

Scotland's First Adoption Activity Day

An Evaluation

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Executive Summary

In October 2015 a first Adoption Activity Day was held in Scotland, organised by staff from Scotland's Adoption Register assisted by an advisory group of experienced adoption practitioners. The Scottish Government commissioned an evaluation and this reports sets out the findings.

BAAF set out that the primary purpose of activity days is to give children waiting for a permanent placement and prospective adopters the opportunity to meet in a relaxing and child friendly environment with a focus on a range of activities that they can engage in together. It is an opportunity for prospective families to respond directly to children and hopefully enhance the chances of finding families for those children who might otherwise miss the opportunity of having a permanent family.

Scotland has about three times more children looking for permanent families than the current number of prospective adopters.

The evaluation involved the researcher attending; the Activity Day, steering group meetings, observing an Adoption Exchange Day, analysing the written feedback forms from foster carers, prospective adopters and social workers. The researcher conducted a total of twenty in depth interviews with foster carers, prospective adopters in their own homes, and with social workers in their offices.

For many years there has been concern about 'children who wait' and various strategies have been developed to speed up the process of finding the right family. Until recently written profiles were provided about children and prospective adopters rarely had the opportunity to meet the child or children. Adoption Activity days are a recent introduction, originally from the United States the days were piloted in England in 2011. Since then England has held over fifty days.

Overall the feedback from the first day in Scotland has been very positive and many of the children were reported to have enjoyed themselves. The day provided an opportunity to bring prospective adopters and children who are waiting for families together. There have been understandable concerns about a process which may result in children feeling inspected or rejected. This report shows that with careful preparation and management these risk to the children can be avoided. The activity day is not a selection process for either the children or the prospective adopters, a child cannot 'chose' a family and adopters

can express an interest in a child but on the understanding they may not eventually be considered the most appropriate match for that child.

There was positive feedback from all the adults about quality of the organisation of the day, which had been carefully planned. The activity day also appears to have had the effect of focussing attention on key aspects of the adoption process in particular the role of foster carers and the importance of preparing the children.

Many participants were alive to the risk and ethical issues for the children. There were strong views especially from some foster carers that the days should primarily be for younger children and that the emotional risks to the child increased with their age. There were some older children who attended the day and very careful preparation was crucial to enabling them to enjoy the day and not to feel they were part of a selection process. Some carers felt that by discussing the day the older children were given the opportunity to understand the process of adoption and to express their views. Foster carers all believed that both carers should be able to attend if they and the child wanted them to.

Many of the prospective adopters found the process emotionally challenging. More than preparation meetings or exchange days the event had brought home to them the powerful mixture of wanting a child and worrying about their capacity to be a good enough parent and enabling the child to love them and to be able to love the child.

The success of the day in the longer term will be evident in the numbers of children who are placed with a family. The early indications are positive. The activity day may well be a part of the process and it will not necessarily be possible to identify precisely how much of a role the day played in the eventual outcome.

There is a plan to follow up after a year later to discover the destinations of this first group of children. And views from social workers and carers about the relevance of the activity day to the overall process.

The study would not have been possible without the help of all the foster carers, prospective adopters and social workers who gave of their time to take part.

Many people contributed to this study;

Robin Duncan and Jess Austin from Scotland's Adoption Register

Members of the Advisory Group-

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Phillipa Brosnan Scottish Government

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Thank you to you all

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Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Methods
 3. Adoption in context
 4. Why hold and Activity day?
 5. Organising and planning an Activity day
 6. What did participants think about the event?
 7. The children
 8. The foster carers
 9. The social workers for the children
 10. The prospective adopters
 11. The social workers for the adoptive parents
 12. The volunteers
 13. Conclusion
 14. Recommendations.
- Appendix 1 research methods

1. Introduction

1.1 This report is about the Adoption Activity Day held in Scotland in October 2015 and sets out the feedback from all who took part. The report also draws upon a recent study '*Beyond the Adoption Order, challenges, intervention, disruption 2014 University of Bristol and the Department of Education.*'

1.2 A number of Activity Days have been held in England and the Scottish Government decided to fund the first one in Scotland and to commission an evaluation of the day to report on the impact on the children and their carers and prospective adopters. The first day was organised by staff from Scotland's Adoption Register assisted by an advisory group of experienced adoption practitioners.

1.3 BAAF set out that the primary purpose of activity days is to give children waiting for a permanent placement and prospective adopters the opportunity to meet in a relaxing and child friendly environment with a focus on a range of activities that both can engage in together. It is an opportunity for prospective families to respond directly to children and hopefully enhance the chances of finding families for those children who might otherwise miss the opportunity of having a permanent family.¹ These are not decision making days for either children or prospective adopters

1.4 There have been a number of such days in England but this one is the first in Scotland. Therefore the day was to be evaluated. The evaluation has six themes.

1. To learn from all involved, the children, their current carers, prospective adopters and social work staff their impressions and views of the day
2. To review the outcomes of the day in terms of views on the day and subsequently when carers will have feedback from the children and prospective adopters and staff will have had time to reflect on the experience
3. To review the event and to evaluate what worked well, what could be improved in a future event, which resources, and organisation and management would be required for future events
4. To identify outcomes in terms of the intention to enhance the adoption process for some families and children. It is recognised that this may not be appropriate for all children awaiting adoption or for all prospective adopters.
5. To review the longer term impact of the process in terms of the wider benefits of the day to the children, in particular how well they were prepared, how well they understood what adoption could mean. (this will inevitably depend on the children's ages and stages)

¹ BAAF (2014) Adoption Activity days.

6. To hear from foster carers and professionals the implications they have identified for the children, for themselves and for future planning.

2. Methods

2.1 Three recognised research methods were brought together to try to answer the above issues as fully as possible. These involved observation, questionnaires, and face to face interviews. (Appendix 1)

2.2 Involving the children. The report is reliant on the views of the children being reflected by their foster carers. In view of their ages and stages it would not have been appropriate to interview them.

2.3 The report does not identify any child or person and great care has been taken to make sure in the report that there will be no direct or indirect means of identification of adults or children.

3. Adoption in Context

3.1 Adoption had no legal basis in the United Kingdom until the 20th century and children who could not live with their birth families were cared for an informal basis. The First World War saw an increase in organised adoption through adoption societies. In 1926 the first legislation relating to adoption was passed for England and Wales, and similar legislation rapidly followed for Northern Ireland and Scotland in 1930.

3.2 Since then almost every decade has seen new laws introduced that increasingly regulate the process of adoption in the United Kingdom, and although legislation for each of the three countries remains similar, there are some differences. The peak number of adoptions was in 1968, and in the following years there has been a decline in children placed for adoption. The main reasons for children being adopted had been unmarried mothers giving up their children for adoption and stepparents adopting their new partner's children. Since the 1960s, social, cultural, economic, and legal changes have meant that neither of these are now major factors.

3.3 Children who are now adopted are mainly from local authority care because their birth family situation placed them at risk; a few are adopted from overseas but the figures for this remain low. The numbers of children seeking an adoptive family have declined and many children are considered to be 'hard to place' i.e. they may have emotional or physical disabilities which require additional support which not all prospective adopters are willing to offer.

3.4 Adoption at one time was primarily restricted to married couples. Recent legislation, Guidance on the Looked after Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 changed the guidance on who can apply including single people and same sex couples and there are now fewer barriers to being assessed. So more people within the community can apply to adopt.

3.5 One of the major contemporary concerns is how best to provide stability and permanence for children whose own parents are not able to care for them consistently or predictably. There is a complex legal process which can take many months to complete.

3.6 The challenge within adoption is to match the child with a family who can meet their needs over a lifetime. Adoption is one of the most life changing experiences to face a child and a family and how to decide which child should go to which family is one of the most professionally challenging decisions in social work.

3.7 For many years there has been concern about 'children who wait' and various strategies have been developed to speed up the process of finding the right family. Until recently written profiles were provided about children and prospective adopters rarely had the opportunity to meet the child or children.

3.8 Adoption Activity days are a recent introduction, originally from the United States the days were piloted in England in 2011. The Department of Education stated in 2012;

'Adoption Activity Days as pioneered by BAAF where prospective parents can meet children waiting for adoption and have the chance to make a real connection with a child. Pilot Activity Days have proved very successful, finding families for almost one in five children and evidence suggests they could be particularly successful in matching harder to place children.'

3.9 The 17 principles are set out in the BAAF handbook on how to organise and Adoption Activity Day.² There is list of principles and values which underpin Adoption Activity Days, the first is central to the process.

'Ensuring the safety and emotional and physical wellbeing of children are paramount and are at the heart of an Adoption Activity day – think child.'

A further principle states that it is important to be *'Acknowledging and supporting the anxiety and emotional intensity and impact of activity days on all.'*

3.10 Matching child and family is complex and there are different approaches e.g. the work of the Hadley Centre at the University of Bristol³. We are still learning about what works and the long term effects of Adoption Activity Days will take time to become clear.

3.11 There are risks throughout the process of adoption, the highest risk being that the placement will fail. But also that children who do not have a permanent placement will 'drift' in care. Current research tells us that the majority of adoptions succeed in providing a stable home for a child. However the most recent and comprehensive study of adoption and adoption disruption concluded that;

It is probably safe to conclude that the proportions of adoptions that disrupt post-order lies between 2% - 9%.⁴

4. Why hold an Activity day?

4.1 Finding families for children is a difficult process and in Scotland there is a shortage of suitable families wanting to adopt a child. There can also be a mismatch between the children who prospective adopters have in their minds and the children who are available. Most prospective adopters are aware that even if they want a young baby they are unlikely to be matched with them. However research⁵ has shown that the majority of prospective adopters would prefer a child under the age of five years.

² Adoption Activity Days BAAF 2014

³ An exploration and development of matching practices: Danielle Turney and Julie Selwyn in collaboration with Coram BAAF (2013-2015)

⁴ University of Bristol study

⁵ In this study I have drawn on a recent and major research study Beyond the Adoption Order, challenges, intervention, disruption 2014 University of Bristol Department of Education

4.2 The most recent research on disruption in adoption has found that three-quarters of children who experienced a disruption were more than four years old at placement with their adoptive family. Children who were four years old or older at placement were 13 times more likely to disrupt than those who were placed as infants. These findings support much of the previous research and the government's attempts to reduce delay in decision-making. This much larger dataset highlights the impact of delay.

4.3 The work of Scotland's Adoption Register steering group found that as of 21st September 2015, 149 children and 61 families were seeking placement – again reflecting the usual disparity between children in need of adoption and families available to adopt.⁶ There is a real need to try every possible means to find more families for children and where appropriate to speed up the process of matching children with families. The Activity day is one potential way of doing this.

5. Organising and planning an Adoption Activity Day

'Any day which runs so smoothly and looks so effortless has to have been very well organised'

Comment by a prospective adopter.

5.1 The organisation of the day can be divided in to three broad stages.

5. a. Planning in advance and identifying the children.

5.2 The concept of the activity day has been recognised as a helpful method of family finding for children who may wait much longer for a family, for example older children, larger families and children with additional needs.

5.3 This initial event was organised by the West of Scotland Consortium and the North East Consortium and in this event the children all came from the West of Scotland. Work was undertaken by the staff at Scotland's Adoption Register to recruit children awaiting adoption, inform prospective adopters and their social workers, and the social workers and foster carers of the children.

⁶ Extract from notes of Steering group 22.09.2015

5.4 A steering group was set up to plan the event and part of their role was to prepare for the event and to take part in the briefings.

5.5 The organisation of numbers of children and people was quite complex, there was concern that the event was not too big and not too small. Some of the days in England had hosted up to a hundred people, prospective adopters, foster carers, social workers and children. The steering group wanted this event to be manageable and 20 children were identified with their foster carer, social worker, prospective adopters and some of their social workers also attended. 19 children were identified to attend the day in South West Scotland with ages ranging from 18 months to nine years. 23 Families were identified, with nine coming from English agencies. Approaches were made to agencies in the North of England in order to ensure there would be enough prospective adopters in relation to the number of children. The possible legal and financial complications were acknowledged but it was also noted that a considerable number of cross border placements are being made by agencies.

5.6 The steering group noted that; *'Only two families were referred from Local Authorities which shows a worrying trend in the number of prospective adopters available through LA's.'*

A modern secondary school was identified as a suitable venue as it had a selection of large and smaller areas and catering facilities. Separate briefing letters were sent to foster carers, prospective adopters and social workers.

5. b. Organising the process of the day.

5.7 The theme was Pirates and Princesses and children and adults could come in fancy dress if they chose.

In summary there were volunteers whose roles were to support the day, meet and greet arrivals and help with refreshments. There was a range of activities for the children, including face painting, soft play, crafts and outdoor play.

5.8 The prospective adopters were expected to engage in play with the children, there was limited but appropriate information available to them, and they were advised not to ask personal or intrusive questions. The children were free to play wherever they wanted and to go from one activity to another.

5. c. Follow up to the day.

5.9 All participants were asked to complete questionnaires which were returned and collated by staff at Scotland's Adoption register. The steering group also reflected on the process of the day.

5.10 I attended the day as a volunteer and I was able both to observe and talk with prospective adopters, social workers and foster carers.

5.11 All adults were told of the evaluation and that I was present on the day. I gave all participants a card and invited them to contact me if they wanted a separate discussion. There was a good response from all groups of adults who took part and I had separate interviews with 20 people, foster carers, prospective adopters and social workers. The small advisory group set up to feed into the evaluation met and discussed key themes of the day.

5.12 There were 14 immediate expressions of interest in the children who attended the event.

6. What did participants think about the event?

6.1 Overall the feedback from the adults has been very positive and many of the children are reported to have enjoyed themselves. There were exceptions, one child in particular was reported by her carers to be unsettled and distressed following the event. Some foster carers had a number of criticisms but still felt the event was worthwhile. Prospective adopters were nearly all very positive about the event, although some described it as rather overwhelming. Social workers supporting prospective adopters and children were also positive, although again there were some thoughts about which children should attend.

7. The children

'It appeared to be a positive experience for the children as they got to play with children in a similar situation to themselves and they all seemed to enjoy it.'

Comment from prospective adopter.

'I do think the majority of children did enjoy the event. One child from our authority struggled towards the end as a result of his additional needs and perhaps this should be taken into account on the future.'

Comment from social worker for a child.

7.1 The children ranged in age from 18 months to nine years old. Some were there with their brother or sister, some were on their own. All came with their foster carers. Although it would have been helpful to be able to hear directly the views of the children, this would not have been appropriate given the potential for unsettling or worrying them. Also many were too young to fully understand the process.

7.2 The children had all been prepared by their social workers and foster carers for the event. Appropriate to their age and stage they had some knowledge that although they were attending a party, the party was a special one concerned with their possible future family.

7.3 On the day most of the children joined in the activities and were willing at different levels to engage with the adults. Some stayed close to their foster carers, others set off the play with the cars, paints etc. Two young boys appeared to relate little to the adults and tended to wander about at times looking at little lost. There was quite a high degree of noise and it could be they were unsettled/ troubled by this. Their carers and social workers engaged with them and made sure they were alright. One little boy became very distressed and his carer was provided with a quiet space and toys away from the bigger group.

7.4 The feedback from foster carers about the impact on the children has been varied. One foster carer was very concerned at how an older child had reacted. The carer thought that the event had brought home to her that she was going to be

expected to move from the foster home and whilst she may have been told this, the event clarified it for her.

7.5 Some younger children were reported to have enjoyed the day but were very tired on return. On the whole it was the older children predictably for whom the event had most meaning. One child paid considerable attention to one family of prospective adopters and her carer was concerned that she had 'claimed' them without perhaps realising that any future interest in her would have to come from them.

7.6 Some foster carers expressed the view that the events were not suitable for older children and there was risk the child felt they were being 'checked out' and if it did not result in a placement they had 'failed'. However another foster carer wondered if attending gave the child a better sense of involvement in the process.

7.7 As this feedback suggests the children found the experience and party like atmosphere enjoyable, the activities were intended for their respective age ranges. Whether it did more than this is difficult to know. One of the issues discussed at the activity day steering group was power, does the child have any? Do they feel powerless in the adoption process? Could taking part in a day like this give them a better sense of involvement?

7.8 The research study by the University of Bristol team asked young people now in their late teens what they thought about being adopted and what advice they would give today. The findings were as follows;

*'Thinking back to when they first moved into their adoptive home, young people talked about not understanding what was happening and not being asked if they wanted to be adopted.'*⁷

⁷ Beyond the Adoption Order, challenges, intervention, disruption 2014 University of Bristol Department of Education page 232

7.9 At the conclusion of the study the young people were asked if there were any other points that they would want to make and the included the following;

'Young people not being listened to and not being believed. This was in relation to children not having a voice in adoption and the young people thought that any child over four years should have to agree to adoption.'

8. The foster carers

'In my opinion it was a fun day for the child we foster. As he is only two years old he would not understand anything else about it.'

Comment from a foster carer

'We work as a team and we were disappointed we could not both come. Keeping the numbers down was a factor but we would have liked to be able to talk it over afterwards. Also our child asked why we didn't both come as she's used to us going together places. She enjoyed the day but was very tired afterwards. There has been interest expressed in her so we are pleased.'

Comment from a foster carer

8.1 Fewer of the foster carers completed the feedback forms than the other people involved. About a quarter of foster carers responded to the written feedback. I interviewed five in their own homes and was able to have in depth discussion about their views of the process and the impact on the children. I also talked with foster carers at the Adoption Exchange event. Foster carers were more inclined to be critical in a discussion than when completing the feedback forms.

8.2 Foster carers had the most mixed views about the event, some admitted they had been opposed to it at the beginning but had warmed to the process when they had the chance to talk with their social worker and appreciated how well the event was organised.

8.3 The main anxiety on the part of foster carers was the potential for upsetting particularly the older children. One foster carer said they would not be willing to bring an older child if they were caring for one in the future as they felt the child would feel they were being 'selected.'

8.4 Another family felt that preparation was the key and that the event had focused their child's social worker into talking with him about his future which they believed was long overdue.

8.5 All the foster carers I met were unhappy that both of them could not come, they appreciated the need to keep numbers of adults down but two suggested having fewer volunteers and asking foster carers to help out with catering etc. They thought the children would be pleased to see them joining and having some responsibility and this could improve their sense of security on the day. Some foster carers had found the day uncomfortable they were advised to 'hang back' and let the prospective adopters play with the children which they recognised as appropriate but for some children confusing.

8.6 Foster carers thought on the whole the venue was good but there were not enough quiet spaces. One foster carer thought each family should have a 'recognised base' where the child could return to for a snack or a drink or a cuddle. They suggested each family having a brightly coloured picnic blanket with camping chairs for the adults. The children could bring a favorite cuddly toy to sit on the blanket whilst they were away playing.

8.7 The fancy dress aspect of the party produced conflicting opinions from carers. Some were very opposed on the grounds that the prospective adopters should be dressed as 'real' people and not hiding in a costume. They also pointed out that for some children this could be frightening and even bring back unhappy memories. Several foster carers also thought that the children should not arrive in fancy dress but could dress up if they wished later.

8.8 Other foster carers welcomed the fancy dress as adding to party atmosphere and making it fun for the children. They felt that by keeping the 'event light' there was less risk to the children's emotions if they were not 'chosen'. Adults in fancy dress protected the children from feeling this was a formal process like school or a Children's Hearing.

8.9 The views of the foster carers reflect at times diverse views but were all firmly rooted in what is best in their view for the child. The research from the University of Bristol found that in placing children for adoption;

'The role of the foster carer during the introductions and transition was crucial. The majority of foster carers (61%) were welcoming. About 30% of foster carers were less helpful and obstructed the move. Those adoptive families who had not been supported by the foster carer in the transition were more likely to be families where the child had left home earlier and the adoption had been less secure.'

9. The social workers for the children

'I think it was positive although I am still not convinced that the children should be made fully aware of why they are there. I explained to the child I accompanied that it was a party and there would be children there who were waiting for a mummy and daddy and parents who were waiting for a child.'

Comment from social worker

Preparation of the children for this event is vital although it's a party it's got a purpose which most parties don't have and we should never deceive children even indirectly. Their foster carers were very experienced and did a lot of the preparation and we worked together. I do think both carers should have been able to come, the front line is the foster carers and their support is vital, how can the child talk to a carer about the event if they weren't there?

Comment from social worker

9.1 The social workers for the children emphasised the importance of preparation and valued the very good organisation of the day which they felt helped it run smoothly. Some felt that there were not enough activities/toys for the younger children and that there should have been a special area for them.

9.2 One social worker referred to a 'sense of fun' which permeated the day. And that allowed the children to feel at ease with so many strangers. Another social worker emphasised that all children are different and there will never be a 'one size' fits all. Some children do not like parties they may remind them of being in families where adults became drunk and out of control. Also some children are abused at 'parties' and therefore there cannot be an assumption that all children can be considered for an activity day.

9.3 The issue of 'hard to place' children was raised by several social workers, this is a difficult term and one social worker suggested perhaps should be substituted for 'children whose needs require a special family'. Although all adoptive families are special in some ways. In England there have specific activity days for these children which the workers thought had advantages, as the families attending had already expressed an interest and the day brought home to them the potential and personality of a child who on paper looked to have limited potential. However it would be unlikely for Scotland to have sufficient numbers of children within a reasonable geographical area. Some social workers felt that the first activity day should have catered more widely for children with additional needs and that there had been missed opportunities to include a small number of children who have been waiting a long time for a family.

9.4 The research by the University of Bristol found that many adopters of children considered that the children had not been well prepared and the children who were least well prepared were most likely to have disrupted placements. The research noted that social workers should;

*'Be aware of the development and capacity of individual children with adoption plans. Social workers need to work with children's ambivalence, ensure children understand why they cannot live with their parent, and prepare them for placement. Adoption is a process not an outcome and children need to be helped to understand what is happening in their life. Children stated that they did not understand what was happening to them or why they could not live with their families at the time they were placed for adoption.'*⁸

10. The prospective adopters

'We were really worried about coming, our social worker reassured us but the thought of meeting the children seemed very daunting, supposing they didn't like us. But it worked out fine it was very well organised with lots going on so we could blend in. I found talking with the children difficult we were meant to be casual but interested. It wasn't casual for us it mattered so much.'

Comment from a prospective adopter

'Really good, all seemed to enjoy themselves. (Although could see some overwhelmed) Perhaps more quiet areas.'

Comment from a prospective adopter

⁸ Beyond the Adoption Order, challenges, intervention, disruption 2014 University of Bristol Department of Education *Chapters 13 and 16.*

10.1 All the prospective adopters completed feedback forms and all were very positive, their comments were invariably focused on the children's experiences. Some said they felt overwhelmed by the size of the event and the noise level.

10.2 I also interviewed four prospective adopters in their own homes and I travelled to the North of England to meet one family. These in depth discussions were worthwhile as whilst being very child focused in their feedback forms, the adopters were more willing to discuss their own feelings and attitudes to the events in a personal discussion.

10.3 The prospective adopters I met enjoyed the aspect of fancy dress and felt that it conveyed to the children that they were 'fun' people who were willing to join in. All had no difficulty engaging with the children and put this down to the fancy dress. It may also have been due to a willingness to sit on the floor and join in as appropriate.

10.4 Some adopters had also attended activity days in England and they felt that the one in Scotland they had attended whilst being quite large was not as overwhelming as some of the larger events held in England. As there are more adopters than children waiting currently in England, the adopters felt that there was a sense of underlying competition between families which was much less evident in Scotland.

10.5 The prospective adopters did think that meeting the children could lead to them widening their choices and what they could offer a child.

10.6 The research by the University of Bristol found that there was a delicate balance to be achieved between respecting the views of prospective adopters about the children they felt they could offer a home to, and the risks of persuading them to alter their views. One of the recommendations of the study was to;

*'Improve linking and matching practice to remove the sense of 'winners' and 'losers' in the process, and discourage the stretching of adoptive parents' preferences. Matching a child with adoptive parents whose expressed preferences are different to those of the child increases risks of disruption.'*⁹

⁹ Beyond the Adoption Order, challenges, intervention, disruption 2014 University of Bristol Department of Education page 301

11. The social workers for the adoptive parents

'More information shared with Social workers beforehand re the children attending? If I had known the age range, I might have suggested other couples attend. It would have been nice if adopters were given an idea of how the children were prepared for this day, in terms of understanding what it is for?'

Comment by social worker

'My adopters found the experience positive but also they felt more overwhelmed by the presence of the children than they had anticipated. They thought they would have done better at engaging and playing with the children but found in reality they were anxious and overwhelmed and this hindered their ability to relax and engage naturally.'

Comment by social worker

11.1 The social workers for the adoptive families were not all present but there was a good response of written feedback. Their responses recognised the experience of the children and also of the prospective adopters. I was able to meet with three social workers and I was also able to talk to two staff at the Adoption Exchange Day who were responsible to recruiting prospective adopters in England.

11.2 The staff who had experienced several activity days in England were very positive about them and felt they gave people wanting to adopt another view of the process and the chance to meet other adopters in different contexts. The staff discussed some prospective adopters who in their view were unwilling to be flexible in the children they wanted to adopt, they felt a minority had too high expectations and wanted the 'perfect' child. They felt the activity days brought families into contact with 'real' children and that having met older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs they were more willing to think again about children they could care for.

11.3 The social workers for the adopters were aware of the emotional impact on their families and that all had found the event stressful. Whilst they thought the briefing on the day was useful some adopters had said they were too keyed up at the thought of meeting the children to take in what was being said.

11.4 The social workers were clear that the activity day was not part of the assessment as their families had already been approved but they did see another side to the families. In England there have been occasions when prospective adopters had not completed their approval before attending events but this had now been stopped and prospective adopters invited were expected to have been approved for certain categories of children e.g. those over a certain age. The activity days had led some families to change their minds and to be more flexible in terms of thinking they could take two siblings, or an older child.

11.5 The social workers were aware of the impact on the children and most commented that they thought the children were enjoying the day, but two noticed *that 'one or two children did not find anyone taking an interest in them, whether they were aware of this being an issue or not I am not sure.'*

11.6 The adoption social workers I spoke to from England referred to 'adopter led adoption' whereby prospective adopters had a more proactive role in their recruitment and child placement. They felt that the Activity days complemented these processes as they enable prospective adopters to meet not only the children but their foster carers and social workers at an earlier stage in the process. One very experienced foster carer who had fostered over twenty children who had all been placed for adoption told me that she welcomed the greater involvement of the prospective adopters and thought in the long run it would contribute to quicker identification of families. She also felt that it would help to focus the minority of families who were looking for the 'perfect child' and would help them to decide if they really wanted to adopt at all. She believed that all adoptive families faced challenges especially in the teenage years and families needed to be resilient.

11.7 This view is reflected in the Bristol University study which found that;

'About a quarter of families described major challenges in parenting their child who had multiple and overlapping difficulties and their struggles to get support. Parents reported that they were physically and mentally exhausted and that there had been a negative impact on marital and family relationships.'

With more maltreated children being adopted out of care and resources pumped into reduce delay and recruit more adopters, the support needs are easily forgotten, as they are mainly needed some way down the line and services especially for adolescents are under-developed. Although disruption rates are low (and could be lower with better support), each one of the parents and young people who were interviewed had a story of personal tragedy and pain. It is important not to forget the hundreds of families who are 'At home' managing very challenging children. The survey results estimate this group at about a quarter of adoptive families who are parenting teenagers and even one in five of the 'Going well' group had teenage children whose SDQ scores indicated probable mental health problems'.¹⁰

12. The volunteers

'I was impressed at the professional thought and organisation that went into each event. There was professional children's event organiser plus storyteller etc. The children were enabled to participate through dressing up (as well as the adults), keeping it child centred. There were goody bags to take home and the children seemed well supported by their carers and social workers. The timing worked well.'

Comment by a volunteer

'I think any event that will help a child find their forever family is positive. It's an emotive day charged with ethical dilemmas but with the right planning (as evident on the day) can work well for children.'

Comment by a volunteer

12.1 The volunteers had a key role in freeing up the adults attending, to enable them to focus on the children. They provided constant supplies of tea/coffee snacks etc. and help practically in setting up and clearing away afterwards.

12.2 They were also alert to the children's needs and intervened where necessary. The majority of comments were very positive, some commented that event could be overwhelming for some children, especially the younger ones.

12.3 The volunteers had mixed opinions on the dressing up by adults. The volunteers commented on aspects of the organisation, especially reception which they felt slowed down people coming in and there needed to be a larger area for reception issuing of badges etc.

¹⁰ Beyond the Adoption Order, challenges, intervention, disruption 2014 University of Bristol Department of Education page 234

12.4 The need for a quiet area was suggested by several respondents, especially for children with special needs who didn't like noise. The large hall was thought to be too big and too noisy by some volunteers.

13. Conclusion

13.1 The initial feedback overall is very positive and the importance of effective organisation cannot be over emphasised. The day was worthwhile in a number of ways. There were a number of expressions of interest in the children and at the time of writing (March 2015) matches had been made for six children and this study will conduct a follow up after nine months. The overall matching rate currently is 26% - which is identical to the average rate achieved over the first 55 adoption activity days in England held since 2011. Some key themes in the adoption process were also highlighted.

13.2 The activity day had the effect of focussing attention on key aspects of the adoption process in particular the role of foster carers and the importance of preparation for the children.

13.2 Many participants were alive to the risk and ethical issues for the children and there were strong views especially from some foster carers that the days should primarily be for younger children and the emotional risks to the child increased with their age. This highlighted the importance of preparation especially for older children so that they felt supported both on the day and afterwards. Foster carers were all clear that both carers should be able to attend if they and the child wanted them to.

13.3 Many of the prospective adopters found the process emotionally challenging. More than preparation meetings or exchange days the event had brought home to them the powerful mixture of wanting a child and worrying about their capacity to be a good enough parent and enabling the child to love them and to be able to love the child.

13.4 The success of the day in the longer term will be evident in the numbers of children who are placed with a family. The activity day may well be a part of the process and it will not necessarily be possible to identify precisely how much of a role the day played in the eventual outcome.

13.5 There is a plan to follow up after nine months to discover the destinations of this first group of children. And views of the relevance of the activity day.

14. Recommendations

- **Adoption Activity Days are a worthwhile intervention in seeking adoption placements for children, especially those whose needs are more complex**
- **The preparation of each child is essential as is joint discussion and planning with the child's foster carer**
- **There should be an individual risk assessment of the likely impact of the event on each child with plan to support them on the day and afterwards, jointly agreed by the child's social worker and foster carer**
- **The existing format with some minor changes to timing and reception is a good working model**
- **The amount of forward planning and planning on the day is essential and needs to be retained**
- **There could be variation in the activities, the introduction of a quiet area would be valuable especially for young children**
- **The plan for a 'wind down' at the end was appropriate instead of a story a singing or music time might meet the needs of all children and could enable the adults to join in**
- **Both foster carers should be able to come.**

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03.03.2016

Appendix 1

Methods

Three recognised research methods were brought together to try to answer the above issues as fully as possible.

1. An ethnographic approach started the process with the evaluator attending the Adoption Activity Day as a participant observer. The purpose was to observe the process. I was identifiable to all adults and children and my role outlined very briefly. I joined in as appropriate and blended as a volunteer in any role needed. I made notes from time to time but not obviously. I attended an Adoption Exchange Day and spoke with social workers and foster carers. I attended planning groups and a small advisory group set up specifically to comment and contribute to this evaluation.
2. Qualitative interviews and questionnaires were used for adults taking part with different schedules for prospective adopters, foster carers, social work staff and volunteers.
3. Quantitative data was gathered, e.g. the numbers invited, who came, broad geographical spread, numbers of children, age range. Outcome data in terms of who did attend. Data on the financial and organisational elements which would contribute to future planning of further events.

Ethics

The evaluation was guided by ethical research principles in research work with adults and children. There was not time to set up a steering group for this project, however there was a small advisory group of experienced adoption practitioners which considered the experiences and themes and commented on the draft report.



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