# The Customers' Story

# Research into the experience of prospective and successful adopters of Birmingham City Council's Adoption Process

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**Content list**

# Acknowledgements

# Foreword and Summary of findings

## Research background

1. Adoption is a stated priority for central government. David Cameron has made this clear with such statements as *"this country must become more pro-adoption"* as well as tackling *"absurd barriers"* to mixed race adoptions. The February 2012 Ofsted inspection of Birmingham City Council (BCC) Adoption service rated the authority overall as 'Satisfactory'. Key statements included:

   • The service responds promptly to those enquiring about adoption and the information provided is of good quality.  Frequent information meetings are held, which ensures people are invited to attend these meetings within recommended timescales.

   • Excellent preparation training is provided to adopters, which is tailored to meet specific needs of applicants, for example, foster carers who are applying to adopt.  Adopters' assessments are of generally good quality, though not always completed in a timely manner.  These, together with the children's needs identified in the child permanence reports, enable children to be well matched with adopters.  The agency's support services, together with the multi-agency services, provide families with good quality support. This helps to maintain the child's placement into adulthood.

   • Both the management and staff teams have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption.  They demonstrate a real enthusiasm in their work and are committed to improving child care practice.

   • The service does not recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of black children and those of a minority ethnic group.

2. Adoption is also a stated priority for BCC. The Council has implemented an action plan for improvement after a study of the service by Impower and the findings form the adoption scorecard. This action plan has been endorsed by the Department for Education (DfE). The actions stated within the plan go some way to helping to improve the adopter's experience and BCC are committed to using the learning from this research to further enhance the plan.

3. Acting on both the local and national agenda, BCC Strategic Research Team (SRT) have completed detailed Research into the adoption experience in Birmingham. The Project was part sponsored by Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands (IEWM), who provided access to their Associate Framework of expert advisors.

4. The Research aim was to highlight opportunities to improve adoption outcomes by gaining an in depth understanding of the adoption experience through the eyes of the adopter. The Research offers up a different perspective that challenges current assumptions, provides meaningful insight and highlights opportunities for positive change and improved outcomes.

## Adoption – The national context

5. In addition to adoption being a stated priority, the government also holds the view that adoption is the best outcome for children in care under the age of five years old and for some older children (Department for Education (DfE), 2011). The following summary sets the Research context from a review of national policy and Research.

**Fewer children to adopt**

6. The DfE Action Plan for Adoption (2011) and the Expert Working Group on Adoption (2012) are concerned there are fewer children available for adoption. This is potentially influenced by special guardianship introduced in 2005 to support children in long term care, whereby children are placed with family members as a priority, which can often delay the decision to place children for adoption. They are also concerned that for the children waiting, the length of time it takes to be approved means some adopters become frustrated and may leave the process, whilst children become older and potentially more damaged as they wait.

**Mismatch of adopters and needs of children**

7. One of the issues highlighted for action in the National Adoption Plan is the apparent mismatch between adopters and the children identified for adoption. Children waiting for adoption have a higher complexity of need than in the past and this level of need does not necessarily match with the expectations or capacity of adopters.

8. So, there is a need to not only recruit more adopters but also to encourage and support adopters to adopt children with more complex needs.

**Black Minority Ethnic children seeking adoption**

9. A study by Julie Selwyn (2010) found that a high proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children in the care system were generally from a 'mixed' background. From such a varied ethic heritage it is difficult to assign these children to a meaningful group or community and trying to do so may be unhelpful. Martin Narey (2010) cites many instances of adopters being turned away because they are 'white' and as such seen not to match the needs of BME children. The government's action plan makes it clear that ethnic or religious background alone should not prevent suitable adoption.

**Concurrent planning**

10. Concurrent planning, the placing of a child with a family[1] likely to become their adoptive parents prior to the court's decision to approve a child for adoption, is a current government proposal. In addition, the government proposes 'fostering for adoption' as a way of placing children in the care of their future adoptive parents at an earlier stage. This Research explored this idea with adopters as part of the in-depth interviews.

11. Coram (2012) completed a study of concurrent planning, leading them to support the idea where it has the aim of *either* a child returning to their birth family or their placement with an adoptive family. This should be within a timeframe which is monitored by the court to promote early secure attachment and timely decision making.

**Potential adopters experience of the process**

12. The DfE 2011 Action plan for adoption suggests that the experience of adopters is mixed. They go on to say that a good service is one where the assessment values the adopter and matches them in a timely manner to children waiting. In contrast, a poor service leaves prospective adopters feeling unvalued and judged during their assessment and training. Other aspects of poor service include the length of the process, a lack of information and feedback and a lack of influence over the decision process.

13. The Expert Working Group (2012) identifies that a good assessment builds the relationship between adopter and social worker and develops trust and understanding of strengths and weaknesses. The BCC customer Research has shown the potential for a power differential to exist between adopter and the adoption service in Birmingham that makes building a trusting relationship sometimes difficult. The Research has not looked at the experience in other local authorities to see how the balance between assessment and building a good relationship is handled.

## Findings - A brief Summary

14. The report provides a detailed explanation of the Research findings. The following summary will draw out the main themes.

**Methodological Note**

15. The Research evidence has been gathered from four research methods: (1) an e-survey of eighty-one adopters, (2) four focus groups, (3) ten in-depth interviews, (4) literature review.

16. The Research was conducted independently of the BCC adoption service and was critically assessed by IEWM associate and expert in adoption, Carola Bennion.

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[1] Who are approved foster carers and adopters.

**Adopters' Preferences**

17. BCC adoption service use nationally accepted assessment documentation that includes capturing preference information. The adoption service then continues the discussion with adopters about preferences as the assessment continues.

18. The Research found that adopters felt there was too much emphasis placed on adopters' early preferences, at a point when they do not have all the information they need to make decisions.  Some adopters felt their preferences were treated as 'written in stone' as opposed to something they would change throughout the process. It is also suggested that issues of preference, in particular ethnicity and religion, need to be discussed consistently and throughout the process in a non-judgemental and trusting atmosphere.

**Preparation Training**

19. Participants found the Training very valuable and a high quality part of the process. However, they often experienced long waiting times to be booked on the sessions. The Training could be improved further by incorporating more real life feedback and case studies as well as building on the peer network that is formed during Training.

**The Adoption Panel**

20. The Adoption Panel is a significant stage of the process, representing the final decision to approve applicants as adopters. This is a legal process. Adoption Panels make a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker, therefore the outcome is dependent on the Decision Maker ratifying the recommendation.

21. From the perspective of the adopter, the quality of assessment reports which go to Panel can be variable and enhanced quality assurance may help. Waiting time was also experienced at this stage.  Some were unclear about the role of Panel and felt that given the in-depth nature of the assessment there should be little doubt as to the outcome from the Decision Maker.

**Matching adopters to children**

22. The Research indicates matching could be significantly improved. Adopters would like more information about children waiting and for this to be more transparent.  They often felt the process was very opaque and extremely variable. This was largely dependant on how proactive the service is at presenting appropriate matches.

23. Significant delays were causing frustration amongst adopters who were approved. Some reflected on this and commented that every week waiting is a week in a stable home that is being lost for a child in care.

24. The Research found several adopters who were approved to adopt sibling groups but had been matched with a single child. This appears to be an opportunity lost to place siblings, who are typically harder to place.

25. Adopters felt greater continuity of Social Workers would help improve the Matching Process, eliminating delays associated with staff allocation.  This has already been recognised in the BCC adoption action plan and with the

introduction of Generic Teams in October 2011. They would also like to be more actively involved in the process, and see less variability in the service provided.

**Social Work**

26. The overall finding regarding social work was that it is a mixed experience for adopters. Approximately half of the adopters in the study praised Social Workers highly for their professionalism and service. There were also examples given where according to adopters the service provided could have been better.

27. Communications were very variable.  Adopters wanted to feel valued and expected to be kept informed. Again, experience regarding communication was variable with some experiencing excellent communication. For other adopters, they felt they had to chase for communication as they did not receive regular contact.

28. The experiences of many adopters reflected a context in which the adoption service, by nature of the position of having to assess an adopter, was in a position of perceived power over the adopter. It seemed to some adopters that significant decisions and judgements were based on opinions, often without recourse for the adopter. The Research shows the adopter can feel unease at raising issues for fear of being adversely judged. This power imbalance meant there is a risk of a reduced respect or value placed on the adopter.

29. Workload and the lack of resources were often quoted by the Adoption Service as reasons for delays. To adopters this seems to be almost an automatic response that has the potential to act as an excuse.

30. The findings echo the recent review of safeguarding at BCC that found social work to be variable in quality. The Research suggests that improvements could be made by strengthening line management arrangements and monitoring the performance of staff.   This also should include peer support and development opportunities for staff.  These actions should enhance accountability and transparency to reduce the power differential between the service and the adopter.

**Timeliness**

31. The Research found it takes adopters between two and three years to successfully complete the process. This was considered to be too long. According to adopters, they experienced having to wait at most stages. The most common experience of waiting was at the Court and Induction stages with 100% citing they had to wait.  The lowest was at CRB at 53%[2].

32. Reasons given for waiting were often considered to be avoidable and caused frustration. Reasons included staff shortages, workload, sickness and annual leave, changes in allocated Social Worker and process delays (e.g. having to schedule a second Panel due to issues with paperwork). Whilst adopters accept the process will be lengthy and unexpected things will happen, they are left with the impression that delays are culturally acceptable.

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[2] Percentages are taken from the e-survey.

33. Reducing or eliminating waiting should enable the Adoption Service to achieve the government's national Action Plan timeframe of 12-18 months. Adopters reported reasons for waiting as issues of sickness, leave and workload which imply delays are caused by resource and capacity issues. To adopters these are not considered culturally acceptable causes for waiting. Many of the actions that cause waiting time are seen as predictable and might be planned for and mitigated against.

**Eligibility**

34. Overall, the majority of adopters accepted that there was a requirement for fairly detailed and robust eligibility assessment. However, a lack of flexibility was an issue for some. For example, some adopters found the length of adoption leave and the possibility of giving up work difficult.

35. The influence of opinions and beliefs on eligibility assessments as opposed to clear criteria was also frequently cited. The decision process was not always well understood by adopters and the criteria used did not, to the adopter, appear to be consistently applied.

36. Proportionality and common sense was not always apparent to the adopter. Accommodation came up regularly, by way of example. Adopters felt some requests and requirements seemed unreasonable and disproportionate against the overriding welfare of the children in care.

37. The Research suggests the process is very opaque and would benefit from being open to scrutiny and challenge by adopters. It should also include better feedback to allow adopters to change and influence decisions. All involved might benefit if the Service could outline essential criteria for adoption and criteria where flexibility can be applied.

**Avoiding systematic bias**

38. Adopters recognise that the adoption process rightly sets out to ensure that adopters are eligible and that the risk to children going into adoption is minimised. There is a risk, however, that some eligibility criteria could discriminate against sections of society.

39. For example, the Research participants generally have a high household income. 66% had a household income of over £30,000 and only 11% less than £20,000.

40. Of the e-survey participants 19% were single adopters and 66% married. Of those who left the process (either voluntarily or involuntarily) 28% were single and 55% married. These statistics, although just an indicator, suggest that the process may be favouring married couples.

41. The Research is not suggesting that there is intentional bias toward either the more wealthy or to married couples but this may be an unintended consequence of the process. This highlights the need to analyse customer data and investigate any observed trends to ensure the Service is inclusive.

**A valuable customer - setting the right tone**

42. Adopters recognise that they need to be assessed in terms of their ability to offer a welcoming, safe and supportive family environment for a child. They also feel they are doing a good thing for society. This highlights the difficulty in treating an adopter as a valued customer whilst also assessing their eligibility.

43. There is a difference between assessing adopters as a valued customer and interrogating them. Adopters feel that messages can be very negative and there is a sense that they survive the adoption process despite the system, as opposed to it being an outcome that is desired by both parties and helped by the system. It must also be recognised that BCC had no adoption breakdowns during the period the research covered, which shows the assessment matching works, once completed. The outcome therefore is sound so it becomes a question of tone.

44. Preparation Training is seen as very positive. Participants did feedback that the tone can be too negative, painting worst case scenarios about children. Some adopters thought this realism was helpful and others thought it was trying to put them off.

45. There is a question of proportionality and tone. It is both a benefit to the Service and children in care that as many adopters can be approved as possible. As such, the Service might consider if it is doing all it can to help approve as many adopters as possible. However, can the Service be a friendly service whilst also looking to robustly screen and assess families? The Research suggests adopters anticipated a reasonable 'grilling'. They expected, however, for this to be applied respectfully and proportionately and to be treated as a valuable customer.

46. There was a strong desire amongst adopters to be able to feedback their praise and concerns about the process without fear of their application being jeopardised. More frequent and independent mechanisms need to be built into the process to support adopters and to enable them to communicate more transparently with the Service to improve outcomes for all.

# Methodology

## Research Aim

The aim of the Research was to generate an in-depth understanding of customers' experiences of the adoption process.

Customers were defined as successful adopters who had been through the entire process, prospective adopters who are going through the process, and others who had started the process and left for various reasons. This broad definition was applied to enable a diverse range of experiences to be captured.

The project involved a series of research activities, namely:
- A desktop literature review.
- Four focus groups.
- Ten in-depth interviews.
- An e-survey.

## Project Overview

The project was initiated by BCC's Strategic Research Team (SRT) and joint funded by SRT and a grant secured through IEWM.

The overall Project Team consisted of the following contributors:

- **BCC's Strategic Research Team:** leading on project management, research design, delivery of the interview and e-survey research activities, quantitative and qualitative data analysis, data triangulation, report writing, recommendations and research dissemination.

- **Qa Research:** leading on the design, implementation, analysis of findings and reporting of the focus groups.

- **IEWM Associate:** undertaking a 'critical friend' and quality assurance role throughout the project from design to dissemination.

## Literature Review

The Research process started with a desktop literature review conducted by SRT and the IEWM Associate. The review covered national policy, local inspection reports and policy documents, as well as national research on the adoption process.

The review highlighted a number of themes to be explored by the Research, these included:
- Adopters' experiences of being 'welcomed' (or feeling discouraged) from engaging in the adoption process.

- Concurrent planning or 'fostering for adoption'[3].
- Mismatch of adopters and the needs of children.
- Longer waiting times for sibling groups, older children, children with additional needs (physical, learning and emotional disabilities) and children from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds.
- Challenges of perfect matching.

## Participant Recruitment

SRT worked in close collaboration with BCC's Adoption Service to identify and invite a relevant sample to take part in the Research.

**Sample Frame Identification**
Hundreds of customers engage with the Service each year. A sufficient sample frame[4] was identified by taking the number of customers involved in the process between January 2010 and June 2012. This timescale ensured the experiences reported would be recent and therefore a more valid reflection on the Service's current practice and processes.

The number of customers that had engaged with the Service during this timescale was shared with the Research Team. This was broken down into the number of customers reaching the different stages to ensure the Research would invite sufficient customers from each stage of the process[5].

**Confidentiality**
Due to Data Protection legislation, the Adoption Service were not permitted to share names and personal details of past, current or successful adopters with the Research Team. To adhere with these confidentiality safeguards, the Adoption Service sent out all invites on behalf of the Research Team. Interested customers then contacted members of the Research Team directly to register on the Project, ensuring their participation remained confidential from the Adoption Service.

**Interview and Focus Group Sample Frame**
Customers who had engaged with the Service beyond the 'Group Information Stage' (during the specified timeframe) were invited to participate in either the interview or focus group activities.

The sample frame for these activities was restricted to customers who had progressed to the middle or latter stages of the adoption process to allow a more in-depth discussion of their experiences. In the main, it was assumed whilst customers who had been involved in the initial stages would have valuable messages these could be effectively captured through the e-survey.

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[3] The process by which approved prospective adopters would also be approved as foster carers so they can foster a named child(ren).
[4] In the context of this report, 'Sample Frame' refers to the total number of customers invited to participate in the research activities; it does not refer to the sample – the actual number of customers participating.
[5] Numbers of customers for the initial stages is inevitably higher than the latter stages as not all customers will decide or be advised to continue with the process.

The sample frame represented a total of 386 customers, this consisted of:
- 115 successful adopters[6].
- 271 customers who were currently in the process of applying or had started the process and left.  132 fell into the former, and 139 into the later categories.

Paper invites were sent by the Adoption Service to all 386 customers to inform them of the Research.  Where email addresses were held for customers, e-invitations were also distributed. A total of 234 e-invites were sent.

The invitation contained brief details about the project and a link to a simple website where customers could find out more and register their interest online (see e-registration below). The letter also stated that participants would be thanked for their participation in the project with £35 of high street vouchers[7].

**e- registration**
Following an analysis of options SRT decided to use an e-registration process to enrol customers on the Project. This was lead by Qa Research.

The e-registration was hosted on Qa Research's website and technical aspects were designed by their ICT function.  The webpage contained: background information on the project, the different research activities customers could engage in, what these would require from customers and how the Research findings would be used.  As such, the registration process sought to gain informed consent from customers before they chose to participate in the Project.

The e-registration form also contained demographic questions to aid profiling for the recruitment stage and asked about convenient times/days customers could take part to inform the Research planning.   When registering their interest customers could select whether they would like to participate in the focus groups or in-depth interviews or they could select no preference.

The invitation also contained a telephone number for Qa Research should potential participants prefer to call and register interest.

A three week period was allowed for registration. At approximately half way into the process, the Research Team reviewed current registration numbers to inform whether a follow up letter and/or email was required to increase registrations.  This was not implemented across the board because of promising registration levels. An e-invite, however, was sent to people who had left the process to try to increase registrations for this group.

**e-survey Sample Frame**
The e-survey was originally intended to capture the experiences of customers who had experienced only the initial stages of the adoption process.  Hence the original sample frame consisted of all customers who had been engaged in the adoption process (in the specified timeframe) up to the 'Group Information Stage'.

A total of 810 customers were identified, however the Adoption Service did not have the resources to co-ordinate a paper mail-out to this number (in addition to

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[6] This excluded 10 cases (identified during the specified period) which were removed from the invite list by Adoption Service Team Mangers and Social Workers due to the sensitivity of these cases.
[7] Transport costs were not reimbursed.

the 386 interview and focus group invites).  As such invites were sent electronically to those customers for whom the Service held email contact details[8].  Only 12 customers did not have email addresses on record. Following the send-out there were 98 failure notices were sent back.  Therefore it can be assumed a total of 700 customers received an email invite.

Following the interview and focus group e-registration, the Research Team decided to expand the scope of the e-survey to include all stages of the adoption process. This decision was taken because of the large number of people registering for the interview and focus group research activities and the limited places available.

All customers who registered for the interviews and focus groups but could not be engaged in these activities, were invited to participate in the e-survey. This flexible approach enabled interested customers the opportunity to feedback their experiences via another forum. This was a further 73 customers, taking the e-survey sample frame to 773 customers.


## Participant Selection for Interviews and Focus groups

In total 112 customers registered their interest to participate in the interviews and/or the focus groups.  The registration also asked whether their partners (where relevant) would like to participate - this increased the numbers to a potential 198 participants.

The Research required a total of 10 single or joint applicants/adopters for the interviews, and 32 applicants/adopters for the focus groups.  To prioritise which customers would be invited to participate, the Research Team divided the registration into the relevant adoption stages.  This enabled the Team to examine the diversity of customers falling into each stage.  The Team then prioritised customers from a range of backgrounds by considering the following factors[9]:
 • Ethnicity.
 • Religion.
 • Gender.
 • Sexual Orientation.
 • Age.
 • Joint/single applicants.

This ensured that a wide range of views would be captured[10].  (However, this was also dependant on how representative the people registering to take part in the Research were).

Once the participant list was finalised, letters/emails were sent out and telephone calls made to confirm arrangements for the focus groups and interviews.

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[8] Whilst recognising a paper invite may have increased registrations, email was also viewed to be an effective mechanism to inform potential participants, with questions raised as to how many
[9] Information on long term illnesses and disabilities were collected as part of the registration process, but these were not prominent enough to influence participant selection.
[10] Selection was also determined by customers' availability.

**Focus Groups**

Qa Research designed and led the series of four groups during August and September 2012.  The groups covered three themes, as follows:

1. Successful Adopters: two groups were delivered on this theme, this included adopters who had been matched or were waiting to be matched with children.
2. Customers currently in the process of applying to adopt.
3. BME adopters: BME adopters who had been matched or were waiting to be matched with children.

(Please note BME adopters were invited to all focus groups, as well as the specifically themed session).

The original research brief included plans for a dedicated focus group on adopters who had left the process.  It was recognised that these customers may not want to participate in a group setting due to the sensitive nature of their experiences. This was the case, with few adopters who had left the process registering for focus groups. There was a small number of people who had registered for the Research under this theme. As this was somewhat anticipated flexibility was built into the process and these individuals were offered interviews.

All focus groups took place in a central location in Birmingham city centre.  A neutral, voluntary sector venue was selected as opposed to Council offices. It was thought the latter may influence participants' willingness to attend and to open up fully.

Two focus groups were held on a Tuesday: one in the early evening starting at 5.30pm and one later starting at 7.30pm.  The remaining sessions were held on a Saturday starting at 10.30am and 1.00pm.

Each focus group was planned to last one and a half hours. All groups, however, continued for approximately 10 to 20 minutes longer.  Audio recordings were taken of the sessions, permission for which was gained from the participants before the session started.  A total of 34 customers took place in the four focus group sessions.

The sessions were facilitated by a member of staff from Qa Research.  They were also attended by one member of the SRT to promote a joint understanding of the findings between the research activities in the Project.

Standardised schedules were used to guide the sessions.  The sessions were semi-structured to allow participants' experiences to inform and direct the themes covered in each session[11].

Participants were also offered an option to provide personal video messages after the session to highlight pertinent issues about what is and what is not working well in the adoption process.  Unfortunately, no one took up the invitation. The reasons for this may have been because people:

- Felt they had already made their messages clear.
- Did not want to be on camera.

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[11] Available on request email Strategic.Research@birmingham.gov.uk

- Did not want to waiver their anonymity.

## In-depth interviews

Ten semi-structured interviews were undertaken in August and September 2012 by the SRT.  These included adopters from the following themes:

1. Successful adopters: four interviews.
2. Customers currently applying for adoption: two interviews.
3. Customers who left or were asked to stop the adoption process: four interviews.

The original research brief also included plans to explore 'placement breakdown[12,] through the interviews.  The Team were aware relevant customers may choose not to come forward because of the sensitive nature of this topic. This was the case with no relevant customers registering to participate.  However, it should also be noted that Birmingham's Adoption Service has a very low rate of placement breakdown, their Ofsted Adoption Service self assessment indicated that in 2011 no placement breakdowns had taken place[13].  Hence there may have been few or no customers invited to take part (in the specified time frame) who fell into this category.

Interviews took place at varying times and venues to suit participants' availability and preferences. Some were undertaken in participants' homes and some in central Council office buildings.  Each interview was planned to last one and a half hours, although in many cases it was longer.

Almost every interview was attended by two members of SRT (one taking on the role of lead interviewer and one taking on the role of transcriber).  Audio recordings were made of all the interviews, after gaining informed consent from participants at the start of the interview.

A standardised interview guide was used in a semi-structured format, with the option for probes and prompts to explore specific themes relevant to the participants in question[14].

A total of 14 participants took place in the ten interviews conducted[15].

## e-survey

The e-survey was designed and created by SRT using SurveyMonkey[16].  The questionnaire consisted of 73 questions covering the entire adoption process.

A number of questions were skipped by many participants, as the majority of customers invited to participate had only been engaged in the early stages of the adoption process.  This is reflected in the sample of participants responding to

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[12] Whereby a child(ren) is placed with adopted parents but that adoptive placement breaks down, and the child leaves the adopted parents home.
[13] Birmingham City Council (January 2012) Ofsted: Adoption Service self-assessment
[14] Available on request email Strategic.Research@birmingham.gov.uk
[15] In addition, 3 unstructured – and unplanned - interviews took place when customers who had not been involved in the research activities called the SRT directly to share their experiences.
[16] SurveyMonkey is an online survey tool.

each question, starting in the high 70's for questions relevant to all, reducing to 10's in the later stages.

The majority of questions included were not compulsory.  This may also have resulted in lower response rates for questions later in the survey, as participants may have experienced completion fatigue.

The e-survey was designed to protect participants' confidentiality.  At no point were participants asked to provide their names or contact details.  Basic demographic information was collected, but this has only been summarised at an aggregate level, so individuals cannot be identified.

There is a function on SurveyMonkey that allows researchers to collect participants' IP address; this was disabled for the e-survey to protect anonymity[17].

There was a two week completion period.  A reminder email was sent (at the mid point) to the 73 individuals who had registered an interest in the focus groups or interviews[18].

Due to technical difficulties, a reminder email was not sent out to the 700 individuals, engaged in the early stages of the process, who had been invited directly by the Adoption Service.

In total there were 81 responses to the e-survey; a 10% response rate[19].

See appendix A for a summary of the demographics for all participants involved in the Research.


## Analysis

**Focus Group**
Qa Research undertook the analysis of the focus group data. Each session was transcribed using the audio recordings.  Following this, the moderators met to identify common themes and differences between the focus groups. Finally, a report was produced outlining the findings, key themes and recommendations.

**Interviews**
The SRT transcribed and summarised the qualitative findings from the interviews using the audio recordings and hand written notes. The lead interviewers coded the data from each of their interviews in advance of meeting together to draw out common themes and differences in experiences.  The themes, and the evidence underpinning for these, were summarised in a document to be combined with the other data sets during the triangulation process.  Pertinent quotes were also identified illustrating a range of adopters' experiences for the final report.

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[17] Participants were also directed to SurveyMonkey's Privacy Policy and Security Statement to inform them how their information would be stored and processed.
[18] The Research Team had permission to contact these customers directly as a result of the e-registration process.
[19] A full summary of the e-survey results are available on request, email strategic.research@birmingham.gov.uk

**e-survey**
The e-survey contained both quantitative and qualitative data. The data was exported from SurveyMonkey into MS Excel. Simple descriptive statistics were generated by the SurveyMonkey programme. These were displayed in a tabular and graphic format to support the analysis process.

Where interesting trends were identified or further analysis was required, cross tabulations and other calculations were undertaken by the SRT Analysts. Qualitative data (e.g. open ended questions) were coded manually by SRT to identify common themes.  Pertinent quotes were also identified illustrating a range of adopters' experiences for the final report.

**Triangulation**
A triangulation session was facilitated by the IEWM Associate, and attended by the SRT and a representative from Qa Research, to discuss the findings from all the research activities. During this session, a summary of key findings was produced to guide the final report, as well as generating ideas for service improvements.

Final triangulation of results took place during SRT's report writing phase, drawing on the findings from all three research activities.


## Reflections and lessons learnt

This Research Project has involved a variety of methods and approaches.  It is worth reflecting on these to consider how effective they have been, making suggestions for future practice.

Some headline messages are summarised below:

- **e-registration:** The e-registration proved to be a very effective and smooth process for enrolling participants onto the Project.  Given it could be emailed as a direct link to customers, it was easy to access for internet users.

- **Incentives:** An incentive was offered in the original research invites for the in-depth activities to encourage customers to take part, given the one and a half hour time requirement.  Many participants said the incentive was not necessary and they would have participated anyway.  This suggests in similar research, where customers have a vested interest in the service in question, incentives may not be necessary.

- **Appropriateness of focus groups:** During the tender process for the focus group delivery, an interested research organisation questioned whether this methodology would be appropriate for 'adopters'.  The Project Team were aware a group setting could potentially be less likely to attract customers with sensitive experiences, e.g. left the process, asked to stop and placement breakdown.  However, it was hoped other participants would be happy to take part in group settings.  Those taking part in the focus groups were very open and honest in sharing their experiences and therefore this did not appear to be a barrier.

- **Preference for interviews:** 51 of the 112 customers registering indicated they would only take part in an in-depth interview.  3 requested focus group only and 58 said either.  This demonstrates a strong preference for interviews, although

as noted above the focus groups proved very effective in practice. Furthermore, many participants indicated they would do either focus groups or interviews; this may suggest if only focus groups had been available, this would not have put customers off registering.

- **Open and constructive:** Across the board, the Research participants were very open in sharing their experiences and did not appear to feel uncomfortable when doing so.  They were also very constructive and focused on how the Service could be improved.  This is very positive, suggesting adopters will be willing to participate in similar activities in the future.  However, the level of openness may have been influenced by the fact the Research was undertaken by a Team who are independent from the Adoption Service and confidentiality was maintained.  It may be necessary, therefore, to look at ways to provide this type of research context when asking adopters for future feedback.

- **Length of interviews and focus groups:** Most of the interviews and focus groups lasted longer than the specified one and a half hours. Often these did or could have run for considerably more time.  This indicates such activities may need to be allocated more time in the future.  However, it may also be the case that asking customers to participate in longer activities may discourage sign up due to the time commitment involved.  Furthermore, if future activities are more focused (as opposed to reviewing the whole adoption process) they may require less time.

- **Critical Friend:** The role of critical friend has proven very valuable in this Project.  The Associate appointed to this role is an expert in child and family research and has undertaken work for the DfE on improving the Adoption process.  Whilst SRT has the relevant research skills, its staff are not Adoption experts.  As such, it was a great asset to have an independent member with this detailed, contextual knowledge as an addition to the Research Team. (See Appendix B for a profile of Carola Bennion).

# Main Research Findings and Recommendations

## Structure

This section of the report summarises the main findings and recommendations from the Research.

Although participants were asked about all stages of the processes, some stages and themes were raised more frequently and/or appeared to have more impact on adopters' experiences. The main findings summarised in this section are under the following themes:

1. **Adopters' Preferences.**
2. **Preparation Training.**
3. **Panel.**
4. **Matching.**
5. **Social Worker.**
6. **Timescale.**
7. **Adopters decided to leave the process.**
8. **Adopters advised and asked to stop the process.**
9. **Adopters' experiences.**
10. **Eligibility.**

**Communication** was also a very prominent theme. It was a common thread throughout all stages of the process and as such is addressed under each of the above themes rather than a stand alone section.

Following the main findings of this report is a further section of 'Additional Research' findings. These are reported separately as they are considered of less significance or have less weight of evidence.

## Contextualisation

### Policy Context
This report proved timely as it coincided with the DfE's national consultation on proposals to deliver 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay'[20](APA), also taking place in late 2012.

Many of the recommendations made by the Research reinforce these proposals. These links are highlighted throughout the Research findings.

### Local Government Context
This Research is taking place at a time when local government is facing significant cuts and efficiency targets, reducing the resources available to deliver existing services and to make improvements to these services. These pressures must be considered when reviewing the recommendations contained in this report.

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[20] Department for Education, (2011). An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay.

**Service Context**

Participants involved in this Research had been engaged in BCC's adoption process during the previous two and a half years at the time the Research was conducted. During this time the Adoption Service has also experienced significant changes.

For the previous two years the Service was required to make year on year savings, restructuring its staff and functions to do so. This has impacted on staff, working in a context of uncertainty.

As of October 2011, other changes have been made to the Service bringing together previously specialised functions – namely adoption assessment Social Workers and Family Finder Social Workers (the latter lead on Adoption Matching).

This change has required staff to develop their overall knowledge and expertise needed to take adopters through the whole process, as opposed to focusing on specific stages. As a result there has been a settling in period whereby some Social Workers were more familiar with the Assessment Process and less so with the Matching stage, and vice versa, although all were now working across both stages of the adoption process.

# 1. Adopters' Preferences

**Preference Research Findings:**

BCC's Adoption Service's website states:

> *'Adopters come from a wide range of backgrounds. You can be single, married, or with a long-term partner. You can be straight or gay. You may or may not have children of your own and you don't have to be a homeowner. We welcome any ethnic origin or religion, <u>although we do particularly need adopters of mixed ethnicity and/ or people able to adopt siblings'</u>.*

This statement demonstrates the challenge many Adoption Services face in placing children from particular backgrounds. To understand more about the challenge of meeting adopters' wishes whilst finding a suitable home for all children waiting, the Research asked participants about their preferences and the reasons underpinning these.

**Age, Number and Gender**

Over 50% of e-survey participants expressed a preference to adopt younger children (0 to 24 months old). However, interview participants often qualified this by stating they knew it was unlikely they would be able to adopt a child under 12 months old, so they widened their preference to older children (e.g. two to three years old).

A substantial proportion - 38% - indicated a preference for three to four year olds, whilst only 6% selected primary school age and above[21]. Some participants said

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[21] Participants could select more than one response; totals do not add up to 100%; n = 79

because of their own age and stage in their career, they felt older children would be a better match.

Nearly 60% of e-survey participants indicated a preference for a single child; 32% a sibling group of two and only 1% a sibling group of three or more[22].

Some said they wanted a single child because they were first time parents and did not know if they could cope with more than one.  Others wanted more than one child and did not want to go through the adoption process twice; hence, their preference for sibling groups.  Others also wanted to help keep siblings together.

These results demonstrate a familiar challenge in placing older children and larger sibling groups.

The large majority had no gender preference at 84%[23].

**Religion**
The large majority of adopters articulated no religious preference: 80% of e-survey participants[24] and 90% of interviewees.

One participant spoke of their experience of rigid matching on religious criteria. The adopter from an Asian origin, was very open to a trans-religious adoption (e.g. would adopt a Muslim child), knowing their own religion – Hindu - is not common amongst children waiting. However, they were told there was a low chance of a trans-religious adoption and an adopter of the same religion as a Muslim child (e.g. Somali) would have more chance of adopting them.

The adopter found this experience very frustrating, particularly given the low level of Asian adopters in the city, and stressed the similarities between their culture and that of many Asian Muslim children. At the time of the Research, this adopter was still waiting to be matched after over two years in the process.

Opinions on religion were not clear cut.   Three participants stated no preference, but felt it would be better if the child came from the same religion as them.  Three others noted they would find it difficult to adopt a child from a different religious background.

Another participant said it would depend on the religion, commenting that Hindu and Sikh are more complementary than Hindu and Muslim.  On the other hand, another Sikh participant had adopted a half Muslim child.

Some adopters who had no religious preference felt they were 'quizzed' by staff about how they would meet a child's needs from a different religion and many were concerned about their ability to do so.

> *"If you don't come from that background what can you really offer the child?"*

> *"If the children was …Jewish, and wanted to go to the synagogue…is that all we could do?  Is that enough? [You] know you can talk about it, [but] felt it[s] … surface really"*

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[22] Participants could select more than one response; totals do not add up to 100%; n = 78
[23] Participants could select more than one response; totals do not add up to 100%; n = 79
[24]  n = 79

**Ethnicity**

Just over half the e-survey participants had no preference regarding ethnicity, while 45% indicated they would like a child(ren) from the same ethnicity[25].

In contrast, 90% of interviewees preferred the same ethnicity. Reasons given included not wanting the child to 'stick out', concerns about being able to meet the children's needs and not living in a diverse area.

> "the child is already defined by its adoption differences… [I would be] worried about the impact… why is your mummy and daddy different colour to you?"

It is interesting that the interviews revealed a stronger tendency towards the same ethnicity. It is possible this in-depth exploration of adopters' experiences may have enabled participants to open up more. The e-survey participants may also have been subject to 'social desirability', whereby participants may have given what they felt to be the 'right response' to the question.

A white couple who reported they had no ethnicity preference ticked 'white' on the 'preference form'. They said this was subsequently highlighted in a negative manner by different members of staff during the process. They felt judged but pointed out there was nowhere on the form to select 'no preference'. Adoption Staff provided them with a list of books to research different religions and cultures, but they said they felt 'quizzed' rather than supported with widening their options.

There were also several examples of participants who felt they experienced rigid matching and felt the Service would not consider them for transracial adoptions:

> "We feel we were quite broad minded … However we were effectively barred from … adopting non-white children by the system?!"

> "…suggested I was not going to be able to adopt…given my rather unusual ethnicity. I was basically told they did not have many X children to be adopted. I had not asked for X children"[26]

> "We are now in the matching stage. Despite our NOT stipulating a preference for white UK children. These were all we were considered for … although my husband and I have the skills and ability to help a child understand their heritage"

In one case, a mixed White/Black African applicant, who appeared physically white, wanted to be matched with a mixed ethnicity child. On 'paper' they said they generated a lot of interest, but once photographs were exchanged interest often declined.

> "…on paper, I think lots of social workers thought, 'Oh that's good' and sent stuff through and whenever they got a photo of us, they all went quiet and in the end our social worker didn't send a photo".

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[25] n = 76

[26] X = participant's country of origin; omitted to protect confidentiality.

In contrast, another white couple had a positive experience of flexible matching for ethnicity. In this case, the couple had an ethnically diverse family and friendship group, and at Panel were advised to consider trans-racial adoptions. The couple were very open to this, but had not widened their preferences previously because of their concerns about being able to effectively support the child.

**Additional Needs (Physical, Learning and Emotional)**
Many participants felt the adoption process as a whole painted an overly negative picture of children waiting to be adopted. Adopters felt they had been given the impression a large number of the children waiting have additional needs and it was therefore suggested it was very likely their potential adopted child(ren) would also have such needs.

Although many said they thought emotional and behavioural needs were a given, the majority (71%) of e-survey participants indicated a preference for children with no significant needs. Only 24% indicated no preference[27].

These findings suggest the Service has a significant challenge to place children with additional needs. However, these results may have been influenced by the Research terminology which asked participants about their preference; alternative wording, e.g. 'what would you consider' may have yielded different results.

Adopters found it difficult to articulate their preferences in this area. Several referred to a form listing 42 conditions (or needs) children might have, against which they were asked to indicate whether they would, would not, or may consider adopting children.

> *"you don't know what it means to have a child with those symptoms so you are initially sceptical about saying yes to anything  - either said no, or maybe"*

It was seen as an abstract decision, with little or perhaps no knowledge of the conditions listed and no other information about that potential child they would be adopting, e.g. their wider needs and personality.

> *"[Its] only when you get to matching process, when you know the child's needs that you might research it, you can't study every condition"*

Very few participants in the focus groups and interviews felt the children they had adopted had additional needs. This seemed surprising given the messages adopters reported about the high number of children waiting with additional needs. However, some adopters did say they had been presented with Child Permanency Reports (CPRs) for children with more significant needs and had not agreed to the match, often because they did not feel capable of caring for the child.

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[27]Participants could select more than one response, hence totals do not add up to 100%; n = 78

**Preference Recommendations**

**Religion and Ethnicity recommendations:**

There are a number of actions which could be taken to increase the number of adoptions amongst children waiting from BME and religious backgrounds.

**1. Review BCC's Trans-racial Policy**
BCC's Adoption Service has a policy for trans-racial adoptions, but this does not appear to mirror the experience of several adopters with reports of rigid matching.

It would be valuable to review the policy to ensure it is flexible enough to meet the needs of children waiting. This review could also examine guidance given to Social Workers on how to implement the policy and Social Workers' practices[28] to ensure the process itself encourages this approach.

Draft legislation for 'Fostering for Adoption' (Secretary of State for Education, 2012) includes a provision repealing the requirement on adoption agencies to give due consideration to religion, ethnicity and cultural background when placing children. This indicates that these factors should not be prioritised over the responsibility of adoption agencies to place the child's welfare as the paramount consideration when matching children.

Birmingham's Adoption Service may wish to include a similar statement within its Trans-racial Policy, (if this not already the case) noting that the child's background will be taken into account, but the overriding concern when determining suitability of matches is the child(ren)'s welfare.

**2. Widening Adopters' preferences**
It is clear some adopters felt judged when they discussed religious and ethnic adoptions outside their own background and others felt they were not capable of doing so.

It is important 'preferences' are discussed with all adopters in an open and non-judgemental manner. Staff should make it clear to applicants the aim of these discussions is to understand adopters' preferences, not to ascertain whether applicants are open minded (or 'racist'). Adopters will have different reasons for requesting children from similar or different backgrounds. There are valid reasons as to why people may opt for a similar background.

Where adopters are open to trans-racial and trans-religious adoptions, but are concerned about their ability to meet children's needs, Social Workers could work with the applicants to understand their concerns and capacity. If a white couple who were advised to consider trans-racial adoptions at Panel had this type of discussion, and were supported through the decision, they may have widened their preferences earlier in the process.

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[28] Birmingham City Council (January 2012) Ofsted: Adoption Service self-assessment notes over the next 12 months Social Workers are due to have training in trans-racial placements. It would be valuable to review the content of this training to ensure it covers the issues and recommendations included in this report.

By having honest and non-judgemental discussions, staff should also be able to identify where adopters may feel pressurised to adopt outside their background but this is not their true preference. This will ensure applicants' matching criteria reflect their genuine wishes.

The Service could also provide more resources and training for adopters to help them understand what it means to meet the needs of a child from a specific religion or cultural background (ethnicity) in practice[29]. This should enable adopters to make informed decisions about what they are capable of, rather than expecting adopters to already know this and/or asking individual adopters to research this themselves.

It would be good practice to involve applicants/adopters in the design and approval of materials for this audience to ensure they are tailored appropriately, providing the right level and tone of information.

Another simple change would be to include a 'no preference' option on the relevant 'preference form' to enable adopters to articulate wider preferences. Or, alternatively, allow applicants to select multiple ethnicities/religions.

### 3. Increase numbers of Ethnic and Religious Adopters
The Service could look at ways to increase the number of adopters coming forward to adopt from BME and religious backgrounds.

Participants felt the Service should be publishing information about 'gaps in adopters' and 'harder to place children' to encourage people who matched these profiles to come forward. (Also see Preferences Recommendations).

The Service could also do more to keep interested adopters in the process. The Research highlighted a number of experiences where BME adopters left the process because of a poor quality of service and timescale/delay issues. These are valuable 'wasted opportunities' the Service should work hard to avoid by improving overall standards, as detailed in forthcoming sections of this report.

When asked about the reason for leaving the process, one participant responded:

> "…advised little likelihood of me being accepted…as a single black adopter"

### Additional Needs Recommendations:

### 1. Publish information on level of 'needs'
The Service could publish information on the number of children waiting with mild to significant additional needs so adopters have a clearer picture of the potential children they could be matched with. The Service informed the Research Team up to 90% of children waiting have additional needs. This suggests that what adopters saw as an overemphasis on children with additional needs may actually

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[29] Birmingham City Council (January 2012) Ofsted: Adoption Service self-assessment notes training in equalities and trans-racial placements will be provided to adopters from February 2012, the context of which should be reviewed to ensure it addresses the issues and recommendations suggested in this report.

be the reality. This would be made very clear by publishing the figures for children with a different range of needs.

## 2. Help adopters understand additional needs

Publishing the above information and providing it to adopters early on could help applicants to start thinking about the type of children waiting and manage expectations early in the process.

Alongside this information, resources could be provided to applicants outlining what it means to have these conditions and what support adoptive parents should expect to provide to children with those conditions.

The Service could also help adopters understand conditions and potentially widen preferences by providing opportunities to speak with adopters of children with additional needs. Another option may be to provide volunteering opportunities with children with additional needs to develop adopters' understanding and to break down barriers.

## Overall Preferences Recommendations:

## 1. Less detail up front

In general, the Research suggests adopters are asked to articulate their adoption preferences in more detail than required early on in the process. At this stage, choices felt abstract and adopters do not have all the information they need.

During initial stages the Service should steer away from firm decisions on the profile of the children adopters would consider. Some adopters felt they could not change their preferences and in effect were signing up for a particular 'type' of child.

It would be valuable however for the Service to have open discussions with adopters from the start of the process about the type of children waiting, this is important to manage adopters' expectations, but also to widen preferences. 70% of e-survey participants indicated their Social Worker did not discuss widening options with them[30].

The conversation about preferences should continue throughout the adoption process as adopters learn more. Conversations then become firmer leading up to the matching stage to help Social Workers start to identify relevant children.

## 2. Provide information on child and adopter profiles

The previous sections outline the importance of providing more information to adopters on children waiting. Overall profiles of children waiting detailing age, gender, additional needs, single child/sibling group, ethnicity and religion, would help adopters see where the greatest needs are, and how they should widen their preferences to increase chances of a successful match.

Publishing aggregated demographic profiles of approved adopters would go one step further demonstrating gaps in adopters, both to widen applicants' preferences

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[30] n = 17

and hopefully to encourage others to come forward.

> *"Birmingham needs to give more information to adopters about the type of children available for adoption and the likely timescales particularly for less complex children"*

### 3. Fast-tracking

The Service could consider whether adopters could be fast-tracked if they opt to adopt harder to place children to encourage more adopters to widen their preferences. Research participants did not have a clear view as to whether this type of arrangement is currently in place.

> *"they only sort of said that sibling groups or children with disabilities or children from different ethnic backgrounds might have priority, but they didn't give much"*

The 'profile' for 'harder to place children' would need to be clearly outlined by the Service. Birmingham's Ofsted Adoption Self Assessment states:

> *'In line with national trends, there is a particular need for placements for children of complex mixed ethnicity, older children, sibling groups and children with specific prenatal substance misuse'.*

The benefits of adopting 'harder to place children' would also need to be made explicitly clear, e.g. in terms of a quicker time scale.

### 4. Practical Support

A few participants noted practical and financial support may help adopters widen their preferences. For example:

- Financial support to enable adopters to keep sibling groups together.
- More information on relevant benefits.
- Financial support to enable adopters to support children with more additional needs, e.g. tuition for learning disabilities, help with travel, and accommodation adaptations for medical needs, etc.

The Adoption Service has indicated they are actively supporting adopters through an adoption allowance. Between April 2009 and March 2012 2,262 allowances were paid to support adopters whose adopted children have additional needs, as well as supporting sibling placements.

The results suggest not all adopters know about the allowance, hence the Service may wish to strengthen communications about its existence and purpose; whilst appreciating such support may be less widespread in the future with year on year budget cuts in local government

(Allowances are means tested on the basis of applicants' disposable incomes).

## 2. Preparation Training

**Preparation Training Research Findings:**

**Positive experience**
The preparation training was reported as the most positive stage in the adoption process with 71% of e-survey participants rating this stage positively[31].

> *"The training is excellent…absolutely fantastic"*

The training was reported to be an eye opener, provoking real thought about the decision to adopt and what it entails.

> *"I think it weeds out those who are serious about adoption and those who aren't. So, we thought it was good for that reason"*

> *"… until that point you looked at the positives…gave you a bit of a jolt and brought you back to the ground…here is the reality and the whole picture and the negatives… if we were going to go ahead … it was a very, very thoroughly informed decision. I think that way it helped"*

**Peer Support**

The talks by previous adopters were reported to be extremely valuable and insightful, with adopters welcoming the honest and open advice. They also valued the opportunity to build networks with peers going through the same process.

> *"… that assessment training I thought the social workers were absolutely brilliant…it was excellent…very insightful, learnt loads and I have kept in touch with people … who have now gone on to become adoptive parents"*

> *"Listening to the experience of an existing adopter [was very helpful…[it] is what I remember most vividly"*

**Children waiting**
The training gave adopters a real understanding of the children waiting to be adopted.

> *"… that's the first point at which you see what type of children are waiting... that's when you start thinking about children that may have disabilities …siblings or other children that you could give a home to…it's the training that changed us"*

> *"I wanted one or two, but then I just wanted one. Reality kicked in!"*

Some adopters felt there was a negative tone about the children waiting.

> *"in the training you get the warts and all but I think …they're trying to make sure all those people with ideal child…in their head, that they dispel it, that it's going to be more complicated … but by the time I finished training I was thinking I don't know if I'm up to this!"*

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[31] n=28

> *"very thorough and useful in some respects, but there seemed an over-emphasis on 'attachment disorder', to the point of almost putting people off, and causing paranoia"*

Others appreciated the honesty and felt it managed expectations of potential matches successfully.

> *"I think if it did put you off I think then it probably should put you off. I mean a lot of our realities is very different from what was shown in training, but in reality you <u>could</u> have a child with all of those issues and all of those problems…"*

> *"We were given a very negative picture of a potential adopted child… at the same time it was a good thing. It made us really think that you can't guarantee the child or the personality…we had all the horror stories, but it still didn't put us off, because my [birth] daughter could be like that"*

Adopters felt staff provided consistent messages stressing if they kept to a narrow set of preferences they could be waiting for longer.

**Format and content**
Some found the intensive format of the training (which ran over five days) helpful allowing time to focus on the process.  Others found this difficult to get consecutive days off work.

There were some remarks that the training sessions were geared towards couples who were adopting because they could not have children naturally.  Other adopters, including people selecting adoption as their first choice, single adopters and fosters carers who were adopting, felt the tone and content should be more inclusive.

Many individuals shared stories and motivations for adoption and some felt there was an expectation that everyone should.  A few prospective adopters found this aspect too intrusive and did not want to articulate personal motivations and traumatic life events in public.

**Too negative**
There were some comments about the training being too negative, putting across the worse case scenario, and needing to strike a better balance.

> *"I did feel … the whole process was … trying to put us off … there wasn't a balance"*

> *"Try not to discourage people as a matter of course"*

> *"one day we said we can't wait 'til we get home to a bundle of joy, thinking after a couple of months when they're settled, she said 'it won't be a bundle of joy! We were dumbfounded, they don't have to be negative all the time, we're hoping to bring joy and love and laughter that's what it's all about''*

> *"General tone was a little heavy. While I can see why it is that way, I think it sets quite a negative tone"*

**Part of the assessment process?**

Some adopters commented they were unclear as to whether the training was part of the assessment process. They felt they were being observed and had to watch what they said and did.  A staff member was reported to have said:

> *"...yeah, you are being watched…"*

The commenting participants could not recall being told the training was part of the assessment.  Two participants said staff had made comments on their suitability to adopt, drawing on 'observations' from the training.

> *"They had actually noticed how many times my phone went and wondered why I was taking so many phone calls. I had an important workshop I was leading in two days' time and I was trying to sort the issues by phone during tea breaks. They asked if I was sure if I could fit in a child as well as doing my day job."*

In the other case, an adopter reported they were questioned about their sexuality and also commented *"if hadn't seen you together I wouldn't have put you together as a couple"*. They felt this comment was highly inappropriate and questioned whether similar remarks would have been made to a heterosexual couple.

Another said:

> *"it is unfair to judge people on training, when you are there to learn and experience not to be judged on".*

**Timescale**

Adopters commonly reported delays waiting to attend the training.  89% of e-survey respondents said they experienced delays at this stage[32].

Several quoted delays of six to nine months and reported having to chase the Service, and 50% of e-survey participants also experienced delays of six months or more[33].

Sometimes a change in circumstances (e.g. bereavement) meant adopters missed the next available course. In some cases, the following one was some months away, thus increasing their wait.

The wait was very frustrating for many adopters who were unsure how long it would take and what the reason was.  Many assumed it was a lack of resources, and several commented that they expected a better standard of service.  Another adopter felt their patience was purposefully being tested, and as such did not chase adoption staff.

**Group Information Session**

Group Information Sessions are held before the Preparation Training stage however many of the above comments relate to both.

In particular, participants also commented that Group Information Sessions were: thought-provoking, gave an overly negative perception of children waiting and there was a negative tone to the session itself.

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[32] n = 18
[33] n = 18

55% of the e-survey participants rated their overall experience at the Group Information Sessions as 'excellent' or 'good', 29% believed as 'average' and 16% as 'poor' or 'very poor'[34].

71% of e-survey participants experienced delays; of those, 17% was less than 1 month, 46% between 1 month and 6 months and 8% more than 6 months[35].

The Group Information Sessions were rated less positively than the Preparation Sessions. Participants, however, experienced fewer and shorter delays for the former.

Five comments were also made about the venue for Group Information Session (above the Adoption Service Recruitment Shop) being too small and hot.

### Group Training (and Information Session) Recommendations:

The Research participants made a number of recommendations for service improvements in relation to the Preparation Training; these are as follows:

1. **More sessions held closer together to reduce wait.**
   - Within the current context of budget pressures the Service could explore the potential to collaborate with other local authorities to share the costs of running training sessions – increasing its capacity to run more sessions.
   - Similarly, the Service could consider marketing and selling places on additional courses to other authorities to help fund these sessions.

2. **Communicate reasons for delays to reduce adopters' anxieties as to the reasons things 'have gone quiet'[36].**

3. **Provide opportunities to build networks before preparation training.**
   - Many adopters valued the opportunity to develop networks with people in the same position. Due to the long waits for training adopters suggested opportunities should be provided to develop these links earlier.

4. **More presentations and/or videos by successful adopters:**
   - Participants rated the presentations by successful adopters very highly and would like training sessions to include more.  In particular, attendees would like to hear from adopters where the process has gone smoothly and equally where it was not been straightforward – outlining challenges faced and how these were overcome.
   - Several participants also said they would be happy to attend future sessions as presenters.
   - Presentations would also be welcomed by different types of adopters, e.g. single, joint, same sexed, fosterers, etc.

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[34] n = 38
[35] n = 24
[36] The Research Team have been informed the Service now write to applicants if there is going to be a delay when being allocated a training session; this should include the reason why.

5. **Presentations by people who have been adopted.**
   - One participant suggested hearing from adoptees themselves. This would provide a valuable insight into the challenges of adoption from the child's perspective, and also help balance negative messages – demonstrating the positive impact adoption can have on people's lives.

6. **Design the sessions so the tone, information and messages are more inclusive for different audiences,** e.g. foster carers, people choosing adoption as first choice and single adopters.[37]

7. **Ensure the tone of training strikes a balance between the challenge and the rewards of adoption.**

8. **Clarify whether training is part of the assessment process.**
   - The Adoption Service have clarified the Preparation Training is part of the assessment process to the Research Team. This message should be reinforced in Service communications so adopters are aware of this.
   - The Service should also be explicit and transparent about what information is being gathered and how it will be used, as well as how adopters can gain feedback on their assessment outcome.

9. **Run sessions for a half day in the morning or afternoon to reduce time taken off work.**

10. **Hold sessions in more spacious and comfortable venues so applicants can relax and feel more valued.**

In addition to the above, the training could utilise actual statistics and information on the number of children waiting by characteristic (as detailed under 'Preference Recommendations'), so adopters can see for themselves the 'type' of children waiting. This will avoid any perceived overemphasis on 'challenging children'.

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[37] The Adoption Service informed the Research Team it has recently started running separate sessions for foster carers.

## 3. Panel

### Panel Research Findings:

63% of e-survey participants found the Panel meeting useful[38].

> *"Made us feel welcomed and valued"*

> *"We were made to feel at ease… and didn't have to wait long for the recommendation"*

Similarly, 59% rated their overall satisfaction of this stage as excellent or good; however 12% rated it as average and 30% as poor or very poor[39]. Participants raised a number of themes where improvements could take place.

### Preparation
Some adopters felt well prepared for Panel. Their Social Worker supported them through the process, explaining what would happen, who would be present, the type of questions they may be asked, etc.

> *"We were supported by our social worker and made to feel at ease although we were very nervous"*

However, the e-survey found that while 50% of participants stated support from the Service was useful; the remaining 50% indicated this was an area needing improvement[40].

> *"Poor, rushed and last minute, we were not reassured and were unsure of what to expect"*

### Assessment reports
Participants had mixed experiences regarding the quality of their assessment reports for Panel. 46% of e-survey participants found their assessment reports useful, the remaining 54% indicated this was an area for improvement[41] [42].

Some were very pleased; they could access the report, make comments and agreed with what was included.

> *"Was thorough and well thought out"*

> *"…thorough and well evidenced"*

> *"It highlighted all our strengths, as prospective parents"*

Others reported delays at Panel. These were considered to be due to the poor quality of the reports. Panel dates had to be postponed due to missing information and inaccuracies. This was frustrating, particularly in cases when adopters felt they had passed on the information and it had not been included.

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[38] n = 16
[39] n = 17
[40] n = 16
[41] n = 22
[42] Birmingham City Council's (January 2012) Ofsted: Adoption Service self-assessment notes historical high turn over rates in Social Workers has had a 'negative impact of the quality, consistency and timeliness of assessments as we as the Child Permanence Report'. However Social Work vacancy rates have been dropping, cited as 13% below the city's current target.

> *"…we were due to go to panel and it was pulled the night before because the panel advisor decided that the paperwork was nowhere near adequate and then we had to get a new social worker and be re-assessed, she decided to start again basically…"*

> *"when I was going through the paperwork I was going 'don't you need to know this about me?' … she ... wasn't employed by Birmingham City Council…weren't interested. She came, answered the questions, ticked the boxes… That was quite frustrating when you go through the process, it's a massive thing that you're doing, and they're getting things wrong, mine was badly written, I could have written it better"*

Others did not have adequate time to read through the report and request changes before they were required to sign it off.

> *"I could keep you here 'til 4 'o clock telling you about all the things in the report that were wrong and yet he turned up on a Friday afternoon saying 'can you have a quick read of this report because I want to submit it on Monday' "*

> *" rushed and done last minute,,,we were given drafts of our report a bit at a time and to meet the deadline our social worker cut and pasted our signatures into the report without us having reviewed and signed off the final report"*

Some participants felt the reports were putting words into their mouths:

> *"[the adopter] is aware that she cannot have a Muslim child"*

> *"The report was full of the negatives rather than the positives…we had to insist that where we disagreed with her that she put this in the report"*

There were also comments about low standards of spelling and grammar within reports and the need to ensure they are properly proofread.

> *"Terribly written, extremely poor spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence structure. Why don't they get someone with good English skills to proof read their reports?"*

**Role of the Panel**
Panel is a legally required aspect of the adoption process. Some participants, however, questioned the role of the Panel. They felt their assessment report already indicated the adoption recommendation and relevant issues had been dealt with.

Others felt the Panel were raising questions for the sake of it, rather than addressing issues of substance.

> *"What is the point? Other than the chair, the panel were moody and unwelcoming, no smiles; hostile environment. No relevant questions [were] put to us"*

There were mixed feelings about the make-up of the Panel. While some viewed the diverse membership positively, others were less positive about being

'questioned' by a group of people who did not know the adopters and their case fully.

There were also some negative reports of overly opinionated Panel members and being asked what adopters viewed as irrelevant or inappropriate lines of questioning.

> "'We don't actually have a lot of questions to ask you because your social worker has done your report so thoroughly…' they were just making up things to ask. One of the panel members asked a really strange question – I think she got told off afterwards…"

In contrast, as previously mentioned, another couple had a very positive experience at Panel. After reviewing the adopter's case, the Panel members advised them to consider trans-racial adoptions because of their mixed family and social network.

## Delays

76%[43] of e-survey participants felt timeliness was an area of improvement for the Panel stage. 12 of the 13 participants completing this part of the e-survey reported that they experienced delays at Panel. (50% of delays were between one and six months, 50% were six months or more[44]).

A lack of Panel days was commonly reported as the reason for causing delays. Participants said this was a frustrating time with the assessment report ready, but having to wait for the next available date.

> "We had to go to panel twice… Delays were horrendous and we were not kept informed at all, we had to chase constantly"

> (The above adopter experienced a seven month delay).

Many other delays were caused by medical checks not being completed in time, or out-of-date checks due to the length of time waiting.

> "There was a long delay before we could get to Panel due to medical paperwork not being returned in time"

In contrast, some had more positive experiences at this stage:

> "Have just been given my panel date and I haven't had to wait long for it".

## Messages about the next stage

Following their Panel decision, two adopters were given very different messages about the next stage of the process.

The first have been waiting for a match since December 2011 but said they were told the following straight after Panel…

> "…prepare yourselves, your feet won't touch the ground, you will be matched rapidly..."

In contrast, another adopter said they were told it would take a while to allocate the matching Social Worker.

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[43] 76% or 13 participants; (n=17)
[44] n = 13

**<u>Panel Recommendations:</u>**

There are a number of actions which could be taken to respond to adopters' issues and concerns about this stage:

1. **Outline consistent standards of support that adopters can expect to receive in preparation for Panel:**
   - Request adopters' feedback on support provided and areas of improvement.

2. **Quality assure Assessment Reports:**
   - Before they are distributed to adopters and Panel.
   - Ensure information gaps are identified and addressed.

3. **Set up process checks to ensure all the necessary information is in place in the run up to Panel:**
   - Investigate why frequent delays are occurring due to incomplete and invalid medical checks and put in place remedial action.
   - APA proposals recommend all checks will be completed before the assessment stage begins. If enforced this should ensure all necessary checks are ready well before Panel. However, there may still be a risk that checks could be out-of-date before Panel occurs (depending on the duration of the assessment process). This, therefore, needs to be monitored.

4. **Set and 'enforce' a minimum timescale for adopters to review and request changes to assessment reports:**
   - APA states adopters should currently have 10 days to consider papers before Panel.

5. **Clarify to adopters the role of the Panel for adopters and the question framework:**
   - Adopters should be informed that Panel is a legal requirement of the adoption process; if this already happens this message should be strengthened further.
   - Adopters would also benefit if panel members had a clear set of criteria and an accompanying question framework upon which to base all questions and the Panel's final decision.

6. **Review current numbers and frequency of Panel dates, and consider ways to increase these to ensure they meet levels of demand.**

## 4. Matching

**Matching Research Findings:**

Participants painted a mixed picture of the matching stage. When asked to rate their overall experience, 38% of e-survey participants indicated it was poor or very poor, 31% average and 31% excellent or good[45].

**Matching Information**

50% of e-survey participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the information given to them on potential matches, whilst 32% were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied[46].

Participants were disappointed when presented with 'grainy' pictures and a few lines on a child. They wanted more and better quality information on which to base their decisions. They were also frustrated when other adopters they were in contact with seemed to be getting more information.

CPRs, prepared by the child's Social Worker were discussed in some length. There were several cases where adopters said these were inaccurate and out-of-date. There was also the sense that adopters needed to 'read between the lines' to understand children's needs'[47].

> *"The CPR was wrong in so many ways…dates of birth…wrong child, they'd cut and paste all these different children's reports into his report, it wasn't in sequence, … page numbers were all wrong and we knew that panel probably weren't going to accept that".*

> *"CPR's can be so out of date …we were given inaccuracies about how he was walking, talking, he's developed along the normal milestones, but when we met him, he wasn't walking and he wasn't talking…"*

One adopter found out more by speaking to a medical advisor involved with a potential match and highlighted that this information should have been in the report itself.

Basic grammar and spelling issues within reports were also highlighted.

**Appropriateness of Matches**

Again, perceptions about the appropriateness of matches were very mixed. 53% of e-survey participants indicated they were excellent or well matched with children; 47% indicated they were inappropriate or very inappropriate matches[48].

Two interviewees found it a smooth process and went with their first matches.

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[45] n = 16

[46] n = 16

[47] Birmingham's (January 2012) Ofsted: Adoption self assessment notes historical high turn over rates in Social Workers has had a 'negative impact of the quality, consistency and timeliness of assessments as well as the Child Permanence Report'. The assessment also notes that Social Work vacancy rates have been dropping, cited as 13% below the city's current target.

[48] n = 17

Other adopters were pleasantly surprised, being matched with much younger children than anticipated with no additional needs.  Given the negative impression adopters reported of the children waiting, their expectations had been surpassed.

> "I thought … that you'd have a child a lot older than the child we ended up adopting, I thought … five plus, [child] was 19 months old… In many ways I was luckier than I expected to be"

Others felt matches were inappropriate for a number of reasons including:

• **Proximity:** There were several cases where adopters were presented with potential matches for children whose birth parents lived in close proximity to the adopter's own home.  Participants felt this was inappropriate given the likelihood that they, and their adopted child(ren), might 'bump' into the birth parents or the parents' friends in the area.  This was considered particularly inappropriate where the child(ren) had been removed in difficult circumstances.

• **Additional needs:** A self-employed couple were matched with a child with significant medical needs requiring five hospital visits a week for six months. The couple could not afford to take the time out of work and felt their report should have indicated such a match would not be appropriate.

• **Child beliefs:** A same sexed couple were matched with a child who displayed negative opinions towards homosexuality. The couple articulated their anxieties about the match; however, the Service wanted to explore the match potential further, with the help of child counselling services.  (The match did not take place after failed counselling).

• **Religion:** An adopter was matched with a Muslim child although they had stated 'Christian' in their preferences.

Some adopters did not understand how the process worked and why they had been presented with particular matches.

> "their computer system routinely sent out inappropriate matches for us and for the friends that we made on the training sessions"

> "Social workers think they know what sort of child you should have"

However, it should be recognised that from a Service perspective to encourage adopters to think more widely about matches, staff will need to present profiles they think 'fit' the adopters well, but do not necessarily reflect their exact matching criteria.

There were several comments that Social Workers were 'great' but were restricted by poor systems and processes.

> "Ours was wonderful and supported all our requests for information from the Children Who Wait magazine and was looking out for children for us as the "Family Finder" wasn't coming up with anything appropriate."

> "our social worker was excellent but hampered by the system which took too long"

**Sibling Groups**

There were at least seven examples where adopters had been approved to adopt sibling groups but had ended up adopting a single child, often because they were only presented with single child matches.

At least three of these adopters are now undertaking the process for a second time and some were frustrated that they now had to repeat the process.

In one case, the adopter reported that staff actively put her off a sibling group (after being approved) saying she did not have the capacity to adopt more than one.

Another adopter who was re-applying reflected on the discussions and said they would be interested to know whether their existing child had any siblings they could adopt:

> "we were approved for siblings but none were ever presented to us but we became desperate I suppose, and we were told we were more likely to find one. But then in terms of [the child's] birth mum we've never been told anything about whether she's had other children, based on what I know about her I'd say there's a strong likelihood she has. It's a shame in a way"

This account is surprising given the difficulty in placing sibling groups, and it would be worth exploring the possibility that opportunities to place sibling groups are being missed.

**Pressure to achieve matches**
There were some examples where adopters felt matches were being pushed too hard. In the main, these concerned children whom participants felt were difficult to place and were not a good match.

> "…we said we weren't prepared to take on special needs we decided that.. I'm sure it's just the way they work, they keep having to push the boundaries is the word they use…"

> "We had settled on two particular children and they kept throwing other children in at the same time. …the really hard to place ones I think they were … trying to push us towards those."

In another case a single adopter who had waited a long time for their first match was being asked to consider adopting the first child's sibling, although she was still awaiting induction (for the first child). The adopter felt pressurised to make a decision.

This example does not seem to follow the principles of adoption assessment. The process would suggest the first child should be placed and once they have had chance to settle, the Service should re-assess the adopter's capacity to adopt a second child. This does not seem to have been the principal driver in this case.

**Change of Social Worker**
Delays were often linked to a change in Social Worker between the assessment and matching stages. In the main, this seemed to be caused by the lack of available staff.

> "…you've passed the test, so it shouldn't take too long for them to find you a child… but then you realise … they haven't got a social worker available because there's a shortage of staff and you're sort of left languishing, I found that the most difficult part"

However, one interviewee experienced a three month delay because their case file had not been passed on; they were 'lost in the system'.

The change in staff also required adopters to develop a new relationship with the new Social Worker.  This meant re-telling their story.

> "the relationship and the understanding that we built up with the first social worker's gone and we're starting from scratch and that is quite difficult and frustrating"

## Length of process
Delays were very common, with 92% of e-survey respondents reporting delays at this stage.  These were lengthy, with 42% experiencing delays of six months or more[49].

The process often speeded up as adopters reached the three month stage and could be referred to the national adoption register.  This suggests the process and/or staff are not as proactive as they need to be, and that activity escalates when the Service may lose adopters to other local authorities.

Participants found the delays difficult to understand and accept when there are children waiting to be adopted, delaying them going to a loving home and ultimately impacting on their life chances.

Unsurprisingly, adopters wanted the timescale and delays to be improved, in particular delays around Social Worker allocation, annual leave and sickness.

In contrast, there was one case where a participant who had been approved fairly recently had found the matching process too quick.

## Involvement
Adopters did not feel particularly involved in the matching process; 63% of e-survey participants indicated they felt partially, not very, or not at all involved[50].

> "better communication needed, as we feel as if we have just been left during the matching process"

> "It should be more of a two way conversation.. you feel abandoned really"

Some participants gave reports of positive and proactive Social Workers.  Others felt they were in a black hole with a lack of proactive matches being presented and poor communications. This included listening to preferences, keeping adopters updated and actively coming back to them.

As in other stages of the process, some adopters perceived a power imbalance whereby the Service were in control, and adopters felt fairly powerless in the system.

## Lost opportunities
There were some cases where adopters sought inter-agency matches because of issues with the process.  Two interviewees went outside Birmingham due to delays

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[49] n = 12
[50] n = 16

and inappropriate matches.  Some focus group participants were also reported to have gone outside the Authority because of delays.

Another interviewee who had been waiting for a suitable match for some time accepted an inter-agency match when they were actively approached by another local authority with a sibling group.

> " if we didn't have a match by certain period of time, we would look at pulling out .. it had been three years … how much longer we going to wait"

There was also one case where the adopters decided to leave the process entirely after two and a half years because matching had been too drawn out.

It is clear from these examples Birmingham is losing adopters during the matching process after investing significant time and resources taking these adopters through the majority of the adoption process.

**Matching Policy**
A few comments were made about the Service's policy in relation to single or multiple matching against child profiles; whereby only one adopter or multiple adopters would be considered at any one time for a particular child(ren).

One adopter felt strongly that single matching should be applied:

> "It's not fair on adopters to bring up their hopes and put a child in front of them and then not be sure if they will be matched or not.  Feel like they are juggling with [your] emotions"

Another adopter said they were pleased Birmingham does not do competitive matching.  This did not match the experience of a further adopter who said they were presented with multiple CPRs at the same time, despite being told that this would not happen.

**Register Referrals**
Participants were asked whether they had been referred to the regional and national adoption registers after three months, as per the Service's policy.

46% of e-survey participants said they had not been referred to either, 23% had been referred to both, while 15% had been referred to the regional register only, and 15% to the national register only[51].

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[51] n = 13; 1% missing due to rounding.

## Matching Recommendations:

Matching is a critical stage; by successfully supporting adopters through it, the Service can help to reduce the number of children waiting to be adopted in Birmingham.

Birmingham's Adoption Self Assessment[52] notes: 'Birmingham provides a significant number of placements for non-Birmingham Children'. To bring the number of children waiting in the city down, this is an area where significant energies should be directed.

### 1. Matching Agreement

APA includes proposals for matching agreements to be put in place between adopters and the Adoption Service, outlining the roles of both parties in the process.

Incorporating a matching agreement in Birmingham's adoption process would help to overcome many of the issues raised in this section of the report by:

- Explaining what the process looks like and what adopters can do to aid and speed up the process. (This would help adopters feel more actively involved).
- Detailing expected timescales and what to do when things are not moving forward.
- Explicitly listing the adopter's specific matching criteria and where flexibility might be possible.
- Providing sources of information on child(ren) waiting in Birmingham.
- Providing points of contact (primary and secondary).
- Outlining the expected frequency of communications and how to feedback concerns and complaints.
- Specifying the level of information adopters should expect to receive on matches and how to find out more. This should set out a consistent standard of service.
- Detailing the Service's policy on matching: e.g. proximity, single/multiple matching, etc.
- Indicating when adopters will be referred to the national and regional registers and how adopters can use this service effectively. This should help to overcome the reported inconsistencies in referrals and ensure the Council meets APA proposals to make the three month referral a duty for local authorities.

(The Adoption Service has informed the Research Team all adopters are referred to both registers as standard protocol. With this being the case, the Service could help to increase adopters' awareness of the register).

Birmingham City Council's Ofsted self assessment also states the Service is looking into the option of adopters attending matching panels. Again, this would help adopters feel more involved in the process and increase transparency.

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[52] Birmingham City Council (January 2012) Ofsted: Adoption Services self-assessment.

**2. Increase the flow and quality of communications**

The Service could strengthen its communication with adopters at this stage by:

- **Providing regular updates and having regular conversations with adopters during the matching process, for example, including:**
  - What is happening with their case?
  - Are matches being made and how appropriate are these?
  - Has the overall picture of children waiting to be adopted changed and how?
  - Would the adopter benefit from widening their matching criteria?

- **Publishing and sharing information on the overall picture of children waiting to be adopted, so adopters can see for themselves where there are gaps in matching:**
  - Provide details of child characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, age, single or sibling group, age, additional needs and length of time waiting.
  - Publish alongside information on overall numbers of approved adopters and their characteristics so that adopters can see the full picture.

- **Providing more detailed information on the children:**
  - Adopters asked for individual/sibling group child profiles to proactively look through and consider themselves, similar to those published by Adoption UK. The Adoption Service has indicated they are now publishing a 'profile book' to share child profiles with adopters during the matching process - this covers harder to place children.

  - The Service should consider whether there is a way for adopters to access information on all children waiting for adoption, so they can be actively involved in the process and challenge their own preferences by considering a wider range of children.

  - Adopters also felt 'videos' of children should be consistently used to help adopters get a real sense of children waiting and decide whether they could be an appropriate match.

  *"A video would have been useful, get you a bit more of an understanding of [what] they are like as children".*

  The fact that adopters often did not get to see their matched adopted child (other than a picture) until the induction process itself was often a great source of frustration and anxiety for adopters. By sharing videos of children, the Service could help to overcome this.

- **Improving the quality, transparency and accuracy of CPRs:**
  - Work with child focused Social Workers who are responsible for CPRs[53] and Panel Advisors to strengthen quality assurance mechanisms, ensuring these reports reach a consistent standard.
  - This will be reinforced by APA proposals to place a duty on local authorities to keep all child information on the national register up to date, including CPRs.

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[53] BCC (2012) Ofsted: Adoption Service self-assessment notes over the next 12 months Panel Advisors are planning training on CPR writing to be delivered in team meetings across the directorate. It would be valuable to review the content of this training to ensure it covers the issues and recommendations included in this report.

## 3. Social Worker Role

The results show a mixed experience of the matching process. This will arguably be a result of both the Services' processes but also working practices of Social Workers:

- **Proactive Staff:** Staff should be trained and encouraged to be more proactive in terms of:
    - Presenting matches to adopters.
    - Communicating regularly with adopters.
    - Listening and responding to adopters preferences.

- **Social Worker Allocation:** Make it standard practice for adopters to keep the same Social Worker throughout the assessment and the matching stages[54]. This would overcome some of the delays experienced at this stage waiting for a new Social Worker to be allocated, as well as reinforcing continuity of service and knowledge of the adopters by their key contact.

    The Service created Generic Social Worker Teams in October 2011, which should in the future ensure the same Social Worker stays with adopters throughout the whole process. This change is supported strongly by the Research findings, and indicates the Service are working to address the issues caused by changes in staff.

## 4. Matching Policy

BCC's matching policy and aligned practices could be improved by:

- **Early and Active Matching:** Ensuring processes allow Social Workers to actively match adopters with children as soon as adopters are approved, (ideally making tentative matches before) so adopters are not waiting for prolonged periods of time.
- **Proximity Policy:** Having a clear policy on the matching and placing of children in terms of the proximity of the adopter's home and the home of the child(ren)'s birth parents and wider networks.
- **Sibling Matching:** Reviewing a sample of cases where adopters have been approved for sibling groups and have been matched with a single child.
    - Identify whether the right match and/or decision was taken, or whether there have been genuine 'wasted opportunities' – how these occurred and how they could be prevented in the future.
    - The Service should involve both adopters and staff in the review to gain feedback as to how both parities perceived the decision making process.

## 5. Review Birmingham's 'exporting policy' practice

The current Research did not investigate Birmingham City Council's exporting practice, whereby the Council's Social Workers actively look for adopters from other local authorities via the National Register to place Birmingham children.

The Research suggests the Service should be more proactive when matching 'Birmingham' adopters with children, with examples where BCC has 'lost' adopters to other local authorities.

It may also be the case the Service can be more proactive in searching for prospective adopters from other areas; the Service may wish to review policy and practice in this area to ensure it is making the most of the service offered by the National Register.

# 5.  Social Worker

## Social Worker Research Findings:

Adopters' relationships with Social Workers were a significant theme throughout the Research.

As with many of the Research findings, adopters' experiences were mixed.  There was almost a 50:50 split between adopters citing positive and negative experiences.  Social Workers had the potential to encourage and support adopters or, it appears, to make the process harder than it needed to be.

### Positive experiences
43% of e-survey participants felt their Social Worker/s were effective or very effective[55].

> "Absolutely brilliant, the social workers were excellent they really helped to prepare you"

> "workers were really friendly and knowledgeable"

> "She raised every concern we had and fought our corner whenever there was…stumbling blocks or barriers"

> "…there are some excellent social workers through our experience… there are people who really care about what they do and have been invaluable…wouldn't have got as far as we've got without some of the people we've met"

> "Very professional and friendly initial meeting, made us feel relaxed & explained process"

### Negative experiences
33% of e-survey participants felt their Social Worker/s were partially or not very effective; and 23% not effective at all[56].

> "We are on our 3rd social worker and had to complain in order to get allocated a competent social worker"

> "Very disorganised – unprepared for meeting and never followed up her actions…"

> "A catalogue of mistakes… meant significant delays and heartbreak…"

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[55] n = 30
[56] n = 30

Some participants had both positive and negative experiences, as they were allocated different Social Workers throughout the process:

> *"We met a number of social workers who ranged from completely inept to very good"*

> *"We had no choice. Assessment Social Worker was awful. Placement worker was great. We have asked for the latter again second time round but told we may not be able to have them"*

> *"You have got those who know nothing at all to those who know everything like mine".*

Many adopters commented they understand the difficult role Social Workers have and empathised with their position. They were very conscious of the pressurised caseloads they work too, particularly in the context of budget cuts. However, some commented they expected a higher level of service and to be treated respectfully.

**Communications**
Communications was a consistent theme throughout many stages of the adoption process. Participants frequently talked about having to chase staff and the lack of two way communication.

They wanted more progress updates to understand what was going on with their case. Several adopters commented <u>when</u> staff were ready to engage they arranged meetings at very short notice and expected adopters to approve documents quickly.

> *"Allow sufficient time to meet deadlines and communicate regularly to ensure all involved are aware of the deadlines, make sure things are not left until the last minute"*

> *"Receiving information varied, sometimes it was good, other times it was delayed and had to chase"*

Getting an answer to a question was very much dependant on the availability of the adopter's specific Social Worker. If they were away (on annual leave or with sickness) communication often stopped. Adopters commented they were unaware who they should contact in their Social Worker's absence to keep the process going.

A power imbalance was articulated whereby adopters felt fairly powerless.

> *"[The Adoption Service need]..Welcoming social workers – made us feel like they were doing us a favour"*

> *"Social workers come across people who are desperate for a child, and …try to play god in a way"*

Several participants also said that the tone of communications was negative.

> *"they need to be more friendly and understanding rather than judgemental"*

> *"…Impartial view and stop looking for the negative"*

> *"he was more interested in putting me off my decision to adopt"*

**Impartiality and Professionalism**

Where adopters had negative experiences, sometimes there were concerns regarding Social Workers' lack of impartiality and professionalism.

> *"We also found that Social Workers had their own personal opinions on the process and did not remain impartial"*

> *"the lady who came to see us was very negative, before she even entered the house she had decided that we weren't suitable, then spent the next 3 hours talking us out of it"*

Adopters felt that some of the comments made were inappropriate and <u>did not appear to relate to objective assessment criteria.</u>

> *"people might consider that quite sinister, if you can have children and you want to adopt"*

> *"you have a lot of processed food"*

> *"How many times a week do you have sex?"*

> *"Are you having an affair?"*

> *"…made comments about our weight constantly, projected her own beliefs onto us and made judgements based on these"*

In other cases, adopters felt staff pushed a line of enquiry too far. Adopters were frustrated around what they perceived to be irrelevant lines of questions which were laboured and caused delays.

> *"Some points she thrashed over to death, at one point I had to insist that I had told her everything about our infertility and how we had dealt with it…"*

A few participants commented they felt staff pushed particularly hard on adopters' reasons and motivations for adopting.

**Allocation to new Social Workers**

There were several cases where adopters were allocated new, often senior, Social Workers after complaining about poor levels of service or mistakes made by their original Social Worker.

For example this occurred when:
- A couple had a poor experience of their matching Social Worker, in terms of the appropriateness of matches presented, lack of communications, few matches coming forward and failure to respond to their feedback and concerns.
- A couple's application was put on hold very close to Panel stage. The Social Worker reported this was because they were unsure of the adopter's commitment to adopt despite being two years into the process.
- Errors were made in assessment reports, for example:
  *"…we were at assessment our social worker signed up for another job, so her heart wasn't in assessing us. When everything was written up it was totally wrong … she changed it in a lot of ways, and that was sent to panel and we've had to be re-assessed by the manager and she's had to do everything again and it's taken another three or four months"*

Where adopters have received a lower level of service, it seems entirely appropriate to allocate a more senior member of staff to ensure a positive experience moving forward; and adopters were often complementary about the level of service provided afterwards.

However, this would not be appropriate if senior members are used to resolve problems caused by some staff, whilst not addressing the quality of work they had originally provided with a view to improving future practice.

**Consistency of advice**
Several participants asked for improvements concerning the consistency of advice provided by Social Workers:

> *"Re-training of the staff so that consistent and accurate advice is given out at each stage"*

> *"we've learnt since some [advice] was incorrect. Including, not being allowed to change jobs, move house or the process taking 9 months max!"*

In one case, two Social Workers openly articulated different opinions as to whether a successfully matched child should be placed with its adopted parents before or after Christmas.  Initially a decision was taken to wait until after Christmas; this was then changed to before.  The adopters felt they had been messed around and rushed into preparing for the child's placement at short notice.

In another case, the adopter's first Social Worker was concerned about one of the applicant's estranged relationship with their father.  The applicant articulated the situation and explained their decision that had occurred some time ago.  They felt the Social Worker pushed too hard on this issue wanting to meet their father, whilst a second Social Worker assigned during the assessment process did not have any concerns about it.

A second time adopter was given inconsistent advice from different Social Workers about their likelihood of being able to adopt again. The Social Worker for their existing child (who is now an adult) and staff during initial assessment had been positive about their chances.  However, later on the adopter reported the assessment Social Worker declined her application primarily on the basis of attachment issues experienced by her existing child when they were younger.  The adopter was frustrated at this response, maintaining the new Social Worker had not contacted her 'child's' Social Worker to find out what their current needs are and how they would respond to the adoption as an adult.

**Social Worker Recommendations:**

From experiences of the Research participants, there appears to be an even split as to whether adopters have a positive or negative experience of their Social Worker/s. There are obviously some very good Social Workers, as evidenced by the quotes in this report. These staff members need to be encouraged and praised for their good work.

However, inconsistencies in service quality should not be commonplace. This may be due to a range of issues, some of which will relate to the process itself e.g. the processes staff must work to, caseload levels, etc. These have not been investigated as part of the Research, and as such conclusions cannot be drawn as to their impact.

Other issues will relate to staff working practices, against which a number of improvements can be made as outlined below. These recommendations draw on many of the main Research themes (not just the findings summarised in this section) as Social Workers have a critical input in each stage of the process.

**1. Allocate the same Social Worker throughout the process**
Some adopters made this suggestion themselves, expressing it would be a good idea, with the caveat 'you get a good Social Worker'.

Having the same Social Worker should:
- Eliminate delays caused by changing Social Workers between stages.
- Increase ownership and commitment to adopters by making Social Workers responsible for their whole journey through the process.
- Prevent problems caused by Social Workers and adopters having to build a new relationship and understanding part way through the process.

One participant commented:

> "There seems to be no planning for progression through the various stages. There is an apparent lack of communication between departments responsible for the various stages and silo mentality with a lack of ownership because of staged process"

The Service created Generic Social Worker Teams in October 2011, which should in the future ensure the same Social Worker stays with adopters throughout the whole process. This change is supported strongly by the Research findings, and indicates the Service is already working to address the issues caused by changes in staff.

The adopters involved in the Research however, did not report they had been allocated the same Social Worker. This may partly be due to the timescale at which the adopters were engaged with the Service, as some participants were involved the before this date (from January 2010 to June 2012).

## 2. Strengthen Management Structures

The Research findings indicate line management and support mechanisms for Social Workers need to be strengthened.

Small teams of Social Workers should be managed by a Senior Social Worker who would have an oversight into all the cases their team is leading on. In particular, the role of the Senior Social Worker should be to:

- Step in when Social Workers are absent (due to sickness or leave) so that progress does not stop.
- Regularly monitor the timescale and progress Social Workers are making with cases and where necessary, put in place remedial action.
- Quality assure assessment reports.
- Act as a second point of contact for adopters when their Social Worker is not available or off work.
- Ask for regular feedback from their team's caseload of adopters and put in place changes and remedial action where needed.
- Sense check significant decisions made by their team's Social Workers (in particular when applications are being put on hold, or applicants are being asked to leave the process).
- Ensure continuity of service where Social Workers must change.

Stronger management[57] should improve standards and promote a consistent quality of service, by changing the way in which staff work.

Adopters commented:

> *"The problem is the social workers are not trained in managing the process"*

> *"Better monitoring of their work by managers ensuring that they are on target to meet deadlines, seek feedback from … individuals on their contact with their social worker throughout the process"*

## 3. Strengthen Communication and Professionalism

The Research findings have highlighted several aspects relating to Social Worker communications and professionalism which need to be improved to increase service standards.

**Communication:**
It is recommended that Social Workers:

1. Communicate regularly with adopters and respond to their enquiries promptly and within set timescales.
2. Listen and respond to adopters' concerns.
3. Provide regular updates on progress, especially during any periods of inactivity.
4. Show value and respect to adopters.
5. Be transparent in decision making and clearly articulate the reasons underpinning those decisions.

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[57] This recommendation is echoed in the 'Diagnostic Assessment of Council Adoption Services' (Autumn 2012) undertaken by Outcomes UK and BAAF which identifies the need 'for more robust case management and supervisory skills to pick up on drift and to challenge poor practice'.

6. Read applicants' background information and reports.

Social Workers also need to take care in their communications with adopters. It is clear some comments had stuck with adopters all the way through the process. This had impacted negatively on how they viewed the Service, the value they felt was placed in them as adopters and their chances of success.

**Professionalism:**

It is recommended that Social Workers:

1. Are impartial at all times:
    - Care should be taken so that personal opinions and judgements do not enter the process.
    - All questions and decisions should be based on objective and transparent criteria set out in the adoption process.
    - Information on the Service's criteria and policies should be openly communicated with adopters to help increase transparency[58].

2. Seek a second opinion with significant decisions.

3. Give applicants sufficient notice to attend meetings, and to read and approve reports.

4. Provide sufficient handover to their manager or other team members to cover planned periods of absence so cases can progress.

5. Provide clear and consistent advice using the established adoption policies. This needs to be implemented across departments where other staff, e.g. child Social Workers, may be answering questions about the adoption process and providing incorrect information.

The Service should explore how these communication and professionalism standards can be incorporated into staff Annual Personal Development Review. (The implementation of these standards should also be embedded in the recommendations under Strengthening Management Structures above).

**4. Assessment Agreements**

APA proposes the assessment process should start with a meeting between the applicant/s and adoption staff, and an assessment agreement should be put in place. As with the proposed matching agreements, this should increase levels of transparency and understanding between the applicant and the service.

In particular, in the Birmingham context, this agreement should include the following information to improve service standards:

1. Decision making processes and criteria used. As discussed above, this will increase transparency and help to highlight and overcome any lack of impartiality.

2. Communications processes and service standards should be explicitly articulated.

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[58] There are several examples relating to what adopters perceived to a lack of impartiality and irrelevant lines of questioning. Adopters would be able to clearly identify these as objective or subjective if they had more information on the criteria and processes guiding Social Worker practices.

3. Timescales and internal progress monitoring procedures.

4. Primary and secondary contact details.

5. Contingency arrangements for Social Worker's annual leave or sickness.

6. How to get a second opinion.

7. Feedback and complaints mechanisms.

**5. Supporting Social Workers**

Some Social Workers will need support, as well as stronger management, to improve working practices. The Service will have existing mechanisms in place. These may need to be strengthened, for example, by providing:

- Skills assessments to identify areas of improvement. These should be conducted in partnership with the Social Worker and their line manager to inform development and support plans.

- Mentors, coaches and/or expertise advisors, in particular for new Social Workers and/or Social Workers who have identified development and/or improvement areas.

  o Experienced Social Workers and those excelling in their role should be encouraged to help in these roles. Perhaps this could be incorporated as a challenging objective in their Personal Development Reviews.

- Shared decision making and collective responsibility on lines of enquiry and case decisions.

# 6. Timescale

**Timescale Research Findings:**

The length of the adoption process is a recurring theme. 60% of the e-survey participants considered timescale to be the biggest barrier to adoption and eight of the interview participants cited delays as an issue. Similarly, when focus group participants were asked to comment on negative aspects of the adoption process, length of time and waiting at different stages were the most commonly cited issues. This is illustrated in the wordle[59] diagram below:
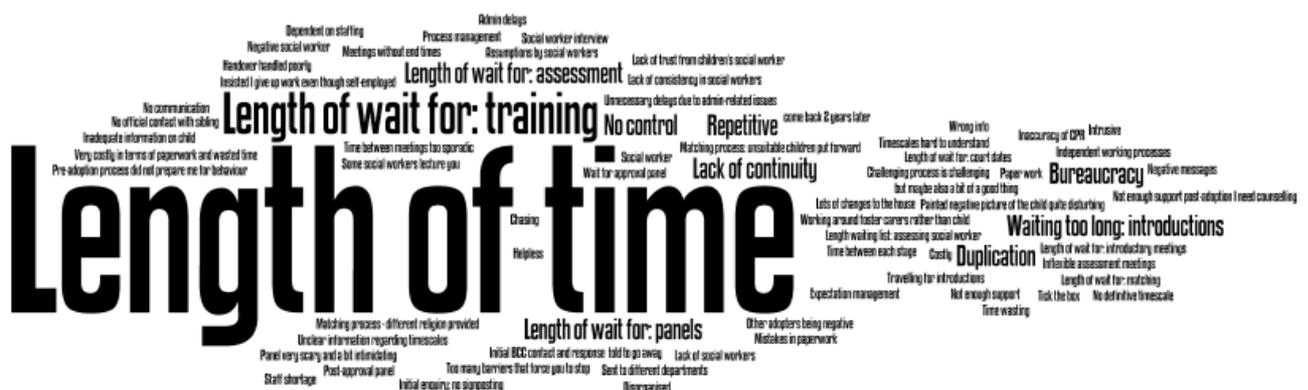


*Image created using wordle.net.*

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[59] *Source: Qa Research (October 2012). Researching Customer Perceptions of Adoptive Parents* The size of the word/term relates to number of times it was cited by participants, i.e. the bigger the word/term, the more frequently it was mentioned.

**Expectations of Timescale**

When asked, participants said staff had informed them that the adoption process would take between 12 and 24 months.  Participants felt there was inconsistency in messages regarding length of time and felt these created low expectations from the start of the process.

> "My wife called the council and told them we wanted to apply to adopt again. Someone said they would call us in a few weeks' time as they were very busy. I got a call within five minutes!"

> "The two year timescale you just accept…there is a process you go through and you have to go through it"

Expectations were also influenced by previous personal experience and/or others experiences of the process.

Many prospective adopters felt the process should take 12 months, and that this would be possible if delays experienced along the way were overcome.

> "….could have been reduced to twelve months quite easily"

**Length of Process**

The Research findings suggest on average the whole process took participants between two and three years (this conclusion has been drawn from the data below and reports from focus group participants).

22 adopters from the interviews and e-survey who had reached the matching stage or successfully adopted, gave more specific information on the length of their process. The following table demonstrates the actual time it took for these adopters to reach these two stages:

| | Up to 1 year | 1 - 2 years | 2 - 2.5 years | 2.5 – 3 years | 3-4 years |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Matching stage**[60] | 1 | 6 | 5 | - | - |
| **Completed process** | - | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 |

This indicates 9 of the 22 reached matching or completion in one to two years, within the timescale communicated by the Service. Although 6 of these participants had not yet completed the process.  Therefore, only 9% (or 2 adopters) had completed the whole process in one to two years.

For 12 participants reaching these stages it took between two and three years, and in the remaining case it took up to four years. Again 5 of the 12 had not yet completed the process.  Hence for over half of the 22 adopters the process took longer than the timeline communicated by staff (as reported in the previous section).

These results are mirrored in the e-survey, with 52%[61] of participants saying they felt the process has taken a lot longer compared with their expectations.

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[60] All adopters at this stage had been approved to adopt and were either waiting to be matched or had been matched with a child(ren).

> *"The process is slow and cumbersome. Some aspects seem to be repeated over and over again"*

> *"A very lengthy process"*

> *"We have been promised, speed and efficiency throughout, but have only faced delays…"*

In comparison, 17% said the timescale was as expected and 22% felt it was a bit or a lot quicker.

It is worth noting the adopters (included in the above table) who reached matching within a year were a BME couple who felt they had been fast tracked.

### *Methodological note*
When reviewing these results, a note of caution should be inserted regarding the potential accuracy of the responses gained. Any question requiring participants to reflect back on historical dates is subject to memory recall and therefore human error.

It may also be that participants interpreted this question slightly differently. The e-survey asked participants to indicate the length of time between their Initial Enquiry and the end of the process or the stage they had reached. Whilst the Initial Enquiry stage is highlighted as the starting point, some participants may have inserted the point at which they felt they started the adoption process, e.g. when they made the decision to adopt, which may have been some time before their Initial Enquiry.

Sometimes when adopters make their Initial Enquiry about adoption they do not act on that information immediately and may leave it some weeks or months before they do so. This may also extend the period of the adoption process beyond the dates when the participants were actually actively involved with the Service.

There were also some cases where changes in adopters' circumstances led to delays or prolonged timescales.

### BME Adopters' experiences
BME applicants had mixed expectations and experiences of timescale. Some adopters were aware that there are a high number of BME children waiting and expected to be fast tracked. One couple thought the Service would *"bite [their] hands off"*.

There are examples where BME applicants felt they were fast tracked, these included:
• An applicant seeking to adopt an older, large sibling group.
• A Black Caribbean couple.
• A mixed couple where one applicant was from BME origin, the other White.

> *"…whatever ideas I had, it ended up being quicker, not easier, but quicker and that might have been to do with circumstances, being a mixed race couple"*

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[61] n = 52

However, BME adopters also reported lengthy processes:

> *"… I was thinking I won't have to wait very long because I'm black and there'd be loads of black kids [in the system] and it was ages and ages and ages"*

> *"… You keep hearing, 'There's loads of black children! Can parents come forward?' And I'm thinking that we tick all the boxes, [and] everything and you go through this process and it takes forever…"*

As previously cited, the Research has also highlighted cases where BME adopters left the process because of the time and delays involved.

## Delays

### *Points of delay*
65% of the e-survey participants experienced delays. The following table illustrates the stages at which delays were most common.

| Stage of Process | % of participants that experienced delays |
|---|---|
| Court Process | 100% |
| Induction Process | 100% |
| Matching | 92% |
| Adoption Panel | 92% |
| Preparation Training | 89% |
| Initial Home Screening | 86% |
| Home Assessment | 82% |
| Group Information | 71% |
| Initial enquiry | 65% |
| Post placement support | 60% |
| CRB check | 53% |

*Source: Adoption Research e-survey*

These findings reinforce messages provided by participants about the Panel, Matching and Preparation stages, whilst indicating there are other stages where delays were common, particularly at Court and Induction.

> *"At every stage in the process we have been met with delay."*

### *Methodological note*
Whilst highlighting the most common stages for delays, the results also suggest delays were fairly common throughout all the stages. These results can not be

dismissed. However, other factors may also have influenced the negative picture portrayed here.  For example:

- 41 participants (approximately 50%) chose to skip this question, rather than indicating whether they did or did not experience a delay.  It may be that participants who experienced delays were more likely to answer this question than those who did not, with the former wanting to ensure their experiences were represented.

- This type of question is also subject to memory recall, and therefore in some cases may not reflect an accurate picture of all participants' experiences.

***Length of delays***

Participants were asked about the length of delays experienced at each stage. The table below summarises the percentage of adopters reporting delays of six months or more.

This indicates the longest delays were experienced during the Court Process, Preparation Training, Adoption Panel, Matching, Post Placement Support and Induction.

| Stage of Process | % of participants who experience delays of 6 months or more |
|---|---|
| Court adoption process | 57% |
| Group preparation sessions | 50% |
| Adoption panel and decision | 46% |
| Matching stage | 42% |
| Post placement support | 40% |
| Introduction process | 33% |
| Home assessment stage | 17% |
| Initial enquiry stage | 10% |
| Group information session | 8% |
| CRB check | 5% |
| Initial home screening | 5% |

Although the Court process was mentioned rarely by participants, where it was, comments seemed to focus on timescale with several reporting a delay (see Legal Process in 'Secondary Research Findings and Recommendations').

Lengthy delays at Preparation Training, Panel and Matching also mirror the messages from previous sections in this report.

**Periods of inactivity**

Participants also reported long gaps between stages. Some described "feeling powerless" during those periods.

> "the first year felt like an endurance test…no progress…just kept dangling to see whether we were committed"

Lack of communication and the lack of clarity around who to contact with queries was particularly frustrating for participants. Often, participants were not given an explanation for the delay and lack of contact.

Several participants felt these reflected staff shortages and capacity issues.

> "…clearly not enough staff who were consequently dealing with a multitude of cases"

> "lack of qualified staff resource"

Many participants commented that delays were due to staff annual leave/holiday periods and sicknesses.  They felt this 'gap' in service during these periods was regarded as culturally acceptable in the Adoption Service.

> "Regular delays should not happen, they should be the exception".

> "Everything seems to grind to a halt during the summer holidays"

> "Social Worker on holiday for three weeks at the beginning of the process and it's been two weeks since she returned and we've heard nothing"

As previously reported, participants also found delays occurred between the stages whilst waiting for new Social Workers to be allocated.

Other participants felt delays and gaps were due to issues with the process, for example:
- A lack of Panel and Training days.
- Gaps in, and inadequate, information at Panel.
- Having to unnecessarily repeat stages of the process; particularly in relation to second time adopters, and people who had returned to the process.
- Administration errors, e.g. paperwork not being sent, missing reports, medical checks not completed/out-of-date, etc.

Where delays are caused by issues that could have been predicted, it may be argued lack of resources and staff availability are not acceptable reasons.

**Communication**

Participants felt that they were waiting too long for progress to be made, and were not receiving regular communication during 'quiet' periods.

This may be one of the reasons adopters felt they needed to chase and be proactive to ensure progress, while the Service are perceived to be "reactive" and "slow".

> "Had to proactively chase the council officer to book [the] appointment. Took 7 weeks to be arranged"

*"Adoption service had not kept in touch between stages"*

*"We have done all the chasing, no standard response times to queries, very reactive and not proactive…"*

As previously noted however, there were also times adopters felt rushed when they felt the Service wanted to push through a stage of the process particularly quickly. Examples included appointments being booked at short notice, and inflexible and unrealistic deadlines to review reports so that staff could meet their deadlines.

Another participant who was applying to adopt a child with additional needs felt rushed and pressurised by the Service's approach.

*"The Adoption Service was going to put a child back to the community. [I felt] pressured enough to be told [that] we need a solicitor, if we wanted to adopt. [I was] under enormous pressure to do it very quick…the social worker didn't want to put the brakes on it…"*

**Impact**

The impact of the timescale on adopters was evident from their responses, causing frustration, anxiety and sometimes contributing to adopters leaving the process.

In addition, many adopters talked about the impact of delays on children waiting to be adopted.

*"Periods of waiting - just told the process takes time. Felt at the time – all the waiting was a waste. They think all these children could be in homes quicker if not for the wasted time – the longer the child is in limbo, the more psychological damage could be being done, as foster carers careful not to attach to children."*

*"…process needs to happen quicker and then [they] will have less kids in care and more into a family…"*

*"The needs of the child are nowhere near the top of the priority list!"*

Adopters also talked actively about the cost of foster care, and savings the Council could make by placing children with adopters faster, particularly in the current climate of budget cuts.
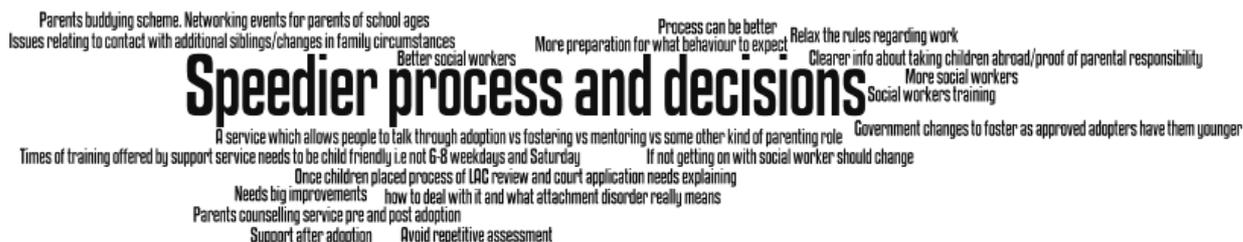
*Image created using wordle.net.*
*Source: Qa Research (October 2012). Researching Customer Perceptions of Adoptive Parents*

## Timescale Recommendations:

During the focus group sessions, participants were asked to note down what improvements they would like to see in the adoption process overall. The wordle image above summarises these suggestions showing the length of the process and decisions was the mostly commonly reported issue.

There a range of actions which can be taken to improve current timescales, many of these are incorporated under previous recommendations, for example:
1. Forging agreements between the Service and adopters.
2. Maintaining the same Social Worker between the Home Assessment and Matching stages.
3. More proactive and transparent communications on progress made.
4. Increasing the number of Panel dates and Training sessions.
5. Strengthening quality assurance processes to ensure inaccuracies and errors in reports and paperwork, and invalid/outstanding checks do not hold up the process.
6. Fast tracking adopters who can match harder to place children.
7. Strengthening management structures; including monitoring Social Worker performance and providing a second contact point to adopters.

## 1. Performance Management and Streamlined Assessments

APA reinforces this report's recommendations for stronger performance management of the adoption process. APA proposals include the introduction of time related performance indicators, linked directly to proposals for a streamlined two stage assessment process.

The proposed two stage process will consist of:
1. A two month initial training and preparation stage.
2. A four month assessment stage.

These timescales will provide a basis upon which the Service can monitor staff performance, the data for which will feed into local authorities' scorecards.

Where is it clear that stage one will take longer than two months, the adoption agency will need to articulate the reasons why this has happened. This will help adopters understand the process and why things are taking longer than anticipated.

All checks are to be undertaken before stage two begins, which should eliminate delays later on in the process caused by these documents not being in place.

Adoption agencies will only be able to extend stage two of the process by two months to a maximum of six. Again, the reasons for which will need to be clearly articulated and backed up with supporting evidence.

If these proposals are embedded this will give adopters a clear picture of the maximum timeframe within which these parts of the process should take place, enabling them to monitor the progress of their case and to raise concerns with the Service appropriately.  It will also increase transparency as to the reasons for delays.

> *"Limited information online…timelines and expectations of the council should be displayed"*

APA proposals do not, however, appear to set out similar timelines for the Checks and Panel[62].  BCC's Adoption Service should aim to do this independently to give adopters a complete overview of the process and expected timeline.

## 2.  Striking a balance

Whilst the majority of participants' comments on timescale relate to delays, there were several examples in the Research where adopters felt rushed by staff at particular points in the process.

Often this seemed to relate to the need to meet specific deadlines.  This would suggest staff need to plan and manage their workload more effectively, building in time to meet with adopters and to share and consult on documents, within a realistic timescale.

It was also commented that staff should have a more customer focussed approach when booking appointments and training sessions. For example, appointments could be arranged for the morning or afternoon, reducing the amount of time adopters need to take off work.

There were also a few examples where staff seem to have pushed adopters for answers about adopting a child quicker than the adopters would have liked. Adopters must be given adequate space to step back and think, rather than feeling pressurised to rush significant adoption decisions.


## 3.  Taking a break from the process

There is the potential that the shorter timescales set out in APA proposals may cause some adopters to feel rushed.

APA proposes that adopters who wish to take a break from the process will have a maximum of six months to do so - between stages one and two.  If adopters wish to have a break of over six months, or before stage one has been completed, they will be required to restart the process.

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[62] Setting timescales for the Matching stage is perhaps unfeasible because of the nature of this process being dependent on the number and type of children waiting and the level of match with approved adopters, which adoption services have little influence over.

These new boundaries should be made clear to adopters at the start of the process, so they are aware what flexibility is built in.

**4. Filling gaps**

Several participants said they felt powerless and as if things were on hold during inactive gaps/delays in the process. Although APA proposals should ensure delays are largely reduced or eliminated, the Service should consider what adopters could actively be doing during any 'waiting' stages to make them feel more proactive and to help the process progress quicker.

This could include specialised training, support sessions and/or resources, which may enable adopters to develop their parenting skills and understanding of adopted children whilst waiting.

**5. Communications Approach**

As indicated in previous sections, a more active communications approach may also help adopters manage delays more effectively.

The Service should actively communicate reasons for delays to keep adopters informed, and to make them feel more proactive and less anxious. The Service should also let adopters know about anything they can do to speed up the process.

One way to achieve this would be to implement a customer tracking system similar to those used by online shopping sites, enabling adopters to log on and monitor the progress of their case, including outstanding and forthcoming actions.

# 7. Adopters decided to leave the process

**Left the process Research Findings:**

21 e-survey participants and 3 interviewees took the decision to leave BCC's adoption process voluntarily.

It is important to reflect on the reasons why applicants decided to leave to identify whether anything more could be done to keep potential adopters in the future.

**Family Situation**

Four adopters left the process because of their family situation. One was waiting for the required time following a miscarriage and another had become pregnant. Two were waiting for existing children to become older, so they were eligible to adopt (in order to allow for the two year age gap required between an existing and a potential adopted child(ren)).

**The Process**

Numerous adopters cited reasons relating to process and service delivery for leaving the process; these are summarised below in the following table.

| Reason/s left the process | Frequency[63] | Illustrative Quotes: |
|---|---|---|
| Poor service quality* | 13 | *"My experience with Birmingham even at enquiry stage was so appalling that I chose to apply elsewhere"*<br><br>*"…the social worker was not an active listener, she had a set agenda, which meant that the opportunity that we have to offer did not meet her expectations"* |
| Timescale* | 10 | *"Our whole two and a half year experience of the adoption process …could have been reduced to twelve months quite easily…my main concern is that while were waiting so was our potential son or daughter…"* |
| Emotional stress of the process* | 9 | *"… found the process very emotionally draining…needed to step back and…think"* |
| Negative staff | 7 | *"the initial response I got from all the advisors I contacted was very discouraging and I had the distinct impression I was dealing with a prejudiced service"* |
| Intrusive process/level of detail required* | 7 | *"Realised the impact of allowing social services into our lives [would] impact on our existing children potentially damaging…Adoption process too intrusive and over cautious"*<br><br>*"I am opposed to the idea of having people from previous relationships contacted"* |
| Perceived low chance of adoption | 5 | *"…told…unlikely to get a child under four…unless agreed to also look at children also physically/mentally disabled… we were angry"*<br><br>*"…there was also a documentary…which confirms potential adopters discriminated for either being too fat, dark, light, old and young"* |
| Strict Criteria | 4 | *"we were advised because the master bedroom of our home is a floor above the other bedrooms a child would not be placed into our care.."* |

Some participants went onto apply through other adoption agencies, the reasons for doing so included:
- They felt Birmingham was too large and bureaucratic.
- To get a more personalised service with clear communications.
- Being advised to try another agency when contacting Birmingham because of the department's restructure.

Two participants commented:

> *"…the attitude of some of their staff nearly put my partner and I of(f) adopting all together, and it's only because we went elsewhere that we could put it behind us…"*

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[63] The frequency count combines the results of the e-survey and reasons articulated through the interviews. 'Reason/s left the process' marked with * pull on results from question 40 and 41 from the e-survey, hence may include some double counting, however in each case the overlap is only by one or two responses.

> *"Did not consider Birmingham any further due to staff attitude and very poor service"*

Following their experience with Birmingham, one participant also stated they were advising a friend who was just about to start the process to go elsewhere and were researching other agencies on their behalf.

**Case study:**

In another case, a couple were in the process of applying to adopt a child with additional medical needs already in their care as a foster placement. The same child was previously placed with the applicants (some time ago) on a fourteen month placement. The child then returned to their birth parents, but subsequently re-entered the care system and returned to the foster family.

The foster carers were keen to adopt the child, demonstrating their long time commitment, and the Adoption Service seemed keen to place the child with the family promptly.

However, during the time with the birth family the child's needs had increased. As the child's foster carers, the applicants received financial support to meet the child's additional needs. They asked Adoption staff what level of support would be offered once the child was adopted, and were informed means tested support would be available. The level of support, however, was not made clear.

The initial assessment took place in March 2011, but after the lack of clarity regarding support, they decided to leave the process in January 2012. The reason for this was the financial strain losing the support would bring. Since then, the foster carers have not been contacted by the Adoption Service to follow up their case.

**Recommendations for preventing adopters from leaving:**

These findings illustrate some practical ways the Service could help to keep more applicants in the adoption process. This is reinforced by our e-survey results, which found 75%[64] of participants said they felt something could have been done to stop them from leaving.

However, these recommendations are based solely on the experiences and opinions of the adopters. As such, it is important to recognise the experience of adoption staff would bring another perspective to this picture.

**1. More Flexible Criteria and Policies**

**Flexible Criteria**

Participants were asked what could have prevented them from leaving. Many cited more realistic and flexible criteria, for example:

- Not having to live in the same house for two years to be eligible.
- Being permitted to use non-family references outside of Birmingham in the assessment.

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[64] 75%= 15 participants; n=20

- More flexibility around contacting people from previous relationships[65].
- More flexibility around trans-racial adoptions.
- Relaxing the requirement around adopted child(ren) needing their own bedroom.

*"The adoption criteria needs to be realistic... if we thought we stood a chance of success we would have continued…but there is no way we would have met Birmingham's criteria, even though we are highly educated people of decent moral standing"*

Participants also asked whether there could be any flexibility for adopters waiting to start the process due to criteria around an existing child's age. Rather than waiting until there is a two year gap between existing child(ren) and a potential adopted child, could the Service allow applicants to commence the process, for example nine months prior, assuming the adoption process will take at least this long? Ultimately, adopters would then be approved to adopt quicker and children would be out of care faster.

**Flexible Policies**

There are also examples where greater flexibility in the implementation of adoption policy may lead to more positive outcomes. For example, in one case an adopter came back to the Council to enquire about adopting their (adopted) child's sibling. They reported it took two years to get the process moving, and they subsequently left because they felt strongly that the Adoption staff should not need to talk to their existing child alone. This seems to be a case where a compromise could have been agreed with the adopters, if policies enabled greater flexibility.

The foster carer's case study described above also appears to be a situation where greater flexibility could be applied. Where there is a potentially promising adopter with a preference to adopt a specific child with additional needs, increased efforts may have been appropriate to overcome issues standing in the way of placing children in a permanent home. By not proactively managing such cases, the Service runs the risk of losing these valuable opportunities, as has been the case here[66].

**2. Improving staff communications and service delivery**

Many participants cited that more positive, helpful and encouraging staff would have prevented them from leaving.

*"…made to feel that we weren't good enough to be parents, totally put off at that initial meeting"*

This message should be fed back to staff so they are aware the impact their communications and working practices have on encouraging and discouraging potential applicants. (Also see Social Worker Recommendations for proposed actions to improve staff communications and service delivery standards).

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[65] The Adoption Service contact previous partners where applicants have been a parent with someone in the past. Where violence has been present in past relationships, partners are not contacted.

[66] If the costs of supporting the applicants to adopt a foster child are less than the costs of retaining of long term foster care, the business case seems to be supported. In addition to the long term benefits that an adoptive placement would provide this child moving forward.

### 3. Follow up

The Research did not systematically capture how many participants voluntarily leaving the process were followed up by the Service. However, two interviewees said no one had come back to them to find out why they have left, and a separate e-survey participant commented:

> "Follow up could have been better we were never asked why we dropped off the radar"

Process checks should be built in so that applicants are routinely contacted after set lapse periods to ensure the reasons why they have disengaged can be identified and worked through collaboratively with the Service, where possible.

More regular customer feedback, as recommended throughout this report, should also help to identify issues that may discourage applicants from staying in the process early on and put in place remedial action. This should also indicate areas for future service improvements.

(The emotional strain caused by the adoption process and how to support adopters will be considered further under 'Adopters' Experiences').

## 8. Adopters advised and asked to stop the Process

**Advised to stop Research Findings:**

**Advised to leave**

11 e-survey participants reported they were advised to leave the process by the Service.

Seven of the 11 were advised to leave at the initial enquiry stage; one at home screening and one at home assessment stage[67]. This indicates that the Service is doing an effective job assessing eligibility early on so people did not progress inappropriately only to be declined later.

Given this often happened during initial stages it is not surprising that in four cases the reasons for leaving relate to the Service's core eligibility criteria, i.e. time required after miscarriage, inadequate/lack of bedroom and age of existing child. It also demonstrates some overlap with responses from participants who indicated they chose to leave the process in the previous section. This illustrates some people left the process for the same reasons but had different perceptions as to whether they were advised to leave, or made the choice to do so.

Other reasons participants said they were advised to leave included[68]:

> "The child's extended family was approved at a very late stage as special guardians"
>
> "because we have two active children and that we both work".

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[67] The responses provided for the two remaining answers did not allow the stage to be identified.
[68] The reasons provided other participants could not be clearly deciphered from the responses provided.

(The impact of work/employment on applicants' eligibility has come up several times during the Research and shall be discussed further under 'Eligibility' findings).

82% of the e-survey participants did not agree with the Service's decision to stop the progress of their application[69]. Furthermore, 91% felt they were not given the opportunity to address the Service's concerns regarding their application[70].

**'Type' of applicants leaving the Process**
A cross tabulation of people who left the process (both voluntarily and involuntarily) and their demographic profiles demonstrated trends in the 'types' of people that were more likely to leave or stay in the process than others. However, due to the low numbers of people falling into some demographic categories, meaningful findings cannot be drawn across most of the demographic traits recorded.

Trends relating to the relationship status of applicants show:
• Higher rates of single applicants left the process than were represented in the overall survey sample, i.e. 28% of applicants who left the process were single but represented only 19% of the overall survey respondents[71].
• Lower rates of married applicants left the process than were represented in the overall survey sample, i.e. 55% of applicants who left the process were married but represented 66% of the overall survey respondents[72].

These trends may be interpreted in variety of ways. The suggestion that single people may be more likely to leave the process may indicate that they find it harder going through the process on their own and/or they decide they do not have the capacity to adopt and/or the process does not support single applicants. Similarly, the second trend may be interpreted to suggest married couples are more likely to remain in the process because they have each other's support, they feel they have more capacity to adopt and/or because the process supports or is catered to them more effectively.

This is an interesting finding, given the feedback noted earlier that some participants felt the Training sessions were not inclusive enough. One participant said the session spent a lot of time focusing on couples and commented:
> *"Maybe they prefer couples to adopt"*

**Case studies:**
Three interviewees were asked to put their applications on hold during the process and one has subsequently decided to leave. The reasons were quite different:

*1. Financial Situation*
Following an initial Home Visit one set of adopters were asked to meet with Service staff to discuss their case. At the end of the meeting, the adopters said they were informed their application was being put on hold for six months due to existing debt (from IVF). However, the staff did not discuss the applicant's level of debt with them and the level it needed to be reduced to in order to return to the process.

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[69] 82% = 9 participants; n=11
[70] 91% = 10 participants; n=11
[71] 28%= 8 participants; n=29
[72] 55% = 16 participants; n =29

At the start of the meeting, Service staff discussed other aspects of their application with them relating to a minor CRB offence and their ethnic matching preferences.  The adopters reported they felt pressurised and interrogated by the Service's approach, which, on reflection, seemed unnecessary to them given their application was being put on hold because of their financial situation.

These adopters have now decided to stop the process because of the poor level of service they received, both due to a negative experience during this meeting and the preceding Initial Home Screening Visit.

## 2.  Commitment

In the second case, a couple had been in the adoption process for two years and were about to go to Panel.  Shortly before Panel, their Social Worker informed the adopters their application was being put on hold.

The adopters felt the reason for this decision was not articulated clearly. When they pushed their Social Worker, they said had concerns about the adopters' commitment to adoption.

The adopters felt this was inappropriate given the stage they were at and the time and effort they had already invested and demonstrated.  They believed concerns such as these should have been raised and addressed much earlier on.

As a result, the adopters challenged the decision and were allocated a new Social Worker.  They have since been approved, and have praised the experience and support they have gained throughout the remainder of the process from the Service.  However, they pointed out that a less confident couple may not have challenged the decision, which may lead to them leaving or experiencing a much lengthier process.

## 3.  Asked to stop

In another case, a second time adopter was told their application had been declined after the initial assessment stages. Two key issues were raised by the Social Worker when the applicant asked the reasons why.

The applicant's existing adopted child, now an adult, experienced attachment issues when they were younger.  The adopter said the Social Worker focused on this asking whether their issues had been progressed.   However, the adopter maintained the Social Worker did not contact their 'child's' Social Worker to find out what their current needs are and how they would respond to the adoption as an adult. A letter explaining why the application had been declined stated their existing child *"wasn't emotionally ready, so at this stage, an application would be declined"*. This was very frustrating for the applicant, after receiving comments from her child's Social Worker about how well the child has developed.

During the conversation the applicant's Social Worker also raised concerns regarding a lodger who lived with them some years ago and something that had come up on the lodger's CRB.  The adopter was not given the details and stressed the lodger no longer lived with them and provided their new contact details. Although this was not included as a reason for being declined in the letter, the adopter felt it had been an influencing factor.

**Recommendations where adopters are advised to leave/stop**

**1.  Clearly articulate reasons for decisions**
This Research does not to seek to make judgements as to whether the decisions made by the Service were the right ones. Recommendations, however, can be made about how to improve adopters' experiences of decision making.

A common thread through the three case studies is a lack of clarity regarding the reasons why decisions were made.  Participants were unclear as to the exact reason/s their applications had been put on hold or declined, and had to push for more information.

A lack of clarity regarding the reasons applicants were turned down may also account in some part for 82% of the e-survey participants not agreeing with the Service's decision to stop the progress of their application[73].  In the future, the Service should ensure reasons for putting applications on hold or asking applicants not to progress are clearly articulated and relate directly to transparent adoption criteria.

APA supports this recommendation. Its proposals will require adoption agencies to clearly set out the reasons why applicants are not being asked to progress in a letter.  This will increase the transparency and adopter's understanding of the decision making process.  It will make it easier for adopters to challenge decisions if they think they are wrong and not based on the relevant criteria.

APA also includes proposals for an Independent Review Mechanism whereby adopters involved in stage two of the application process will be able to make a formal complaint on decisions made to a national body.  This will further increase transparency and reinforce the message that decisions must be internally verified and clearly articulated to applicants.

It should, however, be noted that in some circumstances adoption services will not be able to share reasons with applicants.  This relates primarily to cases where applicants are rejected based on information collected confidentially from a third party, and where this has raised significant concerns leading to the application being stopped.

**2.  Sense check decisions and right to a second opinion**
Previous sections of this report recommend Social Workers' Managers should be involved in sense-checking their decisions against transparent criteria.  The second case study demonstrates why this is important. The decision being overturned indicates the Service felt the initial decision had been the wrong one.

It also demonstrates why applicants should have the right to an automatic second opinion from a staff member who is not involved directly in their case, to bring a further objective lens to the process.

> *"There should be something there so that you can ask for a review to take place."*

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[73] 82% = 9 participants; n=11

This should ensure robust decision making is in place, should a complaint be made to the proposed Independent Review Mechanism.

### 3. Opportunity to address concerns

91% felt they were not given the opportunity to address the Service's concerns regarding their application[74]. In all the case studies, adopters were not given clear indications on how they could address the Service's concerns in order to progress.

This should be clearly communicated to applicants so they know if there are steps they can actively take. They would also be better able to judge whether the required changes would be feasible and hence can make an informed decision on whether they can return to the process.

One participant commented:

> *"This was probably the worst part of the whole process, the support we received was non-existent, no…support after being turned down. We basically had to research next steps to rectify the situation"*

As well as outlining what applicants can do, as specified in the above comment, Social Workers should also play an active part in supporting applicants to address the Service's concerns and work collaboratively with them to progress their application. (In addition, see recommendations under 'Adopters' Experiences' – 'Peer Support Programme').

### 4. Lost opportunities

The applicants from two of the case studies have indicated they are unlikely to return to the adoption process with BCC because of the poor level of service experienced. This may represent a wasted opportunity if the concerns could have been worked through to enable them to progress.

The negative manner in which these applicants were communicated with, and the lack of support provided to them, has certainly played a large part in this decision. Staff need to be more sensitive and balanced in their communications. If applicants feel interrogated, not listened to and not supported, they are unlikely to want to return.

The second case study also demonstrates adopters who do not have the confidence and assertiveness to challenge staff may accept decisions that could have been overturned if questioned by the applicants, and thus leave the process unnecessarily.

### 5. 'Type' of adopters leaving

The results seem to highlight a trend that single adopters are more likely to leave the process than married couples. The Service should undertake regular reviews of the demographic background of people coming forward to adopt and those leaving to identify where any groups are under-represented.

Where trends are observed feedback should be gained from relevant applicants to find out why they have left and if it was related to their demographic profile.

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[74] 91% = 10 participants; n=11

Feedback may provide suggestions as to what might be done to prevent this in the future.

The demographic profile of participants completing the e-survey indicates a pattern in terms of the 'type' of people who are more likely to come forward for adoption. The following table captures the household income of all participants answering this question[75]. This suggests that less well-off people are not as likely to come forward for adoption[76].

| Household income | Percent | Count |
|---|---|---|
| £0 - £9,999 | 5.6% | 3 |
| £10,000 - £14,999 | 1.9% | 1 |
| £15,000 - £19,999 | 3.7% | 2 |
| £20,000 - £24,999 | 9.3% | 5 |
| £25,000 - £29,999 | 13.0% | 7 |
| £30,000 - £39.999 | 9.3% | 5 |
| £40,000 - £49,999 | 20.4% | 11 |
| £50,000 - £59,999 | 7.4% | 4 |
| £60,000 - £74,999 | 14.8% | 8 |
| £75,000+ | 14.8% | 8 |

There are several reasons why this may be the case. An obvious issue may be that people do not feel they have the financial resources and security they need to support a child. Alternatively, one participant commented:

> "The adoption process… needs reviewing as it [is] discriminatory towards working class people with a family"

Similarly, the table overleaf suggests[77] that low levels of unemployed people come forward to adopt.

Given this trend, it would prove valuable for the Service to review information they have on people coming forward and leaving the process from different income backgrounds, to seek feedback to identify and resolve any issues.

It would also be useful for the Service to articulate what financial situation/s would make people ineligible to adopt and include this within briefing information so adopters are not potentially excluding themselves because of incorrect perceptions of a successful adopter[78].

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[75] n=54
[76] If the adopters answering the e-survey were broadly representative of adopters.
[77] If the adopters answering the e-survey were broadly representative of adopters.
[78] There were some general indications that less economically advantaged people were more likely to leave the process than more well-off applicants, however the numbers of participants falling into each income bracket were very small.

| Answer Options | Percent | Count |
|---|---|---|
| Employed full time | 70.2% | 40 |
| Employed part time | 12.3% | 7 |
| Unemployed | 5.3% | 3 |
| Stay at home parent | 5.3% | 3 |
| Self-employed | 3.5% | 2 |
| Full time carer | 3.5% | 2 |
| Retired | 0.0% | 0 |
| Full time student | 0.0% | 0 |

## 9. Adopters' Experiences

**Adopters' Experiences Research Findings:**
Participants highlighted some key messages portraying their underlying feelings about the adoption process.

**Too Negative**
Many adopters felt the adoption process was too negative. When asked about barriers to adoption, 10 e-survey participants cited the negative attitude of staff[79].

Some commented the process was negative about them as applicants:

> "They are not your child, you're only caring for them; they are a ward of the state"

> "Poor – attitude of the social worker was dismissive and negative and I felt that she was judging me from the moment she asked me for details…"

> "Very poor staff attitude meant I discounted birmingham city council"

Another adopter said staff told them they did not want to spend too much time with someone who was unlikely to get a child.

**Demanding**
Participants also commented that the process did not account for the emotional challenges and demands placed on adopters:

> "very cold and uncaring… not appreciate whatsoever that someone is … saying I've got a home, I'm working… quite happy to do it"

> "…some thought MUST  be given to the potential parents, to the stresses that delay upon delay upon delay has"

> "Employ staff who actually care and have some respect for potential adopters…"

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[79] This was an open ended question.

One participant said they had found the process stressful. They felt they needed to consult their GP about their stress, but feared going because it would look bad on their application

Some felt they had got through the process, despite the process:

> "Our commitment to the process and the dream of providing a loving home to a child is the only thing that has kept us going, if we weren't so determined we'd have pulled out more than a year ago"

**Too Intrusive**

Some adopters said they found the process too intrusive:

> "We found the process …long winded, intrusive and focusing on the negative rather than positive aspects of adoption"

> "we don't have any babies in Birmingham, quite bluntly followed by what felt like an interrogation as to the reasons we wanted to adopt…"

> "Very poor attitude…I was made to feel undervalued as a prospective adopter and instead found myself under interrogation about my personal circumstances, when all I'd called up about was an information pack"

It must also be recognised that undertaking a thorough assessment of applicants whilst not being perceived as intrusive is a very difficult balance to strike.

Social Workers have an important role in ensuring children are placed into safe and secure families, and that adopters are matched with the right children. As previously noted, the Adoption Service achieve a very low rate of placement breakdown, indicating the assessment process is very effective at securing good adopters and matching effectively with children who are waiting.

**Need say the right thing**
Some adopters said they felt pressurised to say the right thing during the adoption process, and feared making a complaint would actually be counterproductive.

One adopter said they were unhappy with the opinions of the child's Social Worker, but said their own Social Worker advised them not to say anything that might upset them (the Child Social Worker).

Others reported:

> "…we feared that complaining would jeopardise the process and delay it even further when it was already taking so very long"

> "I think it should be made clear that you should have the opportunity to be able to voice any criticisms you have of how various professionals deal with the process… you just feel like you couldn't really say anything… because it might look bad on you..."

In contrast, one adopter noted they felt confident they could speak up and challenge requests.

**Adopter's want to be heard**

The overwhelming level of response received by this Research indicates a strong desire amongst adopters to be heard and feed back their experiences.

Out of the 386 adopters invited to take part in the interviews and focus groups, 112 or 29% registered their interest. There was some disappointment amongst adopters who had registered for the Research and did not have their opportunity to report their experiences in person. As a Research team, there are lessons to be learnt here about managing the expectations of invitees better.

Of the 773 customers invited to complete the e-survey, 81 customers or 10% responded. This could potentially have been higher. The design of the e-survey was a complex task. It was a challenge trying to keep the questions to a manageable number whilst including an opportunity for participants to feedback on all elements of the process. A shorter, less complex format may well have yielded more responses. This however, may have failed to address areas of importance to adopters.

It is important to note that whilst there are challenging messages coming from this Research, the majority of participants were very balanced in their feedback. They wanted to articulate their experiences to help inform improvements. Many also said they were sympathetic to the demanding context that the Social Workers and the Service are working in.

**Adopters' Experiences Recommendations:**

APA states it wants all adopters to be *'welcomed with open arms'* and *'above all we want adopters to feel valued and respected for the chance they provide to transform a child's life'*. This does not seem to be the case for all adopters going through BCC's adoption process.

In relation to communications, participants felt the tone of communications needed to change to be more positive, encouraging, supportive, respectful and empathetic. A better balance needs to be struck between making sure potential adopters understand and are prepared for the challenges the process entails, whilst encouraging and supporting applicants, and stressing the positive outcomes adoption can bring to all involved.

Recommendations under 'Social Worker' should help to address these issues by improving communications, professionalism, management and support for Social Workers. However, more specific actions should also be taken to support adopters and strengthen their voice in the process.

**1. Supporting adopters – Peer Support Programme**

Most applicants are new to the process of adoption and are unsure what they should/should not do to push their application forward and increase their chances. Often this was compounded by a lack of information about the process and delays/gaps with low levels of communication. Better communications and agreements between Social Workers and adopters throughout the process should help to address this.

In addition, adopters would benefit greatly from having an independent source of

advice and information, ideally through a 'Peer Support Programme' which would be <u>confidential</u>. Such a Programme could be set up and run by current and past adopters (with support from the Service) to advise adopters during their application, and after placement has taken place.

This Programme would enable adopters to ask people with similar experiences for advice on things such as how they dealt with particular issues, what they should expect at different stages, to sense check their decisions and to sense check decisions by the Service. Importantly, it would be a place to go to ask the questions that adopters are worried or concerned about asking members of staff, in case this 'looks bad' on their application.

This support mechanism may help to keep more adopters in the process, with several applicants citing the emotional strain and demands of the process as reasons why they left. Similarly, if in the future adopters are advised to leave the progress and are given clear guidance on what they could do to address the Service's concerns, the Programme could play a part in supporting the applicant alongside their Social Worker.

The Programme could also support the Service to implement the improvements recommended in this report, for example, assisting in the design of materials and resources for adopters to ensure they meet the audience's needs.

## 2. Strengthening adopters' voices

> *"…adopters are not consulted with throughout the process for their feedback which would alert managers to problems & issues at key stages in the process"*

Gaining regular feedback from adopters is a consistent theme throughout this report. It should be built into the various stages of the process, take place when specified time lapses have occurred, and be sought when people leave or are asked to leave the process.

These findings suggest applicants do not always feel they can provide honest and open feedback to Service staff. The Programme could also have a role in seeking and collecting feedback from adopters and communicating this to the Service. Importantly, it would be a confidential route by which adopters can express their views.

The adoption complaints process should also be clearly communicated to applicants. The Service's information pack already contains a fact sheet on 'Improving Our Service', which indicates applicants can make complaints through Adoption Team Managers and the Customer Relations Service. The contact details for these are all clearly listed. However, one participant commented they could not find this on the Council's adoption website. This information should be provided online.

This does not discount the value of having an independent point of contact for complaints, where feedback can be taken to BCC staff outside the Service or to an external body. The Programme could undertake this role, as well as acting as an advocate for adopters who feel unable to take forward issues and/or complaints themselves.

Independent complaints processes will also be strengthened in the future via APA proposals for an Independent Review Mechanism for complaints arising during stage two of the process.

If the proposed 'Peer Support Programme' is not possible in terms of galvanising adopters' time and support, and the finance needed to underpin this, the Service should consider how the functions outlined in this section can be met through an alternative mechanism. The Service could, for example, expand its existing relationship with Adoption UK, who are already used as mediators, extending this to cover the wider functions outlined above.

## 10. Eligibility

### Eligibility Research Findings:

A large proportion, 42%, of the e-survey participants felt the Service's eligibility criteria were very relevant or relevant. 26% felt they were irrelevant or very irrelevant[80].

Some participants said they were generally happy with the eligibility criteria, but found the rigid application of these problematic. Others felt the Council's criteria are set too high and are difficult to meet, and felt decisions were influenced by opinions not just criteria.

> *"… if you knew what the criteria was you knew whether you'd fit it. But actually it seems to be very much on personal opinion of the social worker who is assessing you, and that's hard…"*

There was generally less awareness of what the eligibility criteria was or meant, with some e-survey participants indicating they were unclear what was being asked by the question referring to 'eligibility criteria' within the e-survey.

**Adoption Leave**
The required duration for adoption leave was a common theme. Often a full year was viewed as unrealistic and inflexible. Participants commented that each child would be different, hence the blanket application of one year seemed inappropriate.

The need to take a long period of adoption leave was viewed to be at odds with the potential adopters' need to be more financially stable once they have dependent/s.

**Giving up work**
There were several reports of adopters being told they would need to give up work. One participant left the process because of this. This theme was felt to be more prominent amongst joint applicants, leading adopters to ask whether the same would be asked of single applicants?

> *"was all a waste of time as they wasn't interested as we wouldn't give our job up"*

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[80] The remaining 32% indicated they were neither relevant or irrelevant. n=57.

*"One of the things that I found was …a challenge really was … somebody had to give up their job, irrespective of the age of the child… six months, or sometimes a year, from your job… I could understand that. But to say, give up your job…you're now down to one income. She was very negative…I don't know what it was with her. She left that evening. We looked at each other and said, 'No, we are not doing this'"*

A leaflet[81] by the Service also seems to suggest giving up work is fairly common place:

'Will I have to give up my job? <u>Not necessarily</u>, but remember that appropriate childcare arrangements need to be made for after school, school holidays and unexpected situations/problems'.

**Self Employment**

Some self-employed participants reported they felt disadvantaged in the adoption process because of their working life.

Two interviewees said their employment status had been a primary focus in the Initial Home Screening Visit. They felt quizzed and that felt they were perceived negatively.

*"Your self-employed so there's a big black mark … they [assume you] are … working 17 hours a day, how you going to cope with this child? No one asks about anything [your] own situation [they] just assume".*

One participant was told they would not be appropriate because they are self-employed and have no formal leave capacity. They asked staff about statutory adoption pay, but staff were unable to provide any information.

**Support Networks**

Participants felt criteria relating to the need for a strong support network was at odds with Service's policy that adopters should avoid contact with others during the early stages of an adoption placement. At a time when adopters needed support around them, as with any new parent, they found this difficult to understand.

*"… ridiculous, first of all you're supposed to stay in your house for 3 months with the child and no one supposed to visit you and you're not to visit anyone and then take 12 months off works, who can do that"*

**Accommodation**

Some of the reasons previously cited as to why participants left or were asked to leave the process, related to adopters' accommodation. Often these were viewed as picky and inflexible.

*"Social worker who visited was over concerned with trivial aspects about the house"*

Other comments, perceived as unnecessary, about accommodation, referred to temperature control on taps, ponds and garden fencing, location of bedrooms, steps up to bedrooms/split level, fitting a banister, refitting flooring, proving frequency of dog baths, etc.

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[81] Leaflet entitled - Adoption and Fostering Within Your Faith

**Eligibility Recommendations:**

The Research findings identify several areas where adopters would benefit from greater clarity and flexibility in the Service's eligibility criteria.

**1. Adoption Leave**
The Service should provide clear guidance on the minimum length of adoption leave and why it is set at this level so all prospective adopters receive a consistent message. It will also enable adopters to make an informed choice about whether their finances and/or work will permit this*.

**2. Work**
The Service should outline the criteria used to determine whether adopters will be asked to give up work and why (e.g. when the child has additional needs?).

**3. Self employment**
The Service should share this finding with staff so they are aware some self-employed applicants feel disadvantaged through the process. Staff should be asked to consider these applicants on a same basis to others. If there are particular concerns the Service has evidenced that should be asked of self-employed applicants, these should be written into a standard set of questions.

The Service should also identify and distribute information amongst its staff on statutory adoption leave and any other support available to pass onto self-employed applicants.

**4. Support Networks**
Participants articulated different periods of time following a child(ren)'s placement during which they had been advised they could not see their support network. The required period of time needs to be clarified in the Service's literature.

The Service should also consider whether this can be amended to be more flexible in relation to the individual adopter's and their child(ren)'s needs, if this is not already part of adoption practice. If flexibility is not possible, the reasons for this should be articulated in the Service's literature.

**5. Accommodation**
There are important health and safety requirements, e.g. pond covers, banisters, etc., that need to be in place before children can move into adopters' homes. However, discussing these issues early on in the process seemed out of place for participants. Home alterations such as these would be covered more effectively in a 'home proofing assessment' once adopters know more about the child(ren) they are adopting (and the requirements needed for their age and other personal needs).

It is clear, however, there are some key accommodation criteria which need to be ticked off from the start of the process, e.g. a spare bedroom. It would be best to separate these critical criteria from simple home amendments.

There were several comments about the requirement for a spare bedroom, the location of which came up several times. One participant also questioned why adopted children need to have their own room.

The Adoption Service should review whether existing criteria around the location of an adopted child's bedroom can be more flexible. In addition, the need for adopted children to have their own room could also be reviewed.  The reasons for these criteria should be communicated to enhance adopters' understanding of what might be perceived as unnecessary requirements.  For example, if adopted children need their own personal space because of difficulty forming relationships etc., this should be highlighted.

<u>* Note on Adoption Leave:</u>
Employees are permitted to take up to 52 weeks of adoption leave where they have been working for their employer for 26 weeks when they are matched with a child[82].  Statutory Adoption Pay is worth £135.45 a week or 90% of an employee's average weekly earnings if it is less, and is paid for 39 weeks[83].

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[82] www.gov.uk/adoption-leave
[83] www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/articles/adoption-pay-and-leave/?&gclid=CPWowPGVprQCFczHtAodrGoAqw

# Additional Research Findings and Recommendations

This section of the report summarises the Research findings against the remaining stages and themes of the adoption process, as follows:

1. **Initial Enquiry.**
2. **Initial Home Screening Visit.**
3. **Criminal Bureau Records Checks.**
4. **Home Assessment.**
5. **Induction Process.**
6. **Post-Placement Support.**
7. **Legal Process.**
8. **Second Time Adopters.**
9. **Concurrent Planning.**

For several of these themes the areas for improvement relate directly to recommendations contained in the previous section. These links are indicated and new recommendations are presented where appropriate.

## 1. Initial Enquiry

**Initial Enquiry Research Findings:**

**Method of Engagement**
The initial contact is usually the first impression prospective adopters have of the Service, and thus has great responsibility attached to it.

59% of e-survey participants made their Initial Enquiry by telephone, 20% via the website, 11% attended an information event and 1% visited the Service's Recruitment Shop[84]. A similar trend was also reflected by the interviewees.

**Customer Service**
Overall ratings of this stage were mixed. 50% of e-survey participants said it was excellent or good, 18% average and 32% poor or very poor[85]. Similarly, 55% of e-survey participants indicated this stage was useful and 45% that it needed improving[86].

Positive comments about the Service included staff being friendly, helpful, knowledgeable and efficient. Feedback on response times for Initial Enquiries also suggests this is generally good.

> *"Customer Service was good and was quick to send out information"*

> *"…on the telephone they were very helpful, they knew a lot about adoption and were able to provide advice and guidance"*

Two participants said they chose Birmingham because of the positive response they had to their Initial Enquiry, in comparison to their experience of other local authorities:

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[84] n = 70
[85] n = 60
[86] n = 69

> *"I chose Birmingham because I wasn't impressed with the [other LA] initial phone call"*

> *"they [other LA] just wouldn't give us any sort of timeframe we just felt remarkably uncomfortable … We went to Birmingham and we got clear guidelines within reason and the fact that they were prepared to tell us, we were really happy with, so that's why we went with Birmingham in the end"*

In other cases, adopters experienced delays and some also felt staff were negative and unhelpful, and adopters did not feel welcomed or valued.

> *"Advice was a little on the negative side which may put some people off'"*

> *"More sensitivity and a greater sense of welcome to a prospective adopter rather than be grilled…and making it a negative experience. It takes a lot of courage to make an initial call"*

> *"…they're not thankful for us coming forward, just going through the motions"*

Customer service was a key theme for comment. There were some comments on the need to improve the inconsistency of advice provided.

> *"I think there are some real training issues around accuracy and consistency of information given out at initial enquiry"*

Others said they did not know who to contact at this stage, as lead Social Workers are not allocated until later in the process.

Whilst some participants said their initial experiences were discouraging, many of these decided to continue anyway. There is, however, a risk that applicants will be put off and decide to leave the process.

> *"Very poor staff attitude meant I discounted Birmingham"*

> *"Initial contact with staff was not so good so we left for a year then returned"*

**Information Pack**
Adopters rated their overall experience of the pack positively with 63% of e-survey participants rating it as excellent or good, 27% as average and 11% as poor or very poor[87].

Most adopters commenting were positive on the information pack and praised the DVD provided.  However, some participants said they had not received the pack.

**Initial Enquiry Recommendations:**

- **Communications:** Issues raised under Initial Enquiry relate to common themes regarding the tone and effectiveness of communications.  These are largely addressed by recommendations under the Main Findings.

  These findings highlight that improvements need to be implemented across the whole process, ensuring staff who take Initial Enquiries also have the

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[87] n = 48

necessary customer service skills and knowledge of the process to advise applicants correctly. One participant commented:

> "Make sure all staff are fully qualified and provide realistic advice."

Another simple step would be to provide information packs electronically to eliminate delays and reduce costs. By introducing this as standard practice (using the internet), customers would receive their packs almost instantaneously. The pack could also be posted on the Adoption website.

- **Feedback:** The need for regular feedback is also echoed here. Staff should follow up people who do not to continue with the process to identify any service related issues that need to be addressed. One participant commented:

> "As we enquired it might have been prudent for you to enquire by phone or email as to why we didn't follow up"

An effective Customer Relationship Management system with a trigger to contact applicants after set lapses in time would support this approach.

## 2. Initial Home Screening Visit

### Home Screening Research Findings:

There was a mixed response from participants regarding the Initial Home Screening Visit. 43% of e-survey participants reported they thought it was excellent or good, 29% average and 18% felt it was poor' or 'very poor[88].

Some were happy with Social Worker contact, highlighting ease with officer, friendliness and usefulness as strength; others felt they were being interrogated, judged and put off. Some also described staff as being unwelcoming, not listening well and showing lack of empathy and poor timeliness.

**Criteria**
As previously reported under eligibility, comments were made at this early stage about relatively minor aspects of the adopters' home which felt out of place and inflexible.

> "Whilst the system needs to be safe and thorough, it also needs to be flexible. Just as you expect your potential adopters to be"

There was a sense that some staff used personal opinions during the Home Screening and made inappropriate comments based on this. There was also a sense that communications had a negative tone (as reported in previous sections, in particular under 'Social Worker').

Some participants also felt it took too long, approximately two to four hours.

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[88] n = 34

## 3. Criminal Record Bureau Checks (CRBs):

**CRB Research Findings:**

When asked how they would rate their overall experience of the CRB process,
64% of e-survey participants indicated this was good or excellent, 25% average
and only 11% negative[89].  Few participants elaborated further on their experiences.

Two participants, however, cited negative experiences which left them feeling
judged:

> *"… I was made to feel like my husband's speeding offence put him in the
> category of "Criminal" and left feeling like it was borderline as to whether we
> could be considered potential parents because of his 'conviction'".*

During a meeting with the Service, a second participant said they felt 'criminalised'
due to their failure to declare a minor CRB disclosure (i.e. a speeding fine).  The
adopter said they did not realise this was regarded as a conviction and was asked
to complete and sign a statement reflecting on the CRB at the meeting.  They
reported they felt pressurised and interrogated by the Service's approach.

A few participants also mentioned CRBs being delayed and one that was lost in the
system.  Another said their CRB was repeated at three stages in the process and
was a waste of resources and time.

**CRB Recommendations:**

- **Guidance**: Clear guidance should be provided to applicants when they
  complete CRB declarations and CRB forms as to the full range of offences that
  should be declared (if this is not already the case).

  The information pack received by applicants indicates that minor traffic offences
  will not prevent people from adopting. The Adoption website, however, states
  'We are extremely unlikely to accept anyone convicted of even minor offences
  in the last two years'.  This information should be elaborated on to indicate
  whether minor offences in the last two years include speeding offences.

  At the other end of the spectrum, the Service's website and information pack
  are both very clear about significant types of offences which will prevent certain
  people from adopting.

- **Communication**: Care should be taken to communicate respectively with
  adopters around CRB issues.  This will be a sensitive topic.  Minor offences

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[89] n = 28

which are not significant to the process should not make applicants feel negatively about themselves or their chances of adoption.

- **Time**: Adopters should be given appropriate time to complete CRB statements and supported through the process so they do not feel pressurised.

## 4. Home Assessment

**Home Assessment Research Findings:**

Adopters had mixed experiences of the Home Assessment process. 58% of e-survey participants found this stage useful. 42% said it was an area for improvement[90].

Many comments about this stage are covered by the themes in the Main Findings of this report, in particular the role of Social Workers. Applicants cited a mixture of positive and negative experiences:

- Positive comments indicated Social Workers were friendly, down to earth, answered questions, provided useful resources, explained the process, etc.
- Negative experiences referred to a lack of impartiality, focusing on the negative, poor advice and communications, rushed reports, failure to implement actions, etc.

42% cited timeliness as useful, while 58% indicated it was an area for improvement.

> *"Assessment was done in no time at all"*

> *"The length of time …was adequate because it gave us time to retain the information"*

In contrast, 50% indicated it was an area for improvement [91]:

> *"This seemed to drag on"*

> *"This could have been done in a much shorter space of time by avoiding repetition, and having longer or more regular appointments"*

52% said the relevance of criteria was useful. 48% cited this as an area for improvement[92].

> *"all explained fully and didn't feel like I was being asked anything unnecessary"*

> *"social worker constantly looking for negatives and being pleased to find anything no matter how small"*

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[90] n = 24
[91] n = 26
[92] n = 27

## 5. Induction Process

**Induction Process Research Findings:**

The Induction Process was not rated particularly highly by e-survey participants. 40% indicated this was excellent or very good, 20% average and 40% poor or very poor[93].

Few e-survey participants made direct comments about the Induction Process. However, some messages can be extracted from the interviews and focus groups.

**Preparing for Induction**

- There were positive (and negative) experiences of foster carers handling the Induction process; suggesting the process is dependant on the approach adopted by the child's Social Worker and foster carers in question.

- In some cases, adopters felt their child(ren) had not been prepared which had lead to traumatic meetings.

- As with the Matching process, adopters said they would feel more at ease going into the Induction Process if they had been able to see some video footage of their child(ren) in advance.

- One adopter felt the two week induction process was too long for their children and caused confusion.

    *"We would go to foster home to visit the girls, and then the girls would come here, overnight stay, [its] too much for children…too long …[and]… confusing for them. They were with foster carers for a long time, so drew it out for them"*

- A same sexed couple were asked to decide in advance what they would like their adopted children to call them; they decided Daddy X [name] and Daddy Y [name]. However, when staff introduced them to the children they omitted 'Daddy' and introduced them by their names. This had quite an impact on the children, who did not call their new parents 'Daddy' for some time. The adopters felt this would have been different if handled as they had agreed.

**Delays**

- There were reports of delays and having to wait too long between Matching and Induction to take place. Delays quoted were three, five, seven and ten months.

    *"We have had very positive experiences but it has taken too long. We found out about our boy at 12 months old, it took seven months to get him to us, that's a third of this life"*

- In one case, inter-agency adoption caused delay in the Induction Process.

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[93] n = 10

**Later Life Letters**

- In one case, the adopters had a poor experience around the later life letter – which are completed by the child's Social Worker. They felt this was due to a change of Social Worker after Matching, following which they had to chase the letter. Once received, they felt the letter was impersonal and lacked detail. Their new Social Worker had gained the information 'from the system', which seems to indicate the relevant handover with the previous Social Worker had not taken place.

- A separate adopter commented they are still chasing their child's life story book two months after they have been placed.

**Induction Recommendations:**

- **Investigate delays:** The Service should investigate if delays are common between Matching and Induction and the reasons why. If this is the case, the Service should identify what can be done to address these and how adopters can contribute. If action is not feasible or appropriate, the Service should communicate these reasons to adopters to increase their understanding and involvement in the process.

- **Agreement:** The Service should create an agreement with adopters outlining the support they can expect during the Induction Process and specific actions and strategies which have been agreed for their particular case.

# 6. Post Placement Support

## Post Placement Support Research Findings:

Feedback about Post Placement Support was generally positive. Few comments were made by the e-survey respondents with only nine participants that indicated they reached this stage; however, other focus group and interview participants provided some specific feedback.

**Experience of support**

- Adopters value the coffee mornings and stay and plays organised by the Service as a chance to develop networks with similar people and gain support.

- One adopter commented on the high quality of bereavement support received following the death of their adopted child's parent.

- Another adopter commented it had been difficult to access post placement support following their inter-agency adoption as this was the responsibility of the placing local authority rather than Birmingham(under current regulations).

- Some adopters were confident they could still contact their Social Workers to gain support.

- Review meetings were judged differently. Some perceived these positively, as the Service was making sure everything was OK. Others viewed it negatively, seeing the review meeting as an extension of the assessment process and feeling as if they were still being judged.

*Role of training Post Placement*

- One participant adopted some years ago, when training sessions were not part of the process, and commented that it took a long time for their child to settle in. Later on, the adopter attended some training sessions and said this was a 'revelation', increasing their understanding of child development and neglect.

- Others with school age children could relate back to the training and utilise what they learnt when issues came up. These findings highlight the valuable role training can play supporting adopters Post Placement.

- Adopters of young children were aware issues could come up in later childhood. Some were anxious, perhaps overly anxious about this. This may reflect some of the messages reported earlier about what adopters viewed as an overly negative perception being presented of adopted children's needs.

*Staying in contact with Birth Families*

- Experiences of letterbox were mixed. Generally, adopters welcomed their children staying in touch with their siblings and wanted to be informed when new siblings had been born – this was not always the case.

    *"…we're supposed to have letterbox contact. We've never had letterbox contact from anybody…We have mentioned this to Social Services and they are saying, 'They're both adopted now. So, it is nothing to do with us"*

    *"our contact agreement was set up for the older siblings but since the last two have come along that's never been co-ordinated so there are two sisters out there somewhere and we don't have any Letterbox with them... we've asked, every year it comes up"*

- Contact with birth parents was not very common. Some said they had met birth parents because they felt they should. In contrast, one adopter had active links with their child's grandparent, liaising directly with the family member to arrange visits.
    *"It's a hard thing to do, but [we] still did it. [It's] useful for the [children] to have that contact, it's their history…"*

**Post Placement Recommendations:**

- **Network:** The Service should continue to provide opportunities for successful adopters to network and forge friendships with people in similar situations.

- **Peer Support:** One adopter felt there could be more help available for adopters to understand and work through issues and challenges involved in bringing up an adopted child. As indicated under 'Adopters' Experiences', a Peer Support Programme may be able to help advise and assist adopters during the process and Post Placement. In particular, to reassure (often first time parents) what is normal behaviour through different developmental stages.

- **Letter box:** The few comments here suggest the Service should look into more active management of Letterbox, in particular support for adopters to maintain links with their child(ren)'s siblings and to link with new siblings. If this service is not currently evaluated, the Service should seek adopters' feedback on how well it is working and what improvements they would like too see.

## 7. The Legal Process

**Legal Process Research Findings:**

The Legal Process was not a prominent topic, with only nine e-survey participants indicating they reached this stage.

Four participants cited timescale as an issue at this stage. Two reported it took approximately a year to go to court.

> *"No-one seemed to agree on what the official timescale was for putting in the Adoption order to the court"*

Another participant commented positively on the timescale, noting:

> *"It was good because we decided when we were ready to go to court, so it was at our own pace"*

**Legal Recommendations:**

It is recommended that Timescales for Court Orders are monitored by Managers and expected timescales should be clearly communicated to adopters.

## 8. Second Time Adopters

**Second Time Adopters Research Findings:**

Second time adopters were frustrated at having to repeat stages of the process that they thought were unnecessary given they had already been approved, e.g. the initial telephone interview, Initial Home Screening Visit and Group Training. There was a feeling they should not need to revisit 'their life history 'and issues covered by the first assessment.

The Adoption Service has informed the Research Team that second time adopters are no longer required to attend training, while the assessment is a regulatory requirement.

**Second Time Adopters Recommendation:**

**Tailored Assessments**

- The Service could review current assessment practices to see how these can be adapted so they only include relevant criteria for second time adopters. These should focus less on adopters' background, social networks, etc., and more on what has changed since they last adopted and how they would integrate a new child(ren) into their homes.

- APA includes proposals to fast track second time adopters and tailored assessments. This reinforces this finding and should overcome some of the duplication cited by the Research participants.

## 9. Concurrent Planning

**Concurrent planning Research Findings:**

Participants had mixed feelings about proposals for concurrent planning or 'fostering for adoption'[94]. Some felt it was a good idea, particularly if it would allow adopters to have children earlier and to be matched with younger children.

Some participants qualified their support with the following caveats:
• The Service would need more resources for it to work and less emphasis on rigid/perfect matching.
• It would take a certain type of adopter to manage the risk involved.
• There is also a risk for the child if they become attached to the 'fostering adopter' and the process is not successful.
• Some would probably do it but would be more guarded in the process and conscious about protecting themselves.
• Clear information would need to be provided about the risks involved and care should be taken not to push applicants into it.
• It would not be appropriate for second time adopters, as existing child(ren) may form an attachment to their new sibling(s) which may then be removed.

Some participants felt it might be advantageous in the Legal Process if they can demonstrate the child is doing well with the applicants.

Others were less positive about the option. One participant did not have the confidence the Council could manage this process effectively after their experience with the Adoption Service.

Another referred to 'fostering for adoption' as a 'sticking plaster' that would not be needed if issues with the existing process could be overcome, particularly the prolonged timescale and delays.

A further participant who was familiar with the fostering process, pointed out that a potential barrier for adopters may be while they are foster carers for their prospective adoptive child, they are more 'answerable' to the Council. For example, they would need to discuss more of their parental decision making with Council staff and may feel less autonomous as a result.

**Concurrent Planning Recommendations:**

It is recommended that the Service liaise with current and past adopters when developing plans for 'fostering to adopt' to ensure it responds to concerns adopters will have about the process, and provides adequate levels of support to help them through the challenges involved.

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[94] This question was only posed with focus group and interview participants; it did not feature in the e-survey.

# Closing Statement

The publication of this Research is very timely, taking place as the government consults on proposals to deliver their national Action Plan for Adoption.

Many of the challenges highlighted by the government are echoed in Birmingham. This report demonstrates valuable connections between the government's existing proposals and the steps required by Birmingham's Adoption Service to improve services for adopters and, importantly, to improve outcomes for children waiting.

Birmingham's Adoption Service is currently in the process of formulating its own action plan to respond to the government's agenda. It is hoped this report will also play a significant part in determining this change at a local level.

Once again, thanks must be given to all those adopters who willingly participated in the Research and for sharing their experiences. It is hoped in the future the Service will be able to incorporate more ways for adopters' voices to help shape and improve adoption processes, given the strong desire and enthusiasm demonstrated by participants throughout the Research Process.

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# Appendix A:
# Summary of Research Participant Demographics

The table below provides a headline summary of demographic for the participants taking part in the research.

| Gender | Age |
|---|---|
| Of the participants that revealed their gender 60% were female and 22% male.<br><br>Almost another fifth preferred not say or did not answer the question. | The majority of the participants, 77% were in their 30's and 40's.<br><br>20% preferred not to say or did not provide an answer. |
| **Ethnicity** | **Religion** |
| 50% of the participants were White while participants of a BME background made up 28% of the sample. 22% did not answer the question or preferred not to say.<br><br>The make up of approved adopters in Birmingham in 2011 was 75% White and 26% BME. 5% opted to prefer not to say. | 45% were Christian whilst 25% stated they had no religion, 8% Muslim and 2% Hindu.<br><br>19% did not answer or preferred not to say. |
| **Sexual Orientation** | **Disability** |
| 72% of the participants stated they were heterosexual; 8% reported they were LGBT[95] or 'none of the above'.<br><br>A fifth did not answer the question or preferred not to say. | Only 3% of those that responded to the question reported having limited physical ability or long standing illness. |
| **Relationship Status** | **Employment Status** |
| 61% were either in a relationship (cohabiting and not cohabiting), married or had a civil partnership; 14% were single.<br><br>25% preferred not to say or didn't answer the question. | Almost 50% of the participants reported that they were in full time employment; 8% said they were in part time employment and 8% stated they were self employed.<br><br>5% were stay at home parents/carers. 4% were unemployed. 22% did not answer the question. |
| **Household Income** | **Stage of Process[96]** |
| Surprisingly the average household income of the participants £44,708 whilst the average household income in Birmingham is £27,417. | 29% of the participants were not approved or left the process.<br>25% were successfully approved and placed with a child; 12% were successfully approved and waiting for a match or a child(ren) to be placed.<br>33% were still engaged in the adoption process but not yet approved. |

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[95] Lesbian Gay Bisexual or Transsexual.
[96] Detailed information was not available on the exact stage customers had reached for the focus group participants.  Three of the four sessions were for adopters who were approved who had been or were waiting for a match; the remaining session was for adopters still in the process of applying. However due to changes in circumstances some participants involved in the sessions had actually left the process.

The table below provides a summary of demographic for the participants taking part in each of the three research activities.

| Category | Focus Groups | Interviews | e-survey | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | | | |
| Female | 24 | 8 | 46 | 78 |
| Male | 10 | 7 | 11 | 28 |
| Prefer not to say | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Not answered | - | - | 23 | 23 |
| **Age** | | | | |
| 30's | 9 | 6 | 26 | 41 |
| 40's | 23 | 6 | 30 | 59 |
| 50's | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Prefer not to say | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| Not answered | - | 2 | 23 | 25 |
| **Ethnicity** | | | | |
| White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British | 20 | 8 | 37 | 65 |
| Black/African/Caribbean/Black British | 9 | 3 | 4 | 16 |
| Asian/Asian British | 2 | 4 | 6 | 12 |
| Mixed/multiple ethnic groups | 1 | - | 4 | 5 |
| Other | - | - | 4 | 4 |
| Prefer not to say | 2 | - | 4 | 6 |
| Not answered | - | - | 22 | 22 |
| **Religion** | | | | |
| Christian | 22 | 7 | 29 | 58 |
| Hindu | 1 | 1 | - | 2 |
| Muslim | - | 2 | 8 | 10 |
| No Religion | 9 | 5 | 19 | 33 |
| Other | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Prefer not to say | 1 | - | 2 | 3 |
| Not answered | - | - | 22 | 22 |
| **Sexual Orientation** | | | | |
| Heterosexual | 32 | 14 | 47 | 93 |
| Bisexual | 1 | - | 2 | 3 |

| Category | Focus Groups | Interviews | e-survey | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lesbian/gay woman | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| Gay man | - | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| None of these | - | - | 2 | 2 |
| Prefer not to say | - | - | 2 | 2 |
| Not answered | - | - | 24 | 24 |
| **Disability** | | | | |
| Limited physical ability | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Long standing illness | - | - | 2 | 2 |
| None of these | - | 13 | 52 | 65 |
| Not answered | - | 2 | 26 | 28 |
| **Relationship Status** | | | | |
| Single | - | 2 | 11 | 13 |
| In a relationship – not co-habiting | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| In a relationship – co-habiting | - | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| Married | - | 10 | 38 | 48 |
| Civil Partnership | - | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Prefer not to say | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Not answered | - | - | 23 | 23 |
| **Employment Status** | | | | |
| Employed full time | - | 7 | 40 | 47 |
| Employed part time | - | 1 | 7 | 8 |
| Self employed | - | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| Unemployed | - | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Stay at home parent/carer | - | - | 5 | 5 |
| Other | - | - | 3 | 3 |
| Not answered | - | - | 21 | 21 |
| **Household Income** | | | | |
| £0 – £9,999 | - | - | 3 | 3 |
| £10,00 - £14,999 | - | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| £15,000 - £19,999 | - | - | 2 | 2 |
| £20,000 - £24,999 | - | 1 | 5 | 6 |
| £25,000 - £29,999 | - | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| £30,000 - £39,999 | - | 4 | 5 | 9 |

| Category | Focus Groups | Interviews | e-survey | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| £40,00 - £49,999 | - | - | 11 | 11 |
| £50,000 - £59,999 | - | - | 4 | 4 |
| £60,000 - £74,999 | - | 3 | 8 | 11 |
| £75,000+ | - | 3 | 8 | 11 |
| Not answered | - | - | 27 | 27 |
| **Stage of Process** | | | | |
| Initial enquiry | - | - | 12 | 12 |
| Initial home screening | - | - | 6 | 6 |
| Home assessment | - | - | 9 | 9 |
| Received home visits, assessments and preparation sessions | 10 | 3 | 1 | 14 |
| Successfully approved for adoption and child placed | 21 | 3 | 8 | 32 |
| Received home visits, assessments and preparation sessions | 10 | 3 | 1 | 14 |
| Successfully approved for adoption and waiting match/child to be placed | 3 | 3 | 9 | 15 |
| Not approved | - | 3 | 11 | 14 |
| Left the process | - | 2 | 21 | 23 |
| On hold - received home visits, assessments and preparation sessions | - | 1 | - | 1 |

# Appendix B – Carola Bennion Profile

Carola has worked with central government departments and agencies, local authorities and their strategic partners, and voluntary organisations for over twenty five years, and is highly experienced in strategic development and the delivery of policy within both public and social sector environments.  She has worked with children and young people's services at both national and local level and has extensive experience of supporting local areas in the development and implementation of policy and practice.

Carola has expertise in supporting improvement and policy implementation across children's services, and in particular, improving outcomes for looked after children. She has worked with numerous local areas, providing support and challenge and practical approaches to improving practice and implementing policy. She has extensive experience of strategic commissioning and has supported local authorities and partner agencies to develop strong and effective strategic commissioning arrangements.  Carola has an ability to gain a rapid understanding of local priorities for improvement and takes an outcomes focused approach to designing solutions.

She has knowledge and expertise in both adoption policy and practice, and research methodology.  Her adoption expertise is grounded in a thorough knowledge of placement planning for looked after children, and she has developed many Looked After Children Commissioning Strategies, including adoptive placements, and preventative services to manage demand.  She was engaged by the Department for Education in an Adoption Research project involving 17 local authorities, looking at reasons why children recommended for adoption were not placed, and identification of proposed changes required to the adoption process across England. This work was reported direct to ministers and has informed current developments in adoption.

Carola has a background in research, an MSc in Social Research and in particular, is a specialist in qualitative research. She has undertaken numerous service and programme evaluations, and is trained in Social Return on Investment methodology.  A particular strength is in the analysis of findings and identification of the implications for service and practice development.

Carola is a qualified coach and is frequently commissioned to deliver a coaching or "critical friend" role to Councils, supporting performance improvement and change management.