience of liaising with the agencies and social workers responsible for children?		
Very good	35	8%
Generally good	81	19%
Very mixed	178	39%
Generally poor	82	18%
Very poor	43	9%
Missing	41	9%
How satisfied have you generally been about the speed and tone of the initial response you have received from Children's Social Workers?		
Not at all satisfied	113	25%
Varied experience, sometimes timely and/or helpful	202	44%
Fairly satisfied, usually timely and/or helpful	63	14%
Very satisfied, always timely and/or helpful	40	9%
Not applicable - not yet made any enquiries	21	4%
Missing	21	4%

In the interests of identifying good practice, the questionnaire asked people to identify their best experience of liaising with children's social workers. In focussing on 'best experiences', it is important to note at the outset that some people indicated that they hadn't had a 'best experience'. This report has already discussed the anxieties that could beset adopters as a result of slowness, or even complete failure, on the part of children's social workers or their agencies to respond to enquiries. Some of the additional issues that people highlighted at this point were that sometimes social workers didn't seem to know the children very well, that it was difficult to know 'who was who' and what their role was, particularly when there were changes of social worker and that children's social workers seemed to be seriously over-worked and that something was needed to help them keep on top of enquiries. There were also concerns about last minute changes of direction in the planning for children, where people had thought they were proceeding towards a match when suddenly a 'better' match was found. The uncertainty that could be experienced is summarised by one participant who wrote:

Actually I found the experience very stressful. The process doesn't appear to be very open and you don't know what stage you are at in the linking process, well, not until you get the letter to confirm that you are going to matching panel on a particular date, do you really feel that the match could really be going ahead. (96)

Moving forward to consider the sort of things that people described when they considered their 'best' experience, several themes were identified in the data.

First, as has been mentioned previously, the ability to be in direct communication with children's workers was noted as important as it offered the opportunity to promote oneself and to convey one's own enthusiasm for a child.

Other factors that adopters described as making for a good experience in liaising with children's social workers included:

- CSWs who were responsive and provided information as needed and in a timely way – also mentioned was providing little updates on how the children were progressing.
- CSWs who were informative, keeping people advised of timelines and any likely delays.
- CSWs who were honest and open – even if the news was bad
- Discussions in which there were no competitive links.
- CSWs who conveyed a real enthusiasm for the child(ren) – one participant mentioned how the CSW was able to bring the child's profile 'to life'.
- CSWs who seemed enthusiastic about them as prospective parents for the child(ren).
- CSWs who were thorough, asked good questions and focused on strengths
- For those adopters who already had children, consideration of this on the part of CSWs was very much appreciated.

The following two quotes capture the sorts of contexts in which adopters wrote about a number of the factors listed above:

Dealing with a social worker who was open about speaking to me on the phone, agreeing to finding out more information for us and providing this promptly. She was very understanding and focussed on the strengths in our PAR and discussed how these were good for the potential link. She made us feel valued. (87)

When they felt we were the match and we were told they were only considering us unless we said no because they thought it was perfect. Knowing that we had already proved a lot took pressure off, knowing we weren't competing with other adopters made for a more positive experience and the fact of the matter is they were right! It was like the child's social workers had considered us and the children, the whole picture, it was great. (103)

A few people used this opportunity to describe their experience of being part of a 'life appreciation day', and to emphasise how helpful this had been. One person also included mention of how nervous she or he had been at the point of first contact with a child's social worker, which is a salutary reminder of just how important these interactions are for prospective adopters.

3.6 The support needed and the support received in finding links

A major focus for this survey was to explore adopters' desire for, and experiences of, agency support in their search for a child or sibling group who would 'match' their family.

The first question posed sought to establish how much support adopters wished to receive with their search and the top row of table 9, details the way in which participants responded to this question. As can be seen, almost three quarters of adopters wanted to share the work with their agency. Just under one in five wanted the agency to find links and about one in ten reported they

were happy finding links for themselves. This indicates a substantial expectation for an on-going role for adoption workers in the post approval stage.

Opinion was divided in terms of how helpful the agency had been in supporting the search for links with just under a quarter feeling the agency had been very helpful, about one third choosing 'fairly helpful' and a similar proportion selecting 'not very helpful'. Importantly, a minority, but still nearly 9% of the sample felt their agency had not been at all helpful. This report has already touched on the timeliness of adoption workers' response which was often found to be wanting. Here support is considered in a more general sense.

Table 9: Agency support following approval (N=460)		
Support in searching		
Question and responses	Number	Percent
How much support did you want from your agency in identifying links?		
Little – I was happy finding links myself	43	9.3%
I wanted to share the work with my agency	331	72.0%
I wanted my agency to find links for me	85	18.5%
<i>Missing</i>	1	.2%
How helpful has your agency been in supporting you to find a child or children?		
Very helpful	105	22.8%
Fairly helpful	166	36.1%
Not very helpful	146	31.7%
Not at all helpful	40	8.7%
<i>Missing</i>	3	.7%
How helpful was your adoption worker in supporting you during the stage 2 and home study period?		
Very helpful	275	59.8%
Fairly helpful	127	27.6%
Not very helpful	42	9.1%
Not at all helpful	13	2.8%
<i>Missing</i>	3	.7%
How helpful has s/he been in supporting you since you have been approved?		
Very helpful	140	30.4%
Fairly helpful	161	35.5%
Not very helpful	118	25.7%
Not at all helpful	35	7.6%
<i>Missing</i>	6	1.3%

The third row of table 9 repeats data from table 3, but this time sets perceptions of adoption worker support during stage 2 alongside perceptions of support post approval. Here it is of interest that while a substantial majority of respondents (almost 60%) felt that their adoption worker had been very helpful in the pre-approval stage and a further 28% perceived this as fairly helpful, this picture changes when perceptions of post-approval support are examined. In fact the correlation between the two ratings is just .428, suggesting some association but only around 40% correspondence. Examining these data according to whether participants were approved under old or new regulations, once again reveals a change in experience. Figure 7 illustrates the proportions of respondents who said their adoption worker had been 'very' helpful in either the preparation stage or post approval and separates out the data according to whether people applied before or after July 2013, and according to the type of agency they worked with. As can be seen, for those working with LAs, under the new process significantly more people reported their worker as very helpful at both the pre-approval and post approval stages. The picture for those working with VAAs is similar but less marked. However, while there appears to have been an increase in the proportion of people feeling their worker was very helpful both pre and post approval for both types of agency, the

disparity between the fairly high levels of perceived worker helpfulness pre-approval and the relatively low proportions reporting their worker as very helpful post approval remains. Focusing just on those approved under the new process 72% reported their worker having been 'very helpful' during the approval process compared to just 39% who felt this was true post approval.

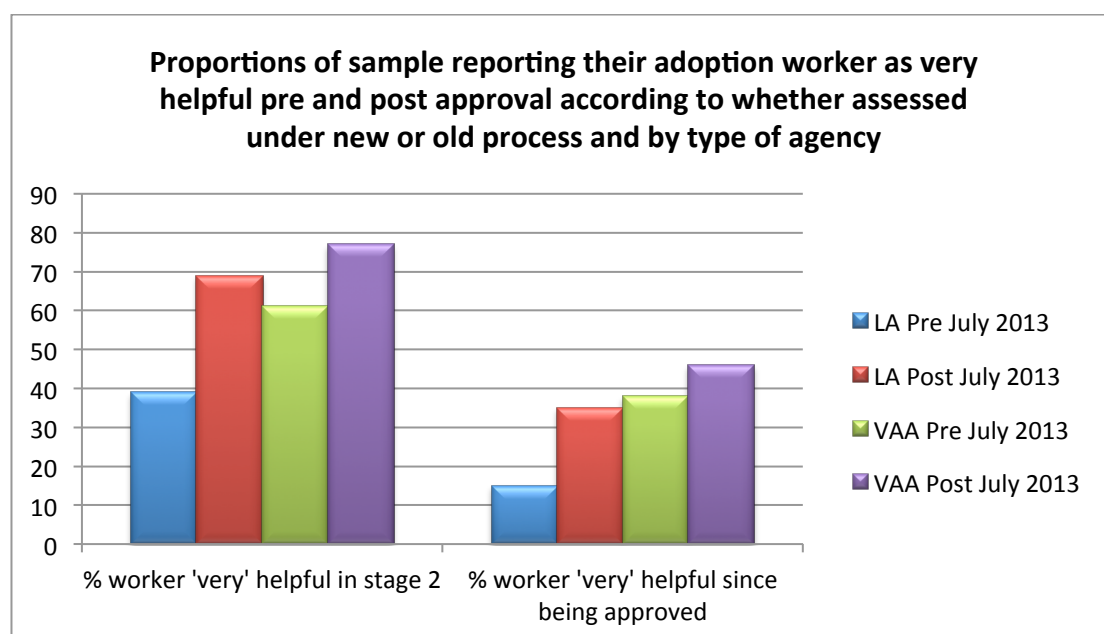


Figure 7

The contrast between experience in the pre- and post-approval stage was commented upon by some respondents in their responses to the open questions:

Our social worker and particularly the team manager have shown little empathy for our feelings in the matching process. During the prep/assessment stage, we were treated like a much valued resource. However, since approval it's been a struggle. They don't seem to get or care that we have to open our hearts to a child to move forward with a link and when it doesn't work out it can be very upsetting. The overriding message is that their priority is to find the right families for their children and that we have to be robust and cope with rejection if we are going to cut it as adoptive parents. Of course children must to be the priority but now there is a surplus of adopters I fear this dismissive, sometimes disdainful, attitude will only get worse. (185)

In their narratives people who did not feel very supported wrote about how they felt like a 'Friday project', or that they were in 'limbo-land' in describing how they felt about their circumstances. Despair, disappointment, discouraged and feeling forgotten also featured. Many adopters felt that matching approved adopters simply wasn't a priority for social workers and 'commodities' is another word that was used:

On the adopters' forums and our adopters' group, there is a strong view that we are "commodities". This was the actual word used by a SW to describe us. The adopter's feelings, emotions, journey, the waiting game isn't considered at all by SWs. We do understand that the child/children are the main focus and concern for

the SWs! And that is how it should be! But who is supporting the adopters in their journey?!? Granted this makes us a stronger bunch and we have our support circles to help us - but no support from Gov't or adoption agency!

There was a good deal of anxiety revealed in adopters' responses to open questions, about the recent change in the numbers and profile of children who need adoptive families. This is considered further later in the report.

Before leaving this topic it is important to make it clear that around two-thirds of participants did feel at least reasonably supported by their adoption worker and some people used the open question opportunity to say so:

She has been brilliant (13)

A major issue identified in the data was that of part-time working among adoption workers. This factor was perceived to contribute to delay in a significant way. Participants would have appreciated that someone else might be in a position to act on their enquiries when their own worker was not available. There were also issues noted about what might be called 'Chinese whispers': a situation where information is relayed through several parties:

We may have a match now, and the child's social worker and family finder have been as honest and open as they can be, which allowed us to be so too. They have also contacted us directly to clarify situations, which has been helpful, as waiting for information from our (part-time) social worker is frustrating, and the quality of the information is questionable - by the time the child's social worker passes on information to the family finder, who then tells our social worker, who then tells us, the facts become quite distorted. (119)

In similar vein, another participant noted elsewhere in the questionnaire:

the best thing is that it [direct communication with the child's social worker] cuts out the middle man, this makes things much clearer. We have been able to go direct to social workers and get answers immediately rather than having to wait for our social worker to contact them and then wait for a response that might not answer your original question. It makes so much more sense going direct.

Bringing the lack of AW proactivity to life, one participant stated:

We have never got as far as directly talking to a child's social worker, but at an exchange day we had a very good conversation with a family finder who was well informed about the children and able to answer our questions. She also responded well to our enthusiasm and responded positively to a follow-up email we sent. Unfortunately, our social worker never sent our PAR, and as there was a lot of competition, the potential link seems to be no more. (351)

Finally, mention needs to be made of the particular experience of prospective adopters whose family structures are 'different'. There were comments from same-sex couples, from single adopters and from adopters who already had children which suggested that they felt disadvantaged in the linking and matching process.

Unfortunately our experience of our own social worker and LA. They are totally passive, haven't shown us any profiles, and have said to our face that they don't agree with adoption into families with birth children and they don't know what they can do for us. Finding a match is very much left in our hands. It's tremendously frustrating and disappointing. Why did they approve us in the first place?!! (30)

3.6 Sharing of profiles and discussing potential links

One of the roles of the adoption worker is to support adopters in the linking and matching process, the starting point for this is to identify profiles of children whose needs might be met well by the prospective adoptive family. Clearly, as has been discussed above, there is nowadays much opportunity for adopters to access profiles in a variety of formats for themselves. Nevertheless much is still achieved by adoption workers, in both types of agency, receiving profiles of children and sharing these, as appropriate, with the families they are working with. The survey asked whether people felt that their adoption worker had been 'selective' in the profiles that were shared.

Table 10	LA (n=305)	VAA (n=123)	All (n=460%)
Have you ever felt that your adoption social worker was being selective in the profiles s/he shared with you?			
Not at all	35%	49%	36%
Somewhat	34%	29%	30%
Yes	31%	22%	27%
Missing			7%
How helpful have you found opportunities to discuss potential links with your adoption worker?			
Not at all helpful	12%	5%	8.3%
Somewhat helpful	48%	39%	37.0%
Very helpful	40%	56%	36.7%
Not applicable – no reason for such discussions as yet.			8.0%
Not applicable – no opportunity for discussion, although these might have been relevant			5.0%
Missing			5.0%

As can be seen in table 10, experience was mixed although people working with VAAs were slightly less likely to feel that this had been the case. Regardless of the type of agency, people's written comments about this question revealed that on occasion the selectivity was perceived as helpful:

She knows us very well and completely 'gets' us. So we're happy for her to exercise her judgement. (209)

I think this is good because otherwise we might waste time reviewing inappropriate siblings. When we get a profile at least we know our SW's experience has been applied to select the profile based on our criteria. (232)

We felt this was very helpful as our social worker could 'translate' the words in the children's profiles for us and identify potential issues we might not have initially understood. (336)

Others however felt this was not at all helpful:

No, this was most unhelpful. We would have much preferred to have made those decisions ourselves and to have been more in control of the process ourselves. At one point in the process, decisions were being made about which profiles were to be shared with us by a new member of staff whom we had never met and who did not know us at all. (449)

Sometimes I think they haven't been shared as we said we would accept siblings so haven't been shown single profiles even though we wanted to see both. But understand they have more adopters than children. (52)

One or two people recognised that there is a need for pace and for equity:

I believe she was trying not to overwhelm us with profiles but also I think that with so many potential adopters on their books, she was also trying to share profiles fairly (9)

3.7 A competitive activity

The linking process, perhaps necessarily, requires children's social workers and agencies selecting the family considered most able to meet children's needs. Frequently, this means considering a number of families alongside each other. As indicated in table 11, nearly 60% of adopters responding to the survey indicated that this had happened to them.

Table 11	Number	Percent
Have you ever been aware that you were in discussions and being considered for a child alongside other families?		
No	163	35.4
Yes	270	58.7
Missing	27	5.9

The narrative data associated with this question indicate that adopters understand that the decisions need to be in the best interests of the child. However, the way in which these situations had been managed varied. There was an acceptance that some 'competition' was inevitable and several people appeared to appreciate being informed about their situation, and kept informed about progress in a timely way: that said there were one or two who said they wished they hadn't known.

On the other hand, there were a number of comments about lack of transparency in this process and slowness in decision-making which left people in limbo:

We are competing, it's not nice, but we understand it should be about what is "best" for the child. We do not appreciate the amount of time it takes however to let us have an outcome and to be kept "hanging" (204)

There were also comments about what could be perceived as duplicitousness, with other adopters suddenly being brought into the frame and the perception was that these others had been chosen

because they were closer to the child’s home authority for example. One participant, when asked how this aspect of the process had been managed, responded:

Badly! Especially as the majority of social workers don't give feedback. Or you hear late in the process that even though they approached us about a child and things are progressing well with the match that they have shown the child profile at an exchange day and then decide to go with an adopter closer to home. (54)

The emotional impact of this aspect of practice on adopters is captured in the following quote:

It's been the worst aspect of the process for us. To know that you are competing against another couple means that you have to convince the social worker of how emotionally committed you are to that child, long before such a commitment really has the chance to develop (in most cases, they won't even let you see more than one or two pictures in advance of this initial meeting), and in order to do that, you have to let yourself believe that the child could be yours. You have to talk through how you and the child would work as a family, and think through all this, and properly imagine it, all the while knowing that any number of other families are going through the same thing. And then when they choose someone else, you mourn that child..... It is truly the most upsetting part of the whole process. (66)

Increasingly, as opportunities develop for adopters to access children’s profiles independently of their adoption worker, there is also the potential for adopters to be exploring the possibility of a link or a match with more than one child (or sibling group) at a time.

Table 12	Number	Percent
Have you ever been in a situation where you were simultaneously involved in serious discussions about more than one child or sibling group?		
No	369	80.2
Yes	63	13.7
Missing	28	6.1

As shown in table 12, only a small proportion of adopters indicated that they had been in this situation at the time of the survey. Indeed elsewhere in the survey several people had indicated that their adoption worker counselled against this. In response to this question several people mentioned that this situation occurred when they had been pursuing links outside their authority when their adoption worker mentioned a child from their authority. These participants went on to say that their adoption worker had insisted that they stop proceedings about children they had been considering before detailed information about the other waiting child would be shared:

We'd made an enquiry about a sibling group and heard nothing. We then met another sibling group at an activity day. We pursued the activity day group but were then contacted about the initial group. We had to turn down the activity day group before our agency would share the CPRs for the initial group. Felt like we had to make an uninformed decision. (279)

For those who had independently pursued potential links, the rationale for doing so related to the competitive nature of matching in the current climate and being realistic about the chances of finding the 'right' child or children in a timely way:

We feel somewhat uncomfortable about doing this but it is the only way we will ever get matched. We need to cast our net wide. (46)

This sense of time ticking away is also reflected in the following quote, which emphasises the need to consider the time that different parts of the process can take. This participant also draws attention to the emotional strain associated with considering more than one child at a time and makes reference to a felt need to be actively involved in the process.

..... it was a bad idea as it's hard to emotionally be involved with both processes. However the idea that you could simply do one at a time is naive at best; it can take a month or more for a social worker to look at your PAR, let alone to then decide whether they want to meet you, and then to decide whether you're their preferred family. If we were to pursue one at a time, it would mean waiting in some cases for months in vain. At the very least, it would make the process far more frustrating and disempowering than it already is. (66)

3.8 What do approved adopters expect of their adoption workers?

Towards the end of the survey adopters were asked to identify ways in which their adoption workers might have been more helpful.

A total 348 participants provided answers to this open question. Thirty seven of 348 people indicated that there was nothing further they would, or could, expect from their adoption worker. Many of these responses were entered as 'not applicable' since people had already outlined the ways in which their worker had supported them. Some, however, entered comments as follows:

None- very happy with the excellent support our social worker has provided (100)

We can both honestly say we have been very lucky with our social worker. Very early in stage two, our initial social worker left and our new social worker and her manager arrived at our door within 10 days and we have never looked back. I don't think we could have been better supported. (285)

Of the suggestions made by the 348 people who had ideas about how their adoption worker might have been more supportive, the major themes identified in the responses concerned the need for workers to be proactive in terms of identifying, and responding to communications regarding, appropriate links and being in regular contact to provide updates and encouragement. The responses of 53 people to this specific question included comment directly related to workers being proactive and 68 people mentioned the importance of regular contact.

Getting more children's profiles through to look at. I don't feel I get many, and generally it's when I'm getting to the end of my tether and I send a sad email - then something turns up. I know social workers are stupidly stretched, and after baby P have been unduly tarred and thus have even more work to do to

cover their backs and avoid litigation! It's an awful situation. I don't want to cause them undue work, but 'm relying on them to help me. What is difficult to know, is when enthusiasm turns into nagging.

In terms of proactive working, responses to this question indicated that many people had been disappointed in their worker's failure to provide them with profiles of children to consider or to provide these in a timely way. There were expectations, which according to some respondents had been set up during stage two, that this is the way that family finding and matching would take place.

People were also disappointed that it often took a lot of chasing to ensure that their Prospective Adopter's Report was being sent out to children's workers and agencies in a timely way:

Any proactive activity on our behalf. E.g. suggest profiles; send our PAR to people without being nagged; spontaneously follow up on links without being nagged; not behave as though we are a lost cause. (30)

The frustration experienced by approved adopters when they felt they were not being kept informed and were not sufficiently aware of progress was very evident in the data with terms such as 'isolated', 'lonely and difficult', 'discouraged', 'not worthy' or 'forgotten' appearing in the narratives on occasion.

A few people commented on these issues but also emphasised the context of the work-load and circumstances of the adoption worker they were dealing with and some highlighted that this is what they had been told to expect

The characteristics, skills and activities required of adoption workers – as identified by approved adopters in this survey are:

- Being proactive – in relation to finding and sharing links – and in sharing adopters profiles
- Listening to adopters, understanding them better,
- Respecting adopters for the choices they make and linking them with children who suit their specification
- Being available! And being in regular contact. Updating adopters in a timely way and feeding back appropriately.
- Being responsive when there is activity which might lead to a potential match.
- Representing or advocating on adopters' behalf – with enthusiasm and positivity
- Being informed and advising and guiding adopters about options and best ways forward
- Being encouraging
- Being open and honest about the context in which they are searching and the chances of their finding a match
- Being warm and empathising with their individual journeys.
- Ensuring that people's Prospective Adopter Report represents them well

Also implicit within the data was a need for adoption agencies to be clear about their policies in relation to how and where adopters' details would be shared by the agency

3.9 Adopters' views about their agency's performance

A final question in the survey asked adopters to add anything else they wanted to say about what their agency (rather than their adoption worker) had done well and where they felt there was room for improvement. A total of 241 people contributed additional and summarising thoughts at this point.

There were large numbers of comments further emphasising delays, changes of adoption worker and problems with lack of communication, all of which have been discussed in some detail already.

There were also a lot of comments about poor administrative systems, which is something that has not been touched on as yet. Some of these comments were clearly heartfelt:

Administration. Good Lord it is CATASTROPHIC (414 – original emphasis)

Another participant explained in a bit more detail:

Grammar and Spelling! So many children's reports are full of mistakes, are cut and paste jobs or really don't make sense. CPRs should be updated at least every 6 months; The process of collating documents on a child should be centralised so there is no faffing with secret and secure websites, etc. Although some LAs don't bother with this and just send it via email. (55)

Other participants had fallen foul of poor administrative systems in relation to their own applications with initial interviews needing to be repeated because no record had been made to indicate this had been completed for example, or that referee letters needed to be sent repeatedly because they had been lost somewhere in the system.

There were lots of extremely positive comments about the pre-approval stages, with people mentioning how supported they had felt and how much they had enjoyed their preparation groups (although there were some comments about this feeling rushed and geared around agencies time-frames, or targets, rather than those of the adopters). However, this was contrasted with one of the major findings of this survey, which is that many adopters felt completely unsupported and on their own in the enquiry and linking stage:

The whole process seems to be geared around speeding up assessment process just for everything to grind to a halt post approval. (34)

Furthermore, several participants indicated that they hadn't been prepared for this.

The matching process is particularly frustrating because of the lack of transparency. Once we had identified the right child we were well supported but it was finding the right child that was the difficult task and solely left to us. It should be made clear from the onset that the matching process is the most difficult stage and training should be done to help people with this process. (16)

There were many references to the fact that the focus on the number of adopters being approved – and the time-frames in which this was achieved meant that workers had less time to devote to supporting and advocating for adopters who had been approved.

We would like to know what is specifically happening with regards to us. Who is talking to whom, about what and how often? We would also like SWs to appreciate that they are dealing with human beings and a one-line decline is simply not acceptable. We know that they are under pressure and damned if they do, damned if they don't. We know that since a case some 18 months ago, the number of [Placement] Orders has reduced by 50%, at the same time that SWs have been under pressure to push potential adopters through, so we understand there is a glut. However, we are humans. Communicate with some empathy and for christ's sake, give us some hope. (85)

Variations in experience between agencies and between individual workers within agencies were also identified by participants, with some contrasting their experience to that of people they knew or with views expressed on online forums. Often people felt extremely lucky to have their worker, or to have chosen their particular agency. But this was not always the case.

Our SW has made our experience great so that reflects on the agency however on speaking to other prospective adopters in [our] agency they have completely opposite experiences. We consider ourselves very lucky to have her. (86)

The data suggest that these problems, of too many adopters and adoption workers with too little time, put adopters in a rather peculiar position of being left, often, to do their own family finding but at the same time reliant on their adoption worker to follow up on enquiries because of (unwritten) protocols about how and when information should be shared. As was seen earlier in this report, this frequently led to significant delays for adopters, particularly where workers were part time. The point was also made that the current situation of children waiting for Placement Orders is not helpful for the children either.

There were some concerns expressed about adopters' ability to criticise or push without jeopardising their chances of a match. Having written about inefficiency in their agency one participant went on to explain:

My view is that the potential adopters have very little choice but to put up with it- we worry that if we push the social workers to get on with things, they will put us to the bottom of their pile of priorities, and it makes potential adopters feel impotent to complain. (459)

3.10 Adopters' suggestions for improving systems

The following points have been extracted from adopters' responses to the last question on the questionnaire. They provide a range of ideas about what is important and what might help things to progress more smoothly from adopters' perspectives

- Something needs to be done to ensure that there is no disadvantage to adopters from any agency (LA or VAA).
 - There were reports about some LAs discouraging adopters to search outside of area and some concerns expressed about agencies not putting children forward, preferring to wait for an adopter from their own pool.

There should be a system where all children placed for adoption can potentially be placed with anyone who is an approved adopter whether they are with a voluntary agency or live far away. Local authorities 'hold' on to children due the cost. This is ethically and morally wrong (177)

- Agencies need to recognise the difficulties for adopters after approval and ensure that support mechanisms are in place. Suggestions include:
 - Agencies should treat adopters with respect – not as a commodity
 - Approved adopters should be allocated a worker soon after approval
 - There should be at least one conversation about matches
 - Adopters' details should be routinely shared with the consortium and the appropriate National Adoption Register.
 - A written agreement stating what will be done to help find matches for adopters, what adopters could do for themselves, what registers are available and when adopters' details can be added.
 - Regular communication from the agency or social worker – even if there is no news.
 - One participant mentioned having been able to attend courses post-approval which made them feel valued. Another suggested regular discussion groups:

Post-approval support - it would be helpful to have discussion groups around particular topics, with visiting speakers - in this way, we would continue to feel 'in the loop' of adoption and to continue learning. It's very isolating to be in limbo on the other side of approval. (374)

- There needs to be more social workers working in this field – or they need more time for this work
- Agencies should recognise that part-time working and practitioners' holidays can cause significant delays and make arrangements to reduce the impact of these factors.
- Agencies need to recognise that many adopters want to work in partnership with their agency or worker
- Children's social workers need to understand the emotional roller-coaster that adopters experience and adoption workers need to help adopters to manage their feelings and expectations.
- There needs to be clarity and consistency in terms of the suitability of adopters' circumstances (regarding accommodation and location etc) both within agencies and between agencies
- All agencies need to be working to the same systems and guidelines regarding the way that linking and matching processes are initiated and managed.

The system to match children with adopters does not appear very joined up; we would expect a far slicker process in place to assist social workers in identifying matches. (356)

- Agencies need to ensure that adopters are aware of available linking mechanisms and know how to access them
- Some adopters were concerned that they had been 'typecast' because they were open to considering certain child characteristics but this meant they were overlooked for other children. In similar vein there was a view expressed that adopters should not be constrained to
- Help with the costs of travelling for linking meetings – and indeed with holiday allowances - was also suggested, as was greater clarity about adoption allowances and other funding for placements which was perceived by one participant as a 'postcode lottery'.

Chapter 4. Summary and conclusions

This report has presented the some of the main findings from a survey of 460 approved adopters who were invited to take part in the study by Adoption Link, which is an online linking resource which prospective adopters can use with the consent of their agency. The sample of 460 usable responses represented almost 40% of all the adopters who would have received the invitation. Although this response rate might be considered disappointing, it is fairly typical of response rates in this sort of survey and is in fact much better than some. Comparison between the profile of participants in the study and all Adoption Link users suggested that there was no systematic bias in terms of the demographic characteristics of those who had responded, but there is no way of establishing how representative, or otherwise, this sample might be of the broader group of approved adopters who may not have connected with Adoption Link for whatever reason.

The study used online survey methods and set out to address four main objectives:

1. To establish the time taken for different parts of the approval and linking stages and explore adopters' perspectives on this.
2. To examine adopters' experiences of the pre-placement stages of adoption – particularly the linking and matching stage
3. To explore the support needs of adopters in relation to approval and linking/ searching for a child (family finding)
4. To identify good practice in supporting adopters in the pre-placement stages of adoption.

The report was structured broadly around these objectives but the presentation of data focused more on the sequence of questions which were asked. This summary will focus on the objectives in turn to draw together the findings and the implications of these as relevant for each. There is a good deal of overlap between objectives 2 and 3, therefore to avoid duplication this summary focuses on describing adopters' experiences, which includes comment on where support was needed and then drawing out indicators of good practice in supporting adopters following approval.

4.1 Becoming approved

The study took place at quite an interesting time which meant that some participants had experienced a new approach to preparation and assessment and one for which tight time-frames are stipulated. Although the sample for this study was not necessarily representative of all approved adopters, the findings from this study suggest that the introduction of this new process may have had a very significant impact on the time taken for adopters to become approved (a reduction from an average of 72 weeks to just 32 weeks). Despite the marked decrease in the average time taken to become approved adopters, very few people felt this happened too swiftly, many of those who had been approved under the old process felt the approval process had been very slow. The majority of participants (81%) had worked with the same adoption worker throughout the assessment period (stage 2) although 10% indicated that changes of worker in this period had resulted in

KEY FINDINGS:

460 adopters contributed to the survey.

This represents a response rate of 40%

Some adopters had experienced the old approval process and some the new 2-stage process introduced in July 2013.

Marked differences in experience for those working with LAs, as opposed to VAAs under the old process seemed to be reduced for those approved under the new process

significant delay or disruption in their journey to becoming approved. Just over 20% of participants reported their stage 2 assessment period to be more challenging than they expected, changes in worker and delays seemed to account for some of this additional challenge but people also wrote about problems with the preparation of their Prospective Adopters' Reports, which had often led to difficulties post-approval. Analysis revealed that prior to the introduction of the new assessment processes there were marked differences between LA adoption agencies and VAAs with those working with LAs reporting far more challenges in the assessment process and more changes of worker, however under the new process these differences between type of agency diminished.

At the time the survey closed participants had been waiting between one and 175 weeks (over 3 years) for a match. Just over half had been waiting less than six months but 13% had been searching for over a year. The major finding of this study in relation to adopters' experience post approval was the dramatic change when the intensity of activity and support during the assessment period suddenly ceased. As mentioned in the introduction, and elsewhere in this report, the impact of falling numbers of children needing an adoptive placement coinciding with record numbers of adopters being approved served to make the post-approval period extremely difficult for many people. Several people indicated that this is a situation that they had not expected and did not feel prepared for. Although they accepted that agencies might also have been taken by surprise, some mentioned their disappointment that news of this did not come from direct their agency.

4.2 Adopters' experiences and support needs in the linking and matching stage

The data indicated that a number of adopters were unclear about the range of linking mechanisms that were available to them, many did not know whether their details had been shared with a National Adoption Register or their agency's consortium and many found they had to push hard to ensure that these tasks were accomplished. Some mentioned that they found out about registers from internet forums rather than from their agency or adoption worker and some discussed how their agency discouraged them from searching further afield.

Some adopters wrote of having formed the impression that interagency matches were harder work for the agency and they explained how they were told that interagency matches can be problematic because of distance (both for the adopters and child in terms of introductions and contact visits – and for social workers in finding the time to travel for visits). Differences between agencies in protocols and practices had also been identified to adopters as potential problems, as had concerns about access to post-adoption support. There was also mention from some adopters about their being advised that other agencies might act in a rather underhand way. There were strong sentiments expressed by a few adopters that it should be 'easy' to adopt a child from anywhere. There was surprisingly little comment from adopters about the costs of interagency placements although one did mention that they had only just found out that costs applied. There was a good deal of scepticism evident in

Key findings (cont'd):

Falling numbers of waiting children and record numbers of approved families made for a very competitive linking experience for adopters.

Adopters need clear information about the range of linking mechanisms they are able to access and how and when they may do so.

There needs to be more clarity about inter-agency matches and processes need to improve to achieve these in a timely manner

Some adopters were suspicious of their agency's motives and would like to see more honesty and transparency

the responses of a number of people with words such as ‘ploy’ or ‘misled’ appearing in the narratives. It would seem important that agencies work to increase the transparency of their practices, and that prospective applicants are fully informed of the implications of working with a particular agency before they commit. There would also seem to be room to examine the processes involved in inter-agency placements to establish whether these could be better integrated across agencies.

Despite the lack of encouragement to search widely, clearly all participants in this study had taken the step, whether encouraged to do so or not, to register themselves with Adoption Link. The survey explored people’s perceptions of support for their being proactive from their agency and from their adoption worker. The responses suggested that LA agencies were for the most part perceived as being ‘lukewarm’ about adopters’ proactive efforts to find a child. Interestingly though, even among those working with VAAs only around 52% of agencies and 58% of adoption workers were described as **very** encouraging (although few were described as not encouraging). Does this raise questions about the extent to which adopters searching independently is seen as legitimate by the professionals involved? Clearly a specific research study would be needed to explore this question, but if there are real reservations about adopters undertaking this activity this needs to be carefully considered, particularly in the current climate, where many adopters report feeling that they are left to their own devices once they have been approved because workers are too busy on other tasks.

A further consideration is the views expressed by some about the disempowering nature of the process as currently conceived: that is as a process that is largely managed by two sets of professionals, one advocating for the child and the other for the adopters. Several adopters did indeed appreciate their adoption worker advocating for them but others wrote about their frustration at not being able to put themselves forward, or that initial decisions were being made on the basis of paperwork that they felt did not reflect them well. Added to this was the distress of many participants resulting from their having to rely on adoption workers who failed to act promptly in sending their details on.

While a few people found direct access to children’s profiles online (such as through Adoption Link) difficult, for the most part this ability to view and consider profiles which were often much more detailed than those appearing in magazines was very much appreciated, as was the ability to easily initiate enquiries. The discussion about ‘adopter led’ matching has been gathering pace for a long time, but ultimately, it seems that technology has overtaken practice in this regard. It would seem that practice needs to catch up and recognise that one size does not fit all – many adopters would like more control over the process. Not least within this was a desire to be able to speak directly to children’s social workers to be able to advocate for oneself, to be able to ask questions and to be able to answer questions in a direct way which avoids things ‘getting lost in translation’. However, two thirds of participants reported that all early communication went through their adoption worker and again where workers

Key findings (cont’d):

Agencies need to be clear about their attitudes towards adopters being proactive in their search and partners in the linking and matching process

Having to rely on adoption workers to communicate with children’s social workers and to forward documents is disempowering and leads to delays

Technology has overtaken practice and how linking and matching is managed to meet the needs and expectations of adopters needs to be re-considered

were not able to respond in a timely way this added to the difficulties and delays for adopters.

In relation to liaison with children's social workers experience was very mixed. There was a lot of comment about lack of feedback, or very slow responses, to enquiries which could leave people in limbo for long periods unsure as to whether they were being considered or not. There were also worries about last minute changes when processes seemed to be moving towards a match and suddenly other adopters were found (often closer to home). Again, there was felt to be a lack of transparency. While adopters were very clear that the match had to be right for the child, there was also unease about the practice of considering multiple families for a child or sibling group which was an extremely difficult experience for adopters emotionally and, especially when they were asked not to consider simultaneously other children themselves, could result in additional delays. Throughout the data, there was a very real sense of linking and matching being a very competitive activity currently and as one adopter wrote:

We feel totally discouraged- when we were approved we were excited talking about 'when we adopt a child', but now we're very much thinking 'if' (426)

As indicated above, many adopters did not feel sufficiently supported in the post-approval stage and certainly contrasted this with the very positive support they received pre-approval. Although some participants emphasised that their experience had been very positive, there were comments from others about being viewed as commodities and feeling forgotten. Lack of proactivity on the part of adoption workers, specifically in relation to identification of and sharing of profiles, was mentioned in the narratives of a number of participants. Adopters working with both LAs and VAAs reported that they felt their worker was being at least somewhat selective in the profiles that she or he shared (true for 65% of those approved by LAs and 51% of those approved by VAAs). For the most part, people understood that this was probably done to prevent them feeling overwhelmed – and perhaps to ensure some equity between waiting adopters, but some people still felt they would have liked to see the profiles and make decisions for themselves.

Thus, the linking and matching stage of adoption, perhaps particularly in the current climate, is very much one for which adopters need to be prepared and one in which they need support, but, at the time of the survey at least this was not happening (at least not for everyone). It was clear from the data that adopters vary in the extent to which they want to take an active part in the searching process which would imply a need for workers to establish adopters' individual preferences in this regard.

It is important to note that the main issues identified by participants related to searching for a child, a number of people commented that once a match had been identified things often progressed very well.

Key findings (cont'd):

Lack of response to enquiries leaves adopters in limbo.

Adopters need to be prepared for the matching stage and need support through it.

4.3 Good practice indicators for adoption workers, children's social workers and agencies

The analysis of people's open responses about their experience of searching for a child and of working with their adoption worker resulted in the following lists of characteristics and skills that adopters would like to see in their adoption workers, children's social workers and their adoption agencies:

Good practice indicators for adoption workers

- Being proactive – in relation to finding and sharing links – and in sharing adopters profiles
- Listening to adopters, understanding them better,
- Respecting adopters for the choices they make and linking them with children who suit their specification
- Being available! And being in regular contact. Updating adopters in a timely way and feeding back appropriately.
- Being responsive when there is activity which might lead to a potential match.
- Representing or advocating on adopters' behalf – with enthusiasm and positivity
- Being informed and advising and guiding adopters about options and best ways forward
- Being encouraging
- Being open and honest about the context in which they are searching and the chances of their finding a match
- Being warm and empathising with their individual journeys
- Ensuring that people's Prospective Adopters Report represents them well

Factors that adopters described as being helpful in liaison with children's social workers were:

- CSWs who were responsive and provided information as needed and in a timely way – also mentioned was providing little updates on how the children were progressing.
- CSWs who were informative, keeping people advised of timelines and any likely delays.
- CSWs who were honest and open – even if the news was bad
- Discussions in which there were no competitive links.
- CSWs who conveyed a real enthusiasm for the child(ren) – one participant mentioned how the CSW was able to bring the child's profile 'to life'.
- CSWs who seemed enthusiastic about them as prospective parents for the child(ren).
- CSWs who were thorough, asked good questions and focused on strengths
- For those adopters who already had children, consideration of this on the part of CSWs was very much appreciated.

Finally, adopters' feedback suggested a range of ways in which agencies need to 'up their game'.

- It is essential that administration is improved so that paperwork related to children's details and adopters' records is accurate, legible and up to date.
- There needs to be support in the process of finding a child or sibling group and appropriate training offered

- Agencies need to be cognisant of the emotional roller-coaster that prospective adopters navigate in the search phase and help adopters manage their emotions and their expectations.
- Some adopters feel intimidated and are hesitant to complain for fear of jeopardising their chances of finding a match – this relates to the need to be reliant on their worker and agency.
- Adopters need to feel that their being approved entitles them to adopt any child (or children) whose needs they can meet
- Adopters want to be treated with respect – not as a commodity. They want an allocated worker identified soon after approval who understands their hopes and expectations and they want their details shared as soon as practicable. They want to work in partnership with their agency and their worker.
- Adopters want regular communication from the agency and some want to continue to feel involved in the adoption circle – possibly by virtue of additional training or support group activities
- Agencies need to make arrangements to provide cover for part-time workers and workers' holiday arrangements because worker absence can cause significant delays and sometimes risk losing the chance of a match
- Agencies need to ensure that some adopters are not disadvantaged just because they are able to offer special skills or competencies.

Wider issues:

- The process of collating documents concerning details of a child (and possibly adopters) should be centralised to reduce the need to access a variety of websites.
- There needs to be more adoption worker time devoted to supporting approved adopters
- There needs to be clarity and consistency within and between agencies in terms of the suitability of adopters' circumstances (be that marital status, sexual orientation, status of accommodation or the presence of birth children).
- All agencies need to be working to the same guidelines regarding the way in which linking and matching processes are managed.
- Consideration ought to be given to recompense in terms of travel costs and time commitments related to linking and matching activities.
- There ought to be a more transparent and equitable policy on the allocation of adoption allowances and other financial support available to facilitate placements.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this survey has provided a wealth of information about the contemporaneous experiences of approved adopters. While there is evidence of reasonable levels of satisfaction with many areas of practice and some participants reported excellent experiences, there are also many ways in which a number of adopters perceive the current system, and the current climate, to be failing them. This report has drawn on adopters' descriptions of their experiences and highlighted where participants faced difficulties as well as identifying the aspects of practice that people associated with their 'best experiences'. The 'wish lists' above might read in some ways like an

unreachable ideal, or require practitioners who are flawless human beings but at the same time, a number of the suggestions made relate to common sense and common courtesy. Many of the practitioner qualities mentioned are characteristics that most social work practitioners would aspire to themselves but, as perceived by adopters, their workloads and work priorities often preclude this. Wider issues were also identified which highlight the need for local and national debate about the future development of adoption policy and practice. In the process, it is essential that at least some of the points made by these service users are taken on board and considered alongside the needs of waiting children and those of the service providers.

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Appendix 1

Table A1: Area of Residence for Study sample and for registered users of Adoption Link (N=460)

Area of residence	Study Sample		Profile of Adoption Link registered users
	Number	%	%
England (Region not specified)	18	3.9%	0.00%
East England/East Midlands of England	56	12.2%	19.05%
North East of England (inc Yorkshire and Humber)	60	13.0%	15.45%
North West of England (including West Midlands)	59	12.8%	12.12%
South East or South West of England (inc London)	254	55.2%	51.01%
Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales	13	2.8%	2.37%

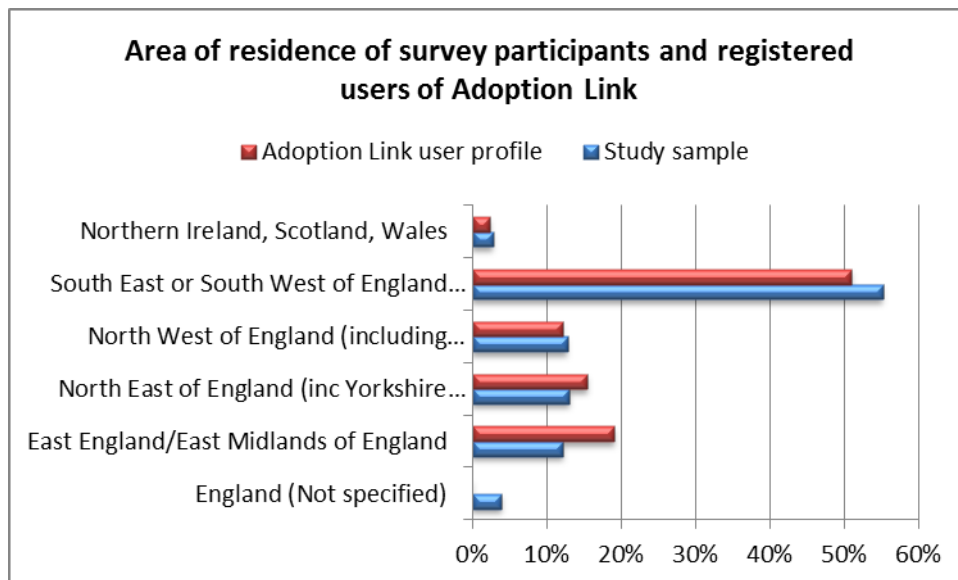


Figure A1: Area of residence for survey participants and registered users of Adoption Link

Table A2: Demographic profile of the study sample and all registered users of Adoption Link (N=460)

Characteristic	Study Sample		All Adoption Link
	N	%	%
Type of adoptive family			
Single Male adopter	2	.4	1
Single Female adopter	59	12.8	12
A same-sex male couple	37	8.0	7
A same-sex female couple	30	6.5	5
A mixed-sex couple	331	72.0	75
<i>Missing</i>	1	.2	
Age group of participant			
Under 30	13	2.8	N/A
30-39	154	33.5	
40-49	259	56.3	
50 or over	34	7.4	
Age group of partner			
Under 30	11	2.4	N/A
30-39	142	30.9	
40-49	210	45.7	
50 or over	36	7.8	
Not applicable – single adopter	58	12.7	
<i>Missing</i>	3	.6	
Ethnicities represented in adoptive families			
White British (or any other White background)	394	85.6	86%
White and Black Caribbean	4	0.9	1
White and Black African	7	1.5	1
White and Asian	10	2.2	1
Any other mixed background	23	5.0	1
Indian	6	1.3	3
Pakistani	4	0.9	1.8
Any other Asian background	2	.4	.4
Caribbean	5	1.1	2.4
Chinese	2	.4	.7
Any other ethnic group	2	.4	1
<i>Missing</i>	1	.2	-
Children in the family			
No children	319	69.3	65%
Children who live independently or elsewhere	18	3.9	Not recorded
Birth children who live in the family home	92	20.0	27%
Adopted or fostered children who live in the family home	31	6.7	7%
Previous experience of adoption			
None	268	58.3	
I/we have adopted a child previously	35	7.6	
One or both us is adopted	22	4.8	
I/we have siblings who were adopted into our families	21	4.6	
I/we have friends or colleagues who have adopted	157	34.1	
<i>(NB percentages will not sum to 100 since categories are not mutually exclusive)</i>			

Table A2: Demographic profile of the study sample and all registered users of Adoption Link (N=460)			
Continued			
Registered with Adoption Link			
April 2014	68	14.8	
May 2014	38	8.3	
June 2014	38	8.3	
July 2014	62	13.5	
August 2014	68	14.8	
September 2014	78	17.0	
October 2014	90	19.6	
November 2014 (<i>survey open 2-16 Nov</i>)	16	3.5	
<i>Missing</i>	2	.4	