



Department  
for Education

# **Call for views: adoption contact arrangements and sibling placements**

**Summary of feedback and Government  
response**

**February 2013**

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# 1. Summary of views and Government response

## Introduction

- 1.1. In March 2012, the Government published *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* which set out a range of proposals for tackling unnecessary delay in the adoption system which does further harm to children who have already suffered severe disruption in their young lives.
- 1.2. Martin Narey, the Ministerial Advisor on Adoption, launched a call for views exercise on 20 July 2012 on:
  - the arrangements for contact between children in care and their birth parents, and adopted children and their birth parents; and
  - proposed changes to the placement of children in sibling groups for adoption.
- 1.3. That call for views closed on 31 August 2012. We received 102 responses on sibling placement and 125 on contact with birth parents. Some of the contact proposals suggested changes that would have an impact on the courts system, which is non-devolved, so the call for views on contact was also translated into Welsh. It launched in Wales on 4 September, and closed on 5 October. We received 5 responses from Wales.
- 1.4. Responses to the call for views were received by email and post. The Children's Rights Director also held focus groups in August 2012 to gather the views of children, and their accompanying carers provided responses in hard copy.
- 1.5. This document provides a summary of the responses received on contact arrangements (Section 2), and of those received on placement of children in sibling groups (Section 3). As respondents also made substantial recommendations around improvements which can be made to practice in both these areas, these recommendations are provided in a separate document, at Annex A.
- 1.6. The Government response to the views received is set out in Section 4.

A summary of the responses from children whose views were captured by the Children's Rights Director, summarised by the Office of the Children's Rights Director, is included at Annex B.

## 2. Contact: summary of responses

- 2.1 The first paper within the call for views was about contact between children in care, or those who have been adopted, and their birth parents. It reviewed law and practice about contact arrangements and looked at the available evidence about the impact of contact on children and their outcomes. It also set out the case for possible changes to the law to ensure that contact arrangements serve the best interests of children.

### Number of Respondents

- 2.2 The tested languages were the five most widely-taught in Europe: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Each jurisdiction tested their pupils in two of these languages. In England these were French and German
- 2.3 There were a total of 125 responses to this paper. There were also 5 responses to the translation of the call for views circulated in Wales.
- 2.4 The breakdown of respondents in England was as follows:

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Adopted Adult   | 4  |
| Adoptive Parent   | 12 |
| Foster Carer  | 9  |
| Children's Social Worker                                  | 5  |
| Social worker (Adoption Team) (Local Authority)           | 8  |
| Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)                       | 2  |
| Local Authority (LA)                                      | 10 |
| Member of an Adoption Panel                               | 3  |
| Lawyer  | 1  |
| Social worker (Voluntary Adoption Agency)                 | 3  |
| Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation (VCS) | 18 |
| Member of an Adoption Support Organisation                | 4  |
| Member of the Judiciary                                   | 1  |
| National Membership Organisation                          | 5  |
| Academic Researcher                                       | 4  |
| Other   | 36 |

- 2.5 The breakdown of respondents from Wales was as follows:

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Social Worker (Adoption Team) (LA) | 1 |
| Local Authority                    | 3 |
| National Membership Organisation   | 1 |

## Contact Arrangements for Children in Care

### Response outcomes from England

**Should we strengthen regulations and guidance so that contact arrangements are purposeful and reflect the needs of the child?**

Yes – 68 (54.5%)    No – 13 (10.5%)    Did not respond – 44 (35%)

**Should we strengthen statutory guidance to ensure more consideration is given to the purpose of contact for infants?**

Yes – 73 (58%)    No – 11 (9%)    Did not respond – 41 (33%)

**Should we look again at guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers?**

Yes – 71 (57%)    No – 10 (8%)    Did not respond – 44 (35%)

**Should we remove the duties on local authorities in primary legislation to allow children in care reasonable contact with their birth parents and to promote contact for looked after children?**

Yes – 29 (23%)    No – 52 (42%)    Did not respond – 44 (35%)

**Should we replace the duties on local authorities in primary legislation to allow children in care reasonable contact with their birth parents and to promote contact for looked after children, with a new requirement that local authorities consider contact arrangements that have a clear purpose documented in the child's care plan?**

Yes – 56 (45%)    No – 25 (20%)    Did not respond – 44 (35%)

### Themes

#### Once Adoption is the Plan

**Should we look at existing guidance and regulations and consider where and how these can be strengthened to ensure a formal review and a clear decision making process about contact takes place at each of the three points?**

- (a) when the local authority makes a decision that a child should be placed for adoption, but no placement order has been made;**
- (b) at placement order; and**
- (c) when the child is placed with prospective adopters.**

Yes – 62 (49.5%)    No – 12 (9.5%)    Did not respond – 51 (41%)

**Should we introduce a presumption of ‘no contact’ once adoption is the plan unless the local authority is satisfied that contact would be in the best interests of the child?**

Yes – 29 (23%)    No – 49 (39%)    Did not respond – 47 (38%)

**Should we introduce a ‘permission’ filter for birth parents, requiring them to get permission from the court to apply for contact with a child?**

Yes – 49 (39%)    No – 25 (20%)    Did not respond – 51 (41%)

**Should we introduce a provision to explicitly seek the views of the potential adopters at an early point in relation to contact at the point of the placement order?**

Yes – 43 (34.5%)    No – 25 (20%)    Did not respond – 57 (45.5%)

### **For Adopted Children**

**Should we provide that the court can, on application for an adoption order, make an order for no contact?**

Yes – 38 (30.5%)    No – 34 (27%)    Did not respond – 53 (42.5%)

**Should we amend legislation to create a new more demanding ‘permission filter’?**

Yes – 34 (27%)    No – 31 (25%)    Did not respond – 60 (48%)

### **Additional Comments**

"Let's not reinvent the wheel – rather understand what the existing regulation and guidance is and ensure it is implemented and monitored etc." – Manager of IRO service.

"The current legal framework and regulations are not the fundamental issues that prevent decisions, in relation to contact and sibling placements, being taken which are in the best interests of children. Rather, there is a need to address the skills, culture and attitudes within the social work profession, and the courts, that can hinder social workers in thinking about the correct placement and care options for children and young people." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"It is not in children in care's best interests to design legislation around the needs of those who will be adopted." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"The no presumption of contact principle urgently needs reinforcing." – Local Authority Adoption Service.

"We do not consider that there is a need to change primary legislation or Regulations

and Statutory Guidance concerning contact. However, there is a need to strengthen the focus on the child's best interests in practice." – Non-Departmental Public Body.

"We are not in favour of sweeping change affecting looked after children of all ages..... Instead, we strongly support specific changes only focusing on contact in infancy, where concerns about the impact of contact on children's welfare. Are most acute." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"Seems to revert to the pre-Children Act 1989 position of leaving contact to the discretion of the local authority." "Given the extreme pressure on local government staff and resources, contact may well not be prioritised by local authorities. Unless it is a statutory requirement." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"There should never be a presumption of "no contact" –Independent Consultant.

"If a child has an attachment and loves a person in a safe situation I feel it is very important that contact continues be it with a grandparent or foster carer." – Other.

"There is a negative impact on children when there is frequent contact, especially once a placement order is made" – Other.

"Statutory guidance around the understanding that all contact should have a purpose should be strengthened" – National Membership Organisation.

"With the development of social media platforms such as Facebook, unauthorised contact will continue to be a challenge for all parties involved. . . This . . . means that adoptions must be much more "open". A presumption of 'no contact' may drive adopted children and their birth relatives to seek unauthorised contact" – National Membership Organisation.

## **A case by case approach**

"Paramount considerations in relation to contact arrangements, their frequency and the means by which are affected should be based upon the individual circumstances of the child" – Local Authority Adoption Service.

"It is clear from research that contact in itself is neither a good nor a bad thing. What matters most is that strong assessments are made of the need for contact " – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"Contact decisions are rarely black and white, good contact vs bad contact, abusive adult vs non-abusive adult. Contact decisions are based on subtleties – of the child's behaviour vs verbally expressed views, of the child's responses within and after contact, of the levels of abuse, distress and past trauma within the family, of support for the placement and care plan." –Children's Social Worker.

"There should be no presumption about contact, either that it will take place or that it will not, for adopted children." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"Contact cannot and should not be a standardised practice" – National Membership Organisation.

"The term 'contact' needs to be defined. It is not only direct face to face contact" – Member of an Adoption Support Organisation.

## **Improve professional practice**

2.6 Recommendations for improvements to professional practice around contact can be found at Annex A.

## Court processes

“Too often contact seems to be about meeting the needs of the parent not the child” – Local Authority Children in Care Manager.

“Contact arrangements appears to be used as a bargaining tool amongst advocates representing the adults in care proceedings” – Local Authority Adoption Service.

“When I first started [as a foster carer 12 years ago] it [contact] was all about the children now however it seems to be all about the parents.” – Foster Carer

“Contact arrangements are also often known to be drawn up through informal negotiations between lawyers, rather than driven by the needs of the child. . . These processes need better management by courts, local authorities and Children’s Guardians if contact arrangements are to be purposeful.” – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

“We believe that the programme of reform to the family justice system following the Family Justice Review alongside reforms to social work following the Munro Review of Child Protection will substantially improve practice in this area. We believe that a highly trained and confident profession, alongside an informed, expert and well-led judiciary is the most effective way to protect and promote the best interests of the child.” – National Membership Organisation.

## Sibling contact

“It is not possible to separate out, in the way this consultation paper does, contact with the wider birth family and siblings, from the consideration of contact with birth parents” – Non-Departmental Public Body.

2.7 Recommendations for good practice in arranging contact between siblings are set out in Annex A.

## Children’s views

“Older children need to be asked if they wish to have contact” – Adoptive Parent

“The views, wishes and feelings of children in care are too often ignored by those who make decisions about them” – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

## Response outcomes from Wales

“The review should be used as an opportunity to add the following to the primary legislation:

- Promote contact with sibling and significant others and
- That reasonable contact must include consideration of the child’s needs, welfare and long term plan.” Local Authority.

“It is not the legislative framework that is at fault but the way in which Article 6 and 8 ECHR arguments are made, by those representing birth parents in court.” – National Membership Organisation.

“If s1 principles are adhered to, with reference to recent research, and individual care plans are constructed by well trained and supported social workers, then there is no



necessity for additional guidance” – National Membership Organisation.

“Contact arrangements tend to be as a ‘one size fits all cases’, without proper consideration as to the impact it has on an individual child” – Local Authority.

“Identified additional support for professionals would be welcomed” – Local Authority.

“Regulations and Guidance should be strengthened to take on board research which indicates the negative impact of a high level of contact, especially for young children . . . Contact should be about quality rather than quantity of contact” – Local Authority Social Worker.

“On-going post-adoption support should be provided to adopters.” – Local Authority Social Worker.

## Organisations Responding

2.8 Listed below are the organisations whose members responded to the call for views, some as individuals and some on behalf of the organisation.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Action for Children  | Hampshire County Council                                      |
| Adopt Together   | Imago Consultancy   |
| Adoption Services East Midlands,<br>Provided by Leicester City Council | London Borough of Barnet                                      |
| Adoption UK  | London Borough of Hackney                                     |
| Adult Adoptees Advocating for Change<br>– UK                           | London Borough of Merton                                      |
| After Adoption   | London Borough of Richmond Upon<br>Thames                     |
| After Adoption Yorkshire   | London Borough of Tower Hamlets                               |
| Alliance for Child-Centred Care  | Luton Borough Council   |
| ASIST (Adoption Support in Society<br>Today)                           | Nagalro   |
| Association of Directors of Children's<br>Services                     | National Care Advisory Service                                |
| Barnardos  | National Society for the Prevention of<br>Cruelty to Children |
| Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service                                    | Newcastle City Council  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Birmingham City Council                        | Norfolk Children's Services<br>Independent Charing Service |
| British Association for Adoption and Fostering | North Yorkshire County Council                             |
| Buckinghamshire County Council                 | Office of the Children's Commissioner                      |
| Cambridgeshire County Council                  | Oxfordshire County Council                                 |
| Cheshire and Wirral NHS Partnership Trust      | Post-Adoption Centre (PAC)                                 |
| Children Care Training and Consultancy         | Parents Against Injustice (PAIN)                           |
| Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies      | Plymouth City Council                                      |
| Coram  | Plymouth Fostering Panel                                   |
| Coventry City Council                          | Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea                    |
| Cumbria County Council                         | St. Francis' Children's Society                            |
| Derby City Council                             | Staffordshire County Council                               |
| Devon County Council                           | Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council                     |
| DFW Adoption                                   | Stoke on Trent City Council                                |
| Durham County Council                          | Suffolk Adoption Agency                                    |
| East Riding of Yorkshire Council               | TACT (The Adolescent and Children's Trust)                 |
| East Sussex Foster Care Association            | The Who Cares? Trust                                       |
| Essex County Council                           | Tri-borough Adoption and Fostering Services                |
| False Allegations Support Organisation         | University of Bristol                                      |
| Families for Children                          | University of East Anglia                                  |

|                                     |                           |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Family Futures                      | University of Kent        |
| Family Rights Group                 | University of Oxford      |
| Fostering Network                   | Voices from Care          |
| Fostering Through Social Enterprise | West Berkshire Council    |
| Grandparents Plus                   | Westminster City Council  |
| Halton Borough Council              | Wokingham Borough Council |

### Respondents from Wales

|                 |                                |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| BAAF Cymru      | Carmarthenshire County Council |
| Cardiff Council | Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC         |

### 3. Siblings: summary of responses

- 3.1 The second consultation paper discussed the placement of sibling groups for adoption. It argued that, while it is often best for siblings to be adopted by the same adopter or adopters, there can be disadvantages as well as advantages to this approach. It contended that decisions about whether to place siblings together should be made on the basis of the best interests of each individual child and taking full account of the advantages and disadvantages.

#### Number of Respondents

- 3.2 There were a total of 102 responses to this paper. The breakdown of respondents was as follows:

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Adopted Adult   | 2  |
| Adoptive Parent   | 20 |
| Foster Carer  | 3  |
| Children's Social Worker                                  | 2  |
| Social Worker (Adoption Team) (Local Authority)           | 11 |
| Independent Reviewing Officer                             | 1  |
| Local Authority   | 7  |
| Member of an Adoption Panel                               | 2  |
| Member of the Judiciary                                   | 2  |
| Social Worker (Voluntary Adoption Agency)                 | 4  |
| Member of a Voluntary Community Sector organisation (VCS) | 18 |
| Member of an Adoption Support Organisation                | 2  |
| National Membership Organisation                          | 3  |
| Academic Researcher                                       | 5  |
| Other   | 20 |

- 3.3 A full list of the organisations from which respondents came can be found at the end of this section.

## Themes

### General approach to placement of siblings

**Should the law be made more explicit so that placing siblings together is considered on a case by case basis for each individual child?**

Yes – 37 (36%)      No – 24 (23.5%)      Did not respond – 41 (40%)

### Additional comments

"re-framing the law won't help. This is a practice issue."

"This does not need a change in primary legislation, but rather a focus on improving practice and a recognition of the financial and practical issues regarding recruitment of adopters for sibling groups." "The Government's working group on adoption set out ways to achieve this and these should be vigorously pursued." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"The current legal framework and regulations are not the fundamental issues that prevent decisions, in relation to contact and sibling placements, being taken which are in the best interests of children. Rather, there is a need to address the skills, culture and attitudes within the social work profession, and the courts, that can hinder social workers in thinking about the correct placement and care options for children and young people." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"Challenge the widely held belief that siblings should always be together." "Re framing the law won't help. This is a practice issue." – Local Authority Social Worker.

"The Government needs to do more to address the capacity of local authorities to undertake in-depth, participatory assessments of individual children's needs. . . The issue of best interests will be better served with a greater focus on improving the quality of assessment than in changing the law."

"Automatic Adoption Allowance to allow for a 'permanent stay at home parent' and domestic services support if needed i.e. cleaner, ironing services etc. . . . Easy access to support groups, family days, counselling, therapy, therapy. A right to respite care/babysitting" – Adoptive Parent.

"Everything we've needed I've had to fight for . . . Siblings should not share bedrooms, under any circumstances. Traumatized children always need their own space." – Adoptive Parent.

"The support package is crucial, as it is emotionally, practically and financially challenging taking on the care of two, three or more children." – Academic researcher.

"There needs to be a robust, well-resourced adoption support service - and this cannot simply be the role of the adoption support workers within an adoption team. There needs to be a quick route to accessing advice, support, training etc. from CAMHS, educational psychology etc." – Local Authority Social Worker.

"Adoption services are, sadly, still the "Cinderella" service in some authorities . . . This means that finance is not put into adoption support - so it is often run on a shoestring. It may also mean that the necessary negotiations with, for example, Health Trusts in order to ensure there is a clear referral pathway to CAMHS are not prioritised." – Local Authority Social Worker.

"Make it legally and financially viable for local authorities to provide the means for

adopters to acquire adequate housing . . . Remove the means testing and annual means tested review of entitlement to adoption allowances." – Local Authority.

"Put more resource into post-adoption support and make it a proactive and regular source of professional and peer (adoptive parent) support." – Adoptive Parent.

"Adoption Support Plans need to take into account the individual and collective needs of a sibling group and the services and support, including financial support, need to be targeted on these needs." – Voluntary Adoption Agency Social Worker.

"All prospective adopters of sibling groups should be offered:

- Pre placement preparation with potential adopters to look at attachment styles and needs
- Mandatory life appreciation days where the professionals involved in supporting the child meet with the potential adopters to discuss every aspect of their life and their involvement with statutory services.
- More information and clarity offered about financial and practical support
- Priority access to CAMHS/education/ therapeutic support
- Post placement support for the adopters including counselling, family support, training and financial advice and guidance.
- Adoption allowances to allow one carer to be full time carer
- Provision of free home help support where necessary
- Provision of short break care
- Practical schemes on offer to facilitate house extension work or priority moves to larger social housing.
- Financial support to cover other one off costs such as a larger car."

- Member of Adoption Support Organisation.

"Willingness and ability of foster carers to take on large sibling groups is influenced heavily by housing costs and bedroom space" – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"Larger families are likely to need a 'stay at home parent', but if families have bills based on 2 wage earners, they may be more reluctant to consider more than one or two children at a time. . . Adoption Allowances should be more readily available for sibling adoptions and not just at the discretion of social services." – Adoptive Parent.

"If families do not have enough bedrooms or a big enough car this should not be the reason for assessing them as only suitable to adopt one or two children." – Adoptive Parent.

"Practical Support – including provision of domestic 'home help' type support" – Consultant.

"Introduce them [adopters of sibling groups] to others in a similar situation (like a buddy scheme)" – Kinship Carer.

## Recruitment

"We need to maximise recruitment as a solution." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

"Those adoption agencies who have invested in skilled 24/7 support have a track record in retaining their adopters and can also sometimes persuade them to take on sibling groups. . . . Public information campaigns using all forms of media can also help with awareness-raising, and, through that, more effective recruitment" – Non-Departmental Public Body.

"The role that smaller specialist voluntary adoption agencies play in finding families for often difficult to place children, including sibling groups, should be recognised." – Member of Adoption Support Organisation.

"Don't expect perfect parents" – Adoptive Parent.

"There is an unrealistic expectation that "ready made" adopters will come forward . . . Rather than begging "experienced parents" to come forward, why not look at addressing this skills gap?" – Adoptive Parent.

"When recruiting adopters for sibling groups it is especially important to look for flexibility of approach to parenting, 'enjoying a challenge' and 'communicative openness' with respect to important birth family links." – Academic Researcher.

"The main barrier is attracting enough of the right sort of adopters to take sibling groups and assuring them they will continue to receive all the support they and the children need to ensure success as the children mature and develop" – Academic Researcher.

"General media coverage – more TV documentaries featuring siblings who have been successfully placed together" – Adoptive Parent.

"We need both national and targeted campaigns based on accurate assessment of unmet need" – Consultant.

"Skilled and well trained adopters are required to take on this challenging task. It would be helpful to look at the characteristics of adopters who have succeeded in caring for siblings together." – Member of a Voluntary Community Sector Organisation.

## Improved professional practice

"LAs place very few large sibling groups - where it occurs there is individual good practice." – Academic Researcher.

- 3.4 Detailed recommendations for improvements to professional practice on placement of sibling groups are set out in Annex A.

## Organisational Culture

- 3.5 This issue is addressed under the good practice recommendations in Annex A.

## Contact with siblings

**Should we revise legislation and guidance to set out the features of good arrangements for contact with siblings when children are adopted separately?**

Yes – 37% (36%)      No – 17 (17%)      Did not respond – 48 (47%)

3.6 Recommendations on improvements to practice in this area are set out in Annex A.

## Organisations Responding

3.7 Listed below are the organisations whose members responded on the placement of sibling groups, some as individuals and some on behalf of the organisation.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Action for Children  | Grandparents Plus   |
| Adopt Together   | Leeds Metropolitan University                                 |
| Adoption Matters Northwest                                 | London Borough of Barnet                                      |
| Adoption Services East Midlands,<br>Leicester City Council | London Borough of Hackney                                     |
| Adoption UK  | Nagalro   |
| Adult Adoptees Advocating for Change<br>– UK               | National Society for the Prevention of<br>Cruelty to Children |
| After Adoption   | Newcastle City Council  |
| After Adoption Yorkshire                                   | Norfolk Children's Services                                   |
| Alliance for Child-Centred Care                            | North Yorkshire County Council                                |
| ASIST (Adoption Support in Society<br>Today)               | Office of the Children's Rights Director                      |
| Association of Directors of Children's<br>Services         | Oxfordshire County Council                                    |
| Barnardo's   | Parents Apart from Their Children                             |
| Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service                        | Royal Holloway, University of London                          |
| Birmingham City Council                                    | Somerset County Council                                       |
| Blackpool Council  | St. Francis Children's Society                                |
| Bournemouth Borough Council                                | Staffordshire County Council                                  |



|  |   |
|--|---|
| Bracknell Forest Council                               | Suffolk Adoption Agency                         |
| British Association for Fostering and Adoption         | TACT (The Adolescent and Children's Trust)      |
| Buckinghamshire County Council                         | The Who Cares? Trust                            |
| Children and Families Court Advisory Service (CAFCASS) | UEA Centre for Research on the Child and Family |
| Cambridgeshire County Council                          | University of Bristol                           |
| Cheshire and Wirral NHS Partnership Trust              | University of Cardiff                           |
| Children Care Training and Consultancy                 | University of Oxford                            |
| Coram  | Voices from Care                                |
| Cumbria County Council                                 | Warwickshire County Council                     |
| Devon County Council                                   | West Berkshire Council, Family Placement Team   |
| DFW Adoption   | Wokingham Borough Council Family Placement Team |
| Essex County Council                                   |   |
| Evangelical Alliance & Care for the Family             |   |
| Families for Children                                  |   |
| Family Futures   |   |
| Family Rights Group                                    |   |
| Fostering Network                                      |   |

## 4. Government Response

- 4.1 The Government would like to thank all who responded for their constructive contributions.
- 4.2 The Government's response to the feedback received is set out alongside each of its key proposals for change around contact arrangements between children in care and adopted children and their birth parents and around the placement for adoption of children who are in sibling groups.

### Siblings

- 4.3 **Should the law be made more explicit so that placing siblings together is considered on a case by case basis for each individual child? Should we revise legislation and guidance to set out the features of good arrangements for contact with siblings when children are adopted separately?**
- 4.4 There were mixed responses to these proposals with many respondents noting that improvements in outcomes for sibling placements were more likely to occur with better recruitment practices and better support for adopters of sibling groups. Many respondents indicated that decisions need to be made on a case by case basis. Some respondents expressed concerns that children's relationships would be undermined by the splitting up of sibling groups because of potentially rigid legislative requirements.
- 4.5 The Government appreciates these concerns and is not proposing to pursue changes through amendments to primary legislation. Instead the Government will consider the issue of delay for children in sibling groups through its broader adoption reforms, including those to the regulatory framework.

### Contact

#### For children in care

- 4.6 **Remove the duties on local authorities to allow children in care reasonable contact with their birth parents and to promote contact for looked after children.**  
**Replace the duties on local authorities to allow children in care reasonable contact with their birth parents and to promote contact for looked after children with a new requirement that local authorities consider contact arrangements that have a clear purpose documented in the child's care plan.**
- 4.7 These two proposals are mutually exclusive and were presented in the call for views document as 'either/or' options. Responses to the call for views clearly favoured replacing the duties rather than removing them.
- 4.8 The Government will take these proposals forward by amending the current duty on local authorities to allow reasonable contact between children in care and their birth relatives, so that it is subject to their duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. The Government will seek to dis-apply the current duty on local authorities to 'endeavour to promote contact' with the birth family and others where a local authority has been authorised to refuse contact, or is doing so on a

temporary basis. We are also seeking to introduce a power to specify in regulations the matters that a local authority should consider when determining whether contact arrangements are consistent with safeguarding and promoting the child's welfare. The intention is to specify that the local authority should have regard to the child's care plan, consistent with the proposal made in the call for views document.

- 4.9 **In order that contact arrangements are, and remain, fit for purpose, we could look at existing provisions for reviewing contact and ensure a formal review and decision making process takes place at each of the key points.**
- 4.10 The call for views suggested that this should be taken forward through regulations and guidance and a clear majority of those that answered the related question in the call for views were in favour of the Government taking this proposal forward.
- 4.11 The Government considered taking this forward through the Children and Families Bill, but as regulations already make provision for reviewing contact arrangements, we have decided, consistent with the call for views, to look to amend and strengthen these regulations, in due course.
- 4.12 **At present, there is no presumption for or against contact with the birth family at the placement order stage. We could introduce a presumption of 'no contact' unless the local authority is satisfied that contact would be in the best interests of the child.**
- 4.13 Of those that answered this question in the call for views, a clear majority were against this proposal. The Government agrees that there should neither be a presumption for or against contact at the placement order stage and has now decided not to take the presumption of no contact proposal forward. We are not proposing to make any alternative changes to the status quo in this area.
- 4.14 **We could also introduce a 'permission' filter for birth parents applying for contact with a child at the placement order stage. This would require birth parents to gain the court's permission to apply for contact, rather than being able to make a direct application.**
- 4.15 This proposal received more positive than negative responses through the call for views but, on balance, the Government has decided not to take this forward through the Children and Families Bill.
- 4.16 We understand from the courts that the number of applications for contact at this stage of the process is likely to be very small, meaning that any change would have a minimal impact other than increasing the burden on the courts. As outlined above in relation to the presumption of no contact, the Government also believes it is right that neutrality is maintained at this stage of the process.
- 4.17 **If potential adopters have been identified it is important that their views are also taken into account at an early point when making contact arrangements. We could introduce a provision to explicitly seek the views of the potential adopters in relation to contact at the point of the placement order.**

- 4.18 Like the permission filter proposal, this proposal received more positive than negative responses through the call for views. The Government has, however, decided not to take this proposal forward. As outlined above, the number of applications for contact at the placement order stage is likely to be small, meaning that any change in this area would have an impact in only a limited number of cases.

### **For adopted children**

- 4.19 **On application for an adoption order make provisions so that the court can make an order for 'no contact' - but this would only take effect once an adoption order has been made.**
- 4.20 Among those that answered the relevant question in the call for views document, opinions on this proposal were fairly evenly split, with a slightly more in favour of this proposal than were against it.
- 4.21 The Government will take this proposal forward by amending current legislation to deal specifically with contact at the point of, and after, the adoption order. This will include introducing a specific provision for the court to make orders prohibiting contact through 'no contact' orders, which might be most appropriate where there is a past history of abuse between the child and former birth relatives or guardians, or a history of disruptive contact. These 'no contact' orders will give adopted parents the ability to ask the court to stop unsolicited, potentially harmful and disruptive contact.
- 4.22 **Amend legislation to create a new more demanding 'permission filter'. This would raise the bar for any birth parent to make an application for a contact order. Criteria for granting permission already exists therefore we could explore how this might be strengthened.**
- 4.23 Like the 'no contact' proposal, opinions on this proposal were fairly evenly split among those that answered this question in the call for views. Slightly more respondents were in favour of the proposal than those that were against it.
- 4.24 The Government is taking this proposal forward through the Children and Families Bill. The new regime for dealing with contact arrangements at, and after, the adoption order stage applies a permission filter for anyone that makes an application for contact under the new provisions, other than the child or the adoptive parents.

### **Improvements to Practice**

- 4.25 **A series a practice and guidance changes were proposed, including social work practice support for the placement of children in sibling groups with adopters, guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers in scrutinising contact arrangements in the care planning process, support for social workers and other family justice professionals to ensure their recommendations are informed by evidence of the potential effects of contact for children, and improved training for prospective adopters.**

- 4.26 Through the implementation of its adoption reforms, the Government will review guidance and will work with the sector to ensure that practice and training on adoption placement and contact arrangements reflect the evidence about the best interests of children.
- 4.27 Many specific practice suggestions were made by respondents. These have been gathered into a practice annex attached to the summary of the views expressed.

## Annex A

### 5. Recommendations for Improvements to Practice Emerging from Call for Views on Contact for Children in Care and Placement of Sibling Groups for Adoption

This section draws together the recommendations made by respondents to the call for views on ways in which current practice on contact for children in care and in placement of sibling groups for adoption could be improved. It contains the following sections:

- Professional Skills and Knowledge for Placement of Siblings
  - Understanding of the Child and their Family
  - Understanding of Evidence
  - Specific Practice
  - Qualifications and Training
  - Workforce training issues
  - Supervision and Management
  - Staff Turnover
- Professional Practice on Placement of Siblings
  - Information Sharing and Recording
  - Reducing Delay in Processes
  - Assessment Processes
  - Planning
  - Multi-Agency Working
- Links between Care and Adoption
- Contact with Siblings
- Professional Culture on Placement of Siblings
- The Role of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Sibling Placements and Contact
- Professional Practice on Contact
  - Better Assessment Processes
  - Planning of Contact
  - Arrangements for Contact
- Professional Training and Qualifications on Contact
- Adoption Support for Contact
  - Training for Adopters
  - Training for Adopted Children
  - Support for Birth Relatives

- Professional Skills and Knowledge for Placement of Siblings
- Understanding of the Child and their Family  
 “Social workers poor child development knowledge. For example most sibling groups bicker and argue and this is not a reason to separate siblings who come into care.” –University of Bristol.

“Lack of understanding about who is perceived as ‘family’ – half siblings can be just as important as full siblings.” – University of Bristol.

[To promote a case-by-case basis]: “a pack of assessment tools such as the sibling checklist, Guidance” –Bracknell Forest Council  
 Exact words repeated by Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service.  
 Repeated by Family Placement Team, Wokingham Borough Council

“It would be helpful to have a standard assessment tool used by all social workers to assess the individual need of children and as a result what they need from adult carers, alongside a sibling assessment to inform decisions about whether it is in the best interests of the children to be placed together or separately” – Family Placement Team, West Berkshire Council.

[Need] “a consistent assessment tool for assessing individual children’s needs within a sibling group, that includes their relationship with one another” – Family Placement Team, West Berkshire Council.

“Clear frameworks and guidance for assessing siblings and taking decisions about placements would be helpful” – Essex County Council Children’s Social Care

“Better assessments of children including sibling relationships, so adopters are better informed when matches are made. We do not think social workers have adequate training/assessment tools to assess complex sibling relationships. The Together or Apart questions are too often used a checklist. It would be helpful to have access to an experienced panel to consider the assessments of sibling relationships in the context of family finding for adoption” – Oxfordshire County Council Adoption Team.

“Lack of standardised and appropriate assessment tools available to social workers to properly assess sibling relationship and make evidence-based decisions about the placement of sibling groups.” – Adopt Together (Faith in Families Adoption Service).

“The Adoption community would welcome DfE commissioned research on methods of assessment currently used by social workers when considering sibling

relationships and decisions round placing together or separately, with a view to devising/developing a recognised and appropriate assessment tool for this purpose” – Adopt Together (Faith in Families Adoption Service).

“Professionals working with adoptive sibling groups need to have knowledge around the complexities of sibling relationships . . . Social workers making these decisions have to assess whether a sibling relationship is ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ or whether the siblings have such disturbed attachments that it is beyond the capabilities of most adoptive parents or carers to be able to re-parent them . . . Without the relevant and necessary training, professionals cannot appropriately support adoptive families and their children. Furthermore, social workers and their managers should support each other to make these difficult decisions” – Adoption UK.

“There is also a wealth of helpful research findings and written publications to assist social workers in making the required comprehensive assessments. We could provide further detail of these if required. BAAF is also intending to publish a good practice guide on placing large sibling groups based on the research by Julia Selwyn later this year which we hope will assist agencies.

Adoption Statutory Guidance includes a helpful chapter which brings together legislation and guidance on contact and we would suggest that it could be helpful for a similar comprehensive approach to be taken in the coverage of placing siblings.” – BAAF.

“Reinforcing the material in for example the BAAF publication and requiring the inclusion of a ‘sibling checklist / sibling assessment tool ’ in the reports prepared for the agency Decision Maker in respect of a potential adoption.” – Adoption Panel Chair.

“Guidance should include or refer to existing sources of existing excellent material ( please obtain sources from BAAF , Adoption UK, After Adoption, Family Futures Practice Papers etc).

Guidance should require the use of The Sibling Assessment Tool (I’m sure you can source but please contact me if you require further information on this).” – Adoption Panel Chair.

The elements of social work practice are well documented in for example the publication by BAAF dealing with assessing the placement needs of siblings (‘Together or Apart’). Many publications eg from BAAF: ‘Adopting Larger Sibling Groups’, ‘Siblings in late permanent placement’ , ‘Where are my brothers and sisters’ and other titles from Adoption UK , Family Futures, should be essential



reading for those considering the placement needs of siblings.” – Adoption Panel Chair.

“Saunders and Selwyn (2011) also highlighted that half sibling relationships appeared to be less valued than full sibling relationships, particularly in relation to adoptive placements and contact planning. The findings from my study (Ottaway, 2012) strongly support the view, expressed powerfully by one participant, that ‘a half sibling is not a half relationship’. While there is no doubt that having a full birth sibling was seen as being particularly special for some participants, many others saw this as irrelevant: a sibling was a sibling, whether they shared some, all or more rarely any genes. Their relationship was defined by the fact of their biological connection (or their connection to one another through a birth parent, in the case of step-siblings), but the development and practice of these relationships was not. Other factors, such as liking one another and being able to spend time together, were also important. Social workers therefore need to think about their own conceptualisation of siblinghood when making decisions about children in sibling groups, and the value they place on sibling relationships. Biological connectedness is certainly one factor, but it should not be treated hierarchically, with full siblings being given greater status. Shared genes are one aspect, but only one, in the myriad of factors which make up sibling relationships.” –University of Cardiff.

- Understanding of Evidence

[Criticises] “Lack of awareness of the implications of sibling dynamics and how to mitigate these if the outcome is likely to be permanence away from the birth family. . . . Lack of knowledge around permanence including adoption to inform decision making at the front end of the service particularly during the course of care proceedings – decisions presented for example in court may not have been informed by those with relevant knowledge and experience of adoption. (This includes Cafcass, expert assessments, children’s social workers and the Judiciary)” – Adoption Advisor, Buckinghamshire County Council.

“Good research is needed about what works in parenting siblings who have been adopted from care” – Oxfordshire County Council Adoption Team.

“Social workers are not always aware of relevant research pertinent to assessing sibling relationships- e.g. an often used argument to separate siblings is where the older child is perceived to have had a caretaking role for the younger child – this leads to a recommendation for separate placements to allow the older child to ‘regain their childhood’. This notion is challenged in research by Sanders.<sup>1</sup> .

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<sup>1</sup> *Sibling Relationships – theory and issues for practice, Sanders (2004:26)*

Brodinsky<sup>2</sup> also comments that ‘...when a history of conflict is used as the basis for separating children and there is no effort made to overcome the problems, a primary message sent to the children is that conflict is best handled through avoidance and withdrawal...’. He concludes that ‘...Unless there is a compelling reason, siblings should not be separated from one another when they enter foster care or are adopted.’” – BAAF.

- Specific Practice

“Children benefit from life story work to help them to make sense of the complexity of their lives, and the complexity of their feelings. This is not a one-off task but will be something children need to revisit as they grow. It is a skilled area of work where specialist training is needed to enhance workforce skills.” – Nagalro.

“Research has shown that children ‘singled out for rejection’ by birth parents (among their birth sibling group) are more likely to fare poorly in adoptive placements which are then more likely to disrupt. The psychology of the singled out rejected child needs to be better understood along with ways to promote the integration of such a child into an adoptive family.”

Rushton A. Dance C. (2003) preferentially rejected children and their development in permanent family placements. *Child and Family Social Work*, 8, 4 257-267 Post-Adoption Centre.

“Life Story work is necessary (different from a Life Story Book) to enable the child/ren understand how decisions were made” – Suffolk Adoption Agency.

“Emphasise the need for Life Story books to be ready on placement – whilst this is covered in current guidance the reality is that some local authorities are not ensuring this happens” – Adoption Advisor, Buckinghamshire County Council.

- Qualifications and Training

“The social work degree and post-qualification training deals very little, if at all, with training social workers on adoption and how to assess sibling relationships. There also needs to be more training for social workers in how to implement the good practice guidance ‘Together or Apart’.” – TACT.

“Lack of understanding of the specific needs of children adopted from care. This reflects a lack of specialist training for social workers, CAMHS staff and others which can lead to a failure to appreciate the significant challenge that faces

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<sup>2</sup>*The Experience of Sibling Loss in the Adjustment of Foster and Adopted Children Brodzinsky: (pp. 54-56 in Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care Edited By Deborah N. Silverstein and Susan Livingston Smith*

adopters of large sibling groups. So, for example, the reasons for a tailor-made respite care service are not appreciated” – Nagalro.

[Recommends] “Setting up a central resource and website with guidance to sources of advice and help” –DFW Adoption.

“Too often decisions are made based on custom and practice or are resource-led. Social work need to be upgraded as a true discipline by higher level training comparable to that of psychologists and psychotherapists. In order for social workers to make decisions about sibling placement they need to be similarly familiar with not only the research but with the theory and knowledge base relating to child development at a level and depth of sophistication as are these other disciplines.” – VAA Manager, Family Futures

“Social workers need training in techniques such as theraplay” – Essex County Council Children’s Social Care.

“Placing social workers need to have in-depth knowledge and understanding around:

- The effects of early trauma and neglect on children’s longer term development and attachments
- Therapeutic parenting and re-parenting strategies”

Family Placement Team, Wokingham Borough Council.

“Effective workforce development, and effective supervision, is required to enable practitioners to take improved decisions about contact and sibling placements, based on the evidence of the needs of the child in each case. Such development would need to focus on improving practitioners understanding of research and the impact of contact, and placements decisions (and all other aspects of care planning) to enable them to take sound decisions. To achieve this we must look at how social workers carry out these tasks and develop a programme that improves decision making and empowers confident and competent individuals to make the correct decisions in the best interests of the child involved.” – NSPCC.

“There also needs to be more in-depth training available to all professionals in the whole sphere of attachment, with attachment-based therapeutic services being available to adopters and to adopted children.” – Adoption Social Worker, Blackpool Council.

“I would value joint training for all parties involved not just social workers but also guardians, solicitors, magistrates, judges and psychologists” – Adoption Team, Staffordshire County Council.

Therapeutic support for looked after, fostered and adopted children is a therapeutic specialism in its own right and I would also propose that this is promoted and funded as a general issue” – Adoption Social Worker, Somerset County Council.

A good understanding among professionals working within this area of early childhood development, attachment theory and therapeutic parenting will support the placement of sibling groups.” – Adoption UK.

- Workforce training issues
  - Social workers need training on completing comprehensive sibling assessments
  - Assessing social workers and adoption panels need training to enable them to be confident in accepting that adopters have the skills and ability to take on what could be regarded as “higher risk” placements.
  - Foster carers need training in how to monitor, assess and encourage positive sibling relationships.”

“Social workers could also benefit from training to develop their expertise in trauma, brain development and the long term issues adopters face” –Head of Corporate Planning, London Borough of Hackney.

It is important for qualifying social work education to cover the main themes and issues relevant to supporting carers, children and birth parents when children are adopted. However, these issues and the underpinning research are of central importance in post-qualifying social work education. At all post-qualifying levels there should be specialist modules for workers in family placement teams including those from other relevant disciplines.” – UEA.

“Although there are some experienced specialist adoption teams in local authorities, much of the expertise and knowledge base is in the voluntary sector agencies. It is important for local authority and voluntary sector teams to work together collaboratively- and to undertake joint training.” – UEA.

“We recommend seeking out best practice from agencies that have been successful and assisting all LAs to use similar models to Coram and other voluntary adoption agencies which have led the way in providing support. Ensure practice uses research findings and is evidence-based.” – NAGALRO.

Biehal et al (2010) underlined the lack of expertise from children’s social workers when planning for adoption. In particular, they found that staff lacked the necessary knowledge and training and needed support (often from specialist adoption teams) in thinking through and planning for the life-long consequences of

adoption; in particular the impact on siblings who were not being adopted. – University of Cardiff.

- Supervision and Management

“Social workers need to be supported through effective supervision” –Royal Holloway, University of London.

“Excellent and reflective supervision is needed to ensure that social workers are not influenced by their own life experience and value judgements in making decisions but reach evidence based conclusions by assessing the needs of the individual children” – Essex County Council Children’s Social Care.

Support is also needed to make sure that the right help is provided to professionals to help them make the difficult decisions about which route to ‘permanency’ is right for the sibling group (and for each child within the group) at an early stage” – Coram.

“Earlier permanency planning and tracking under senior supervision in such a way that the position of each child is considered individually.” – Coram.

“Supervisions with adoption team leaders and managers to test assumptions can be a helpful aspect of social work practice that can support the decision making process.” – Adoption UK.

- Staff Turnover

Not enough dedicated adoption support social workers – Hilary Thomas, Adoption Social Worker, Blackpool Council.

“Everyone would benefit if the allocated Social Worker could see the case to conclusion and beyond” – Chairman, Family Proceedings Court, Scarborough.

The biggest problem is the too rapid turn-over of social workers- both those in child and family teams and (to a slightly less extent) those in specialist adoption and family placement teams.” – UEA.

- Local Authority and Court Practice on Placement of Siblings

- Information Sharing and Recording

“Data protection issues’ are too often used as an excuse for poor information sharing. There should be a clear expectation on the placing agency to share all information with staff in a VAA or another LA, and for adopters to read information on the child.” –University of Bristol.

“Careful and accurate case recording of the child’s personal history is crucial to understanding what has happened and how this has impacted on the child and the extent of the damage. . . . When another social worker takes on the case, assumptions can be made about a child’s past experience if there isn’t objective clarity to the case record” –Director, DFW Adoption.

“Sometimes it is difficult to gather full information about children’s siblings. The Adoption Register has information about all children who are adopted and this could be helpful when we are working with children who have older siblings or half siblings who were adopted in another part of the country” – Oxfordshire County Council Adoption Team.

“It is imperative that adoptive parents receive full disclosure of their children’s histories so that they can learn to recognise dysfunctional patterns of behaviour and triggers that may re-traumatise their children. With this information, adoptive parents can work towards re-parenting their children using truthful, supportive strategies that focus on positive long-term outcomes” – Adoption UK.

[Problem can be] “a lack of cooperative working when there are different social workers representing the siblings” – Adoption UK.

“Make sure prospective adopters know as much as they possibly about EACH child before they arrive, as this was our biggest source of frustration. Social workers need to respect each child’s differences, recognising that a sibling group is not just a family but a collection of individuals with different needs and personalities – Adoptive Parent.

“Poor social work organisational structures, which work in silos rather than across social work teams and other agencies in the best interests of the child/ren. Inefficient processes, poor quality of information, information systems which are not joined up . . . . The sometimes constant re-allocation of children to new social workers to optimise case load (but not the outcomes for the children concerned) only makes the situation worse.” – Adoptive Parent.

“Being able to provide accurate information about children’s birth siblings has the potential to be challenging..... An accurate genogram detailing the child’s sibling group could be placed on the adoption file, which includes who the children themselves perceive to be siblings, if they are old enough to express a view. Any subsequent siblings born could be added to the genogram, providing the local authority is aware of them.” – University of Cardiff.

- Reducing Delay in Processes

“One of the central challenges to placing sibling groups – often decisions are avoided, and this is a decision in itself. Any delay exponentially increases the challenge of finding suitable placements . . . To help address this situation, early care planning is crucial, as is timely review of care plans. A realistic assessment must be made at the outset of the chances of finding an adoptive placement. Social workers should be supported by a wider professional group to make these decisions in a timely and well-evidenced manner” – Coram.

“Guidance should emphasise the importance of not letting difficult decisions create drift and delay in the adoption process. Coram’s adoption consultancy work has shown that some children can experience long delays as a result of no proactive decision being made.” – Coram.

[Recommended improvements:] “A particular focus on the timescale of the youngest child, whose chances of adoption may be compromised by the needs of older siblings.

Recognition that for older children (who may have had more complex journeys in care) and for whom joint placement may be more essential, long term foster care be the best option.” – Coram.

“Guidance should be strengthened on early decision making in the placement of sibling groups.” –Family Proceedings Court, Scarborough.

“Children’s permanence reports show that often the assessment of the children’s needs, attachment to their siblings and the benefits/risks of placing them together is often poor or delayed, often not taking place until the placement order stage. Some social workers lack the experience in assessing siblings relationships and attachments and relationships and sometimes delays occurred as specialist assessments are commissioned.<sup>3</sup>” – Barnardo’s.

“A sequential approach to family finding leads to delay and less confidence that the plan can be achieved. Saunders and Selwyn’s<sup>4</sup> study of the experiences of

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<sup>3</sup> Saunders, H and Selwyn, J (2010) *Adopting Large Sibling Groups: Experiences of Agencies and Adopters in Placing Sibling Groups for Adoption from Care*. Bristol: Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, University of Bristol

<sup>4</sup> Saunders, H and Selwyn, J (2010) *Adopting Large Sibling Groups: Experiences of Agencies and*

those adopting large sibling groups, found that local authorities were sometimes deterred from making an adoption plan, or plans were delayed, because they believed it would be too difficult to find a suitable placement.” – Barnardo’s.

- Assessment Processes

“Lord and Borthwick’s (2008) practice guidance, published by BAAF, regarding assessing the placement of siblings together or apart emphasises the importance of understanding and assessing relationship quality within sibling groups and the factors (such as effects of abuse / neglect and parental conflict on the quality of the sibling relationship) that may impinge on them. However, whilst the authors acknowledge that this relationship has the potential to be one of the most long-lasting throughout the children’s lives, the assessment framework, like those of more formal assessments described above, tends to concentrate on relationships in the ‘here and now’. There is an emphasis placed on the levels of warmth, rivalry and hostility present in sibling relationships in these assessments as predictors of future functioning. Whilst this may be useful in terms of providing a ‘snapshot’ at a fixed point in time, it does not fully allow for how sibling relationships may change and develop over time, nor the potential reparative effects of re-parenting.” – University of Cardiff.

“Encourage social workers to adopt a life-span approach in relation to assessment, decision-making and planning for sibling groups in care, who have a plan for adoption and/ or whose contact needs are being considered. Decision-making for children in sibling groups needs to be based on each child’s assessed needs, but these needs should be looked at more longitudinally, also taking account of the possible significance of the relationship, and the meanings of ‘kinship’ and ‘family’, not just at that time but over the life-span.” –University of Cardiff.

“It would be useful for care planning regulations to require the Local Authority to evidence how they have reached the decision around the placement of sibling groups for adoption together or separately” – London Borough of Barnet

“Specialist training for foster carers to identify children’s needs, individually and together” – Adoption Matters Northwest.

“We need to listen more to foster carer’s experiences and views about sibling relationships. We also need to be able to evaluate this information, as the foster carers own lifestyles, experience and skills have an impact” – Oxfordshire County Council Adoption Team.



“Foster carer training to help them to identify sibling attachments, different and competing needs and normal and unhealthy sibling interactions and behaviours” – Adoption Matters Northwest.

[Guidance should include] “reference to factors that need to be taken into consideration in reaching decisions about whether siblings should be placed together or apart. These should include an assessment of the dynamics between the siblings, established patterns of behaviour between the siblings and a realistic assessment of the implications of this for future carers and the degree to which they are likely to change if at all.” - Adoption Advisor, Buckinghamshire County Council.

“We rarely see any assessment by a social worker, or other professional such as psychologist, focusing on the needs of the children and concluding whether they should be placed together or separately” –VAA social worker, Families for Children.

“The loss of full service from Children’s Guardians has the effect of depriving children of a strong voice over these arrangements” – Nagalro.

“An assessment of the sibling dynamic should be an integral part of the child assessment process” –VAA Manager, Family Futures.

[To promote a case-by-case approach] “Psychologists could do an assessment. Currently this only happens when driven by the court process” – Adoption Matters Northwest.

“It should be a requirement that each child with an Adoption Plan have an assessment of their needs and of the sibling relationship through a recognised, standardised assessment tool” – Adopt Together (Faith in Families Adoption Service).

“The recent change to the adoption panel process means that there will not be any independent scrutiny of proposed plans to separate siblings or the consequent contact plans, as these are not areas for court scrutiny, until a match is being presented to the panel. Agency decision makers will need to ensure that they consider the evidence for these areas of the care plan and ensure that other staff such as IROs have the necessary knowledge and experience to challenge plans that have not been properly assessed.” – BAAF.

The ‘Restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Report Regulations 2005’ could be amended to require appropriate knowledge concerning decision making in respect of the placement needs of siblings. –Adoption Panel Chair.

Emphasis should be given to timely assessments of the individual child's attachment styles, behaviour, and relationship with their other siblings, background factors leading to care episode and individual needs should inform decisions about whether siblings should be placed together or not. This is vital to enable social workers to use their own judgment and act with confidence to make decisions for each child based all the information. This includes having the confidence to decide that siblings should be adopted separately. Where a robust assessment of each individual child demands, social workers should not feel as though they failed because they have not been able to keep the children together, but act with confidence safe in the knowledge that they have covered every base and that this decision is right for each child." – Barnardo's.

"A much more detailed assessment is needed before any adoption plans are made. These should also include provision of therapy before some children are placed for adoption" –Team Manager, After Adoption Yorkshire.

"Formal assessment of sibling groups when planning for permanence is very limited<sup>5</sup>. Although use is made by some Local Authorities of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and in-house psychologists for advice and support in relation to deciding whether siblings should be placed together or apart<sup>6</sup>, formal assessments of sibling groups are rare. Recent research in this field, usually focusing on a small number of clinical case studies, has highlighted the potential of formal assessments in assisting social workers with decision-making about sibling groups in adoption. The importance of formally observing the children in the sibling groups on more than one occasion, both together and alone has been highlighted, alongside taking comprehensive case histories from those people involved in the children's lives in order to understand the context of the sibling relationships, and listening to children's views (where possible) about the meaning of their sibling relationships, as the importance of these relationships is often under-estimated by professionals<sup>7</sup>.– University of Cardiff.

Brophy, J., Owne, C., Sidaway, J. and Johal, J. (2012) *The Contribution of Experts in Care Proceedings: Evaluation of the work of independent social work assessments* University of Oxford. Recommended by Nagalro on the important role of independent social workers in court proceedings.

"The way to ensure the right decisions are made for the individual children within the sibling group is to ensure good quality, comprehensive and well informed assessments are undertaken – ideally by the social worker as they can access information from all relevant sources i.e. the foster carer/s, schools or nurseries, birth parents or other family members, contact supervisors. However if they are

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<sup>5</sup> Rushton, 2001; Biehal et al, 2010; Dance et al, 2010

<sup>6</sup> Rushton et al, 2001; Selwyn et al, 2006; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Kosonen, 1996; Ryan, 2002; Hindle, 2007; Farnfield, 2009.

not confident in doing this key piece of work an independent assessment may need to be commissioned.” – BAAF.

- Planning

“Offering a robust review/mediation service where issues of contact between sibs can be address” – Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service

Repeated by Family Placement Team, West Berkshire Council.

“Part of the adoption support plan needs to review contact arrangements. Contact is a large part of the final care plan, the right level of contacts needs to form a part of decision making at the earlier stages” – London Borough of Barnet.

[Calls for] “Emphasis on the need for robust care planning meetings informed by people with knowledge and experience of adoption before final care plans are formulated.” -Adoption Advisor, Buckinghamshire County Council.

“Systems for review of plans that ensure that decision making is not allowed to drift.” – Coram.

The care plan for each child should include an assessment of that child’s individual needs, including role taken within the family e.g. is a child parentified or have they been preferentially rejected. The quality of siblings relationships needs to be properly assessed within the care plan (Sibling Relationships Checklist). The care plan should include a view about whether a child is so traumatised that they need individual therapeutic re-parenting. This can be facilitated by SDQ scores – (Saunders and Selwyn 2011) – it is unrealistic to place together siblings of two or more children with high SDQ scores.” – Confidential.

“Lack of effective planning from the outset (see for examples of effective practice, ‘Meeting the Needs of Looked After Siblings’ (2005) in The Companion to Foster Care ed. Wheal, Russell House Publishing)” –Foster Care Training and Consultancy.

“There is some scope for expanding on the Care Planning guidelines.” – UEA.

]

- Multi-Agency Working

“CAMHS teams still lack knowledge of adoption-related issues.” – NAGALRO

“Adoption agencies should be constituted as multi-disciplinary service which includes social workers but encompasses a range of other child health professionals who can address the depth and breadth of the needs that are currently presented” - VAA Manager, Family Futures

[Need a ] “Review of existing CAMHS culture of ‘no therapy until settled’ – Bracknell Forest Council.

“When deciding whether to separate siblings or place them together....this process should also involve CAMHS if required” – Coram.

Access to multi-professional/external support in identifying the ground for decision including to separate in some cases. – Coram.

“One local authority who had difficulties in accessing work from CAMHS have now commissioned a psychologists from CAMHS to provide consultations on a monthly basis and as a team the workers do meet with the psychologist on a monthly basis to get information on cases” – BAAF.

Access to consultations with CAMHS or psychologists whilst children are in foster care to assist with sibling relationship assessments or to advise foster carers on how to influence and encourage more healthy relationships. Some of the local authorities who met with us had access to specialist CAMHS workers who were integrated into the looked after children’s service and would offer either direct work or consultancy for carers or social workers. This was in sharp contrast to other local authorities where their local CAMHS service would not offer any direct work to children who were not in their permanent placement. – BAAF.

“Adoption can be a peripheral issue for schools and health services” – Mike Gast, Independent Social Worker.

“It is important to have people who are trained in therapeutic approaches tailored to adoption issues working in adoption support. Agencies like the Post-Adoption Centre and Family Future have for a number of years led the way in the provision of such specialist training. Those who have taken up this training include independent practitioners and therapists, who often chose to work outside of local authorities to enable them to provide flexible and high quality services. There is spare capacity in the workforce and scope to increase the availability of skilled help by more innovative use of independent social workers and agencies . . . encouraging a mixed economy of provision.” – Nagalro.

- Links between Care and Adoption

“Use the time children are in foster care for assessment and where necessary, therapeutic intervention for children’s relationships with their siblings.” – Oxfordshire County Council Adoption Team.

“A particular barrier in placing siblings for adoption can be that whilst in foster care they have not been placed together. This means that on moving to their

placement the prospective adopters not only have to cope with their 'new' children, but they also have to assimilate the sibling group. We consider that there is a proper role here for local authorities to ensure that their sufficiency obligations are met in terms of foster placements for sibling groups together." – IRO, Norfolk Children's Services.

[Problem is] "Not having the foster carers with the skills and abilities to meet the needs of larger sibling groups when they become looked after, and who are able to do the therapeutic work that many of these children need and enables an accurate assessment to be undertaken to inform decisions about whether the children should be placed together or apart prior to adoption placement" –Adoption Advisor, Buckinghamshire County Council.

"Some agencies are using workers in their placement or adoption support teams who have been training in using theraplay techniques to help bridge children into their adoptive placements and develop positive attachments. These interventions have been valued in sibling placements" – BAAF.

A longitudinal study in the US by Wulczyn<sup>8</sup> found that "it is critical to place children together from their initial placement forward. This requires a commitment to having foster care resources available to their siblings, it means identifying children immediately as part of a group and uniting them in their first placement, unless the decision is contraindicated by the needs of any given sibling." – BAAF.

- Contact with Siblings

"Sibling contact arrangements when placed in separate foster placements can actively undermine the development or continuation of a positive sibling relationship where it is determined more by availability of venues, contact supervisors and court ordered levels of contact with parents. There must be equal recognition of the importance of the sibling relationship with more consideration of informal contact arrangements proactively involving children's foster carers." – BAAF.

"SCIE and NICE guidance published in October 2010 . . . . contains recommendations for improved practice which could be more widely promoted." – BAAF.

"When children are separated because of a history of conflict, priority must be given to sustaining the relationships and reducing the conflict through therapeutic interventions And when children are placed for adoption, more attention must be

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<sup>8</sup> Wulczyn, F., & Zimmerman, E. (2005). *Sibling placements in longitudinal perspective. Children and Youth Services Review, 27(7), 741–763.*

given to helping children maintain (or develop) relationships with siblings left behind or with those born after them. Brodzinsky” – BAAF.

“Many agencies do provide opportunities for adopters to meet together e.g. annual adoption gatherings where activities are provided for children. Where children are placed with adopters in other parts of the country thought could be given to including those adopters in such activities. Organisations such as Siblings Together provide events and opportunities for sibling contact and this could be utilised by agencies or families.” – BAAF

Beckett, S. ‘Split up but not cutt off: Making and sustaining contact arrangements between siblings’ (2002) in *Staying connected: Managing contact arrangements in adoption* ed. Argent, BAAF

[On contact:] “There is already sound research on this area of practice which should be made available to all social workers working with separated children. It is not possible to isolate practice to maintain sibling links from practice with respect to continuing links with parents and other adult relatives” – UEA

“Research into the impact of long term sibling contact would also be helpful to inform decision making by social work practitioners, courts and families” –London Borough of Hackney

Recommends research on contact: Lord & Borthwick “Together or Apart?” BAAF, and Mullender (ed) “We are Family: sibling relationships in placement and beyond”. – Fostering Network

Periodic reviews of contact arrangements should take place post-adoption order in order to reflect the flexibility required as children grow up, and to identify and manage any support needs arising from any party.”- University of Cardiff

Mullender, A. (ed.) (1999) *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, London: British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering.  
-Recommended by University of Oxford

“When contact plans are agreed in proceedings, attention needs to be paid within the contact schedule to factoring in contact between the siblings (without birth parents) as distinct to the siblings coming together when they have contact with birth parents. On the latter occasions sibling contact is often totally skewed because of the way the birth parents interact or do not interact with individual children.” – CVAA

- Professional Culture on Placement of Siblings

“Training for social workers – changing some social workers’ and guardians’ opinions that it is possible to successfully place siblings together. Agencies that only see families in difficulty are likely to give a biased and negative view of sibling placements – they only see the ones that are not working.” –University of Bristol.

“There is much folklore about adoption and especially sibling groups within social work practice, and dissemination of research on this topic is crucial so that properly informed decisions can be made” – IRO, Norfolk Children’s Services.

“In some agencies there may need to be a cultural shift in developing or promoting a positive attitude to placing siblings” – BAAF.

“The fears of the placement agency and conservative views of the Adoption Panels. They take safe decisions, ie. To limit the number of children that a single parent can adopt, rather than offer more support so the single parent can cope better.” –Adoptive Parent.

“Chiefly the barriers lie with social workers, who are often risk-averse and unprepared to take on the challenge and hard work involved in placing sibling groups. . . . A positive attitude from the social workers themselves that adopting a sibling group is “normal” and that it can work positively with the right support.” – Adoptive Parent.

“Having experienced or been aware of successful sibling placements can alter a social workers’ attitude towards placing sibling groups.” – Barnardo’s.

“Local authority policies and the values and beliefs of individual social workers towards sibling groups and have also been cited as influential in decisions about sibling placement, with some agencies being more pro-active and positive about the value of sibling placements than others.” –University of Cardiff.

- The Role of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Sibling Placements and Contact

“IROs are often unable to effectively challenge the local authorities that employ them . . . In Nagalro’s view the time has come to implement s11 of CYPA 2008, which allows the IRO service to be moved from local authorities to an independent agency. CAFCASS would not be able to provide a suitable home for the service.” – Nagalro.

“There is some scope for expanding on the 2010 guidelines for IROs.” – UEA

“In our recent written and oral evidence given to the House of Lords Select Committee on Adoption Legislation, Barnardo’s called for a vastly enhanced role for independent reviewing officers and for them to look at the issue of stability as a

safeguarding issue. We believe that securing stability for the child should take place as soon as we become aware of a young child who is at risk of significant harm. A far more active role should be played by the independent reviewing officer to twin-track from the earliest point the possibility that adoption may be an outcome for a child, and to ensure that there is an intensity of input at this point which incorporates contact planning into the process.” – Barnardo’s.

“One specific aspect of the Care Planning Guidance (2010) and IRO Handbook (2010) that should be clarified for IROs is the need to differentiate their approach to short and long term /permanent foster placements in relation to contact. There is little account taken of the special nature of long-term foster care – though a working group in DfE, led by Helen Kay, is currently developing policy and practice for permanence planning in foster care that may wish to add guidance on this. But as part of this review of contact it will be important for IRO guidance in relation to permanence in foster care to include discussion of contact. Contact may not always be reduced in longer term placements –in cases where there are good relationships between the foster carer and the parents it may be more frequent or it may just be better quality (Schofield & Beek, 2004a; Schofield & Stevenson, 2009). But in cases where contact is not working well for a child in a long-term placement, efforts must be made first to improve the quality with extra support - and then to give consideration to reducing it if need be. . . .” UEA.

“The IRO service is not a robust or effective means to hold local authorities to account and cannot protect children against poor practice in any consistent or reliable way. The IRO service is not capable to exercising the level of monitoring that children’s needs require. The recent case A and S v Lancs CC [2012] EWHC 1689 (Fam)<sup>2</sup> provides a stark example.” – Nagalro.

“IRO not always familiar with the children, they need to be more involved with the children” –Foster Carer.

“IROs must have unfettered ability to raise concerns without risk to their employment. Concerns have been raised by IROs themselves about the measure of independence they have in this regard.” – Office of the Children’s Commissioner.

We are calling for IROs to:

- Have more independence: the Government should explore the different models of practice for IROs including independence from local authority management
- Work with reasonable caseloads: in order to be effective IROs need to have a manageable caseload (lower than is currently recommended in the IRO Handbook)



- Involve children and young people more: participation in reviews by children and young people and general communication practice should improve to ensure that looked-after children are able to meaningfully contribute their wishes and feelings.....

The IRO needs to know the young person to be able to see the situation clearly.” - The Who Cares? Trust.

“Experience indicates that the view of the IRO is not sufficiently taken into account by the courts, who tend to be the main determiner in relation to contact arrangements. The redress currently available to the IRO is insufficient to change this situation.” -Buckinghamshire County Council Adoption Service.

- Professional Practice on Contact

- Better Assessment Processes

“When decisions are being made in court or through the review process about the possibility of return to a parent, well-planned contact will be part of the assessment of parenting skills. In longer term / permanent placements in foster care the ‘purpose’ of contact will be about maximising the child’s welfare and stability in the placement, while also maximising the benefit and support to be obtained from birth relatives. Because in both short-term and long-term placements the purpose of contact will always be about promoting the child’s development (Schofield and Simmonds 2011, Beek and Schofield 2004b, Schofield and Stevenson 2009), evidence based developmental assessment and review of contact plans and arrangements are crucial. This is the responsibility of the social workers, with the IRO providing a supportive but also monitoring and, if necessary, challenging role.” – UEA.

“We believe that decision-making around contact could be improved through the development of practice tools to help guide assessment and planning in relation to contact, and support for contact. These tools should firstly help practitioners to focus on the needs of the child in relation to issues such as attachment, loss and identity, and to consider the impact of contact with birth family members on these issues. The roles of adoptive parents and birth relatives in meeting the child’s needs in these areas should be considered. A clear rationale for the intended purpose of contact in terms of meeting the child’s needs should be the starting point of contact plans. Practice tools should help to clarify in each particular case the factors (identified from research studies) which can affect the quality of post-adoption contact, helping practitioners to make individualised, case sensitive decisions. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department for Education on the development of such practice tools.” – UEA.

“The contact plan in outline should be driven by this assessment of the child's needs and not by the wishes and feelings of either the birth relatives or the adoptive parents. However as the adoptive parents and the birth relatives are those who will need to enact the contact arrangements, and because the feelings and behaviours of the adults involved are highly relevant to the experience of contact for the child, it is important to assess the strengths and vulnerabilities they may bring to contact and the possible impact of contact on birth relatives and adoptive parents as well as on the child.” – UEA.

“Address how various professionals involved with the child could share this decision [around contact once adoption is the plan], rather than an overworked social worker and their manager” –Children’s Social Worker, Isle of Wight Council.

“Family justice professionals should listen to the evidence of the professional child care workers as to the benefits, or not, of contact” –Children’s Social Worker, Isle of Wight Council.

“We would be pleased to see strengthened guidance to the courts, local authority social workers, IROs and CAFCASS emphasising the importance of being specific about the purpose of contact arrangements and the needs of the child. . . . Impact and risk assessments also need to be carried out by social workers. It should be a requirement that the views of the child should be sought, in keeping with the child’s age and understanding. Foster carers are often required to facilitate contact with birth parents, and should be fully involved as part of the team around the child in the proposal for, and assessment of, contact arrangements. . . . It would be useful for guidance to ensure that foster carers are consulted on the frequency, days and length of contact before arrangements are settled. This means that children’s social workers should consult them before presenting recommendations to court. It is essential that the needs of the foster carer’s family and any other looked after children are taken into account, especially as to what constitutes “reasonable” arrangements.” – Fostering Network.

“We know that as children grow and develop, particularly in adolescence, they become curious and/or have unresolved issues: a managed therapeutically oriented contact could be a positive experience for the child or young person. The birth parent’s capacity to engage in such a contact needs to be assessed at the time when the child becomes curious. Many birth parents, particularly birth mothers, can be supported in making a positive contribution through indirect or direct contact.” – Family Futures.

“The loss of skilled ISWs from court proceedings will detract from the ability of courts to make best judgments in relation to children’s needs, including contact issues. The recent publication of research by Oxford University<sup>3</sup>, the first to look

at the specific contribution of ISWs to family courts, refutes many of the assumptions made about the work of ISWs. The research found that:

- There was no evidence that ISW reports cause delay to court hearings;
- ISWs produce high quality reports to tight deadlines;
- ISWs provide new information to the court;
- There was no evidence of routine duplication with a current local authority core assessment;
- ISWs have 'added value': they are independent, highly skilled and experienced (median 24 years in child protection work);
- They are child focused.

There is significant spare capacity in the ISW sector that is not being deployed because of structural barriers. This valuable part of the workforce needs to be 'stitched in' to the system in order to stem the loss of the most experienced ISWs." -Nagalro.

"The Children's Guardian should have a key role in safeguarding the interests of children in proceedings. Previously it would have been the Children's Guardian who was best placed to identify the quality of contact and to provide authoritative advice to courts about what frequency of contact is in an individual child's interests. However, the new Cafcass Operating Framework, which embeds the model of 'proportionate working', does not encourage practitioners to spend the time observing contact that they would need to do for them to challenge inappropriate local authority proposals for individual children. Many children see their Guardian for only a brief time, if at all, during the case." – Nagalro.

"Whatever the proposal put to the court, the social worker should be able to evidence to the family, the court and other professionals that their position has been reached by a primary focus on the healthy development of the child and consideration of child's rights." – Eastern Region practice note.

"Courts and Guardians need to accept that contact arrangements can be reviewed and amended during proceedings where there is clear evidence that it would be in the child's best interests" -Children in Care Manager, Halton LA.

"Contact plans that are made in the reviewing process are seemingly not taken into account by the court, who give the child's parents levels of contact that are unsustainable and not consistent with the longer-term planning for the child" –IRO, Norfolk Children's Services.

"Family assessment should happen in all cases, routinely and when circumstances change." – Project Manager.

“It would be very helpful to have an assessment tool which can be used and reviewed. A summary of this should be included in the support needs assessment which forms part of the plan. The BAAF form currently used is poor and clumsy and invites formulaic and superficial thinking” –Social Worker, North Yorkshire County Council.

Some clarity about assessment formats for supervised contact would, I think, be enormously helpful. . . . I see huge variation in how and what is described during contact sessions by contact supervisors. Typically notes are handwritten and provide more of a running narrative of key events in contact – there is a lack of understanding as to attachment behaviour and what should be being recorded. Clear frameworks and training on using these would be beneficial. In addition, key summary information as to contact is not readily available. For example, when I have asked a social worker ‘how many contacts has the parent attended/missed/arrived late for?’ this has not been collated. This does not help effective planning.” - Consultant.

“It is also important that there is a clear assessment of whom it might be helpful for the child to have some form of contact with. Individuals need to be identified in each case, rather than ‘the birth family’ being seen as an entity” – PAC.

“The following points may be of benefit:

- Clearer need to illustrate what evidence base has been used to inform decisions and planning around contact for individual children.
- Support and supervision for ‘braver’ social work decision making where it is clearly not in the child’s best interests to have contact maintained or where contact arrangements need to be withdrawn.
- A move away from ‘one size fits all’ and an emphasis on regular review of contact arrangements.” – After Adoption (VAA).

Sen and Broadhurst<sup>9</sup> suggest six useful criteria for consideration in assessment for contact:

- child/parent pre-care characteristics
- the child’s age and stage of development
- the circumstances of the family members with whom contact is proposed
- the history of previous professional intervention with the family
- the quality of relationships between the child and family members
- the capacity of carers to manage contact in the child’s interests

[Young people] “want social workers to speak to the people who know that child or young person well and spend a lot of time with them. This should include carers and could include therapists” – The Who Cares? Trust.

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<sup>9</sup> Sen, R. and Broadhurst, K., (2011) *Contact between children in out-of-home placements and their family and friends networks: a research review*, *Child & Family Social Work*, 16 (3), p.308

- Planning of Contact

“Regular review of contact arrangements is already good practice; for those professionals who do not see the value in regularly reviewing a child’s contact arrangements as their case progresses, . . . enhanced training, on-going support and development for these professionals to help them appreciate the importance of child centred contact arrangements that are fluid and change with any change in the child’s circumstances and needs would be . . . profitable.” – Barnardo’s.

“Systems should be in place whereby contact arrangements can be regularly reviewed and the child and carers views are sought and listened to.” – Barnardo’s.

“A detailed consideration of contact plans would in our view, be best undertaken in an adoption planning meeting which considers contact alongside other matching issues for the child, and some agencies already use this type of meeting to good effect. It is important to have such a meeting at each of the stages mentioned [in question 6]. This allows the contact plan to evolve from an outline proposal to a detailed plan that accommodates the best interests of the child, along with the strengths, preferences and support needs of the prospective adoptive parents and birth relatives. . . There is clear research evidence that the wishes and needs of children and young people regarding contact change and develop over time. For a range of reasons, contact arrangements become more open or more closed, as children learn more about their adoption stories. The situations of adoptive parents and birth relatives can also change, and these changes can impact on contact (for example major life events such as births, deaths, illness, divorce and relocation). To ‘fix’ a plan for no contact with an order from the start of the adoption would seem at odds with this reality. . . As a minimum we suggest that all contact arrangements should be reviewed periodically (the frequency of reviews will depend on the frequency of contact, but as a general guide an annual review may be appropriate) , even if this is just a letter or phone call to all relevant parties asking for their views on how the contact is working. A more in depth review can then take place if difficulties or a need for change are revealed.” – UEA.

“Adoptive parents, birth relatives and older children should be involved in planning the details of the contact. . . . A clear plan to support any intended contact should be mediated by the professionals in consultation with (older) children, prospective adoptive parents and birth relatives and this should address the management of any risks, the support needs of the child, the adoptive parents and birth relatives, and the importance of constructive relationships between all parties. Contact arrangements should be reviewed on a regular basis after adoption, unless adoptive parents are clear that they are happy to take control of arrangements themselves. Reviews of post-adoption contact are an important opportunity to

assess whether the goals of contact are being met, and to consider any changes that might be necessary in relation to the contact plan or the support arrangements. All contact arrangements are likely to have both benefits and challenges, and a review of contact needs to assess the balance of these.”– UEA.

[Calls for] “agreement in contact plans between birth relatives and birth relatives about the restriction or agreed use of social media as contact. At present the ways that local authorities complete contact plans varies a great deal and there should be a more structured and customised way to deal with this. All too often the birth families are left unsure about what to expect or contribute to the indirect contact but can be highly criticized or penalised when they get it wrong.” – DFW Adoption.

“Guidance should remind [practitioners] that contact needs to be revisited at every LAC review and before each court hearing.” – Fostering Network.

“We consider [when the local authority makes a decision that a child should be placed for adoption, but no placement order has been made] to be the most appropriate point [to review contact arrangements], as this adds to the preparation of the child for future placement for adoption, and can be justified on the basis that on balance the eventual outcomes most frequently follow the local authority decision. Regular and robust reviewing needs to accompany the above in order that plans are adapted and changed to meet the child’s needs and any change away from the plan for adoption. (The need for this is evidenced by the recent Lancashire case)”. –Buckinghamshire County Council Adoption Service.

“In Norfolk, contact planning for the whole adoption process is something we try to achieve in the reviewing process. For the birth parents, when the decision is taken to go for a placement order we are already thinking of contact arrangement for when that order is made, i.e. a planned and phased reduction in contact to a holding position until a placement is identified and made. However, delay in the court process between this decision about reducing contact as part of the plan and the placement order being granted often create additional difficulties. The point about contact arrangements being changed as the case progresses towards adoption is an important part of the review process, and the frequency of looked after children reviews can be changed to reflect changed contact circumstances” – IRO, Norfolk Children’s Services.

“The scrutinising of contact should be reinforced with the decision makers and children’s trusts, who should then be responsible for ensuring this message is imparted throughout the service, top-down. . . . I believe the first key point [for reassessment of contact plans] is on the initial review and drawing up of the care

plan, and that review of contact arrangements should not be limited to these times but form part of on-going case review and discussion.....

Risk assessments should take place as part of care plans on the potential and the possible impact for [unsolicited contact]” – Project Manager.

“Review of arrangements is very important throughout the adoption process. At a minimum, contact should be reviewed at key points in the adoption process. The following are some of the issues that need to be considered during these reviews:

- The purpose of contact is that it will be of value to the child by providing a relationship that enhances his/her life, or contributes to his/her understanding of adoption and identity or to her self esteem. Where a contact arrangement does not fulfil any of these aims, it should be immediately reviewed and changed in a timely manner consistent with the child’s needs.
- The nature of the pre-placement relationship between birth parent(s) and the child.
- The birth parent’s capacity to accept and support the adoptive placement and to recognise and accept the adoptive parents as the child’s psychological parents. Where birth parents are not able to accommodate the fact that their role in their child’s life has radically changed, contact is likely to undermine placements or be a negative or anxiety provoking experience for children.
- The birth parent’s capacity to cope with the emotional demands and complexities of post-adoption direct contact.

In addition to the three key points listed [in the call for views document], contact arrangements should also be considered and reassessed when the child is being matched with specific adopters – between (b) and (c) above. Adoption Panels present an opportunity to provide oversight when considering the match, and should – as with IROs . . . – be encouraged to scrutinise contact arrangements as an additional safeguard to ensuring purposeful placement and post-adoption contact arrangements.

The expectation of review should therefore be understood from the start as part of the contact agreement. Local authorities should send adopters a letter to enquire whether contact arrangements need review, every two years, and provide adequate resource for reviews as needed. This would take the pressure off adopters, and create an expectation of a regular and reasonably frequent review where needed. This would also ensure that initial arrangements could be made with confidence that they do not have to work on a permanent basis.” – Coram.

▪ Arrangements for Contact

“Barnardo’s generally supports Coram’s best practice recommendations to guide courts and practitioners when deciding and arranging contact sessions with birth parents:

- Settling in time – the courts to allow a settling in period of no more than 14 days with the foster carers before contact begins to allow the baby to settle without diminishing the established child/birth parent relationship.
- Consistency of escort – the same person to bring the baby to and from the contact venue. This should also be the case with small children.
- Short travel time – the distance between foster placement and contact venue to be no greater than 20 miles.
- Regularity of contact – ideally no more than three times a week.
- Length of contact – sessions should be no longer than two hours and should be purposeful in developing the child/birth parent relationship.
- Consistency of timetabling – sessions to be at the same time each day wherever possible.
- Continuity of care – the foster carers to remain on site during contact so they are available to support the birth parent in meeting the needs of the child.
- Transition time – where possible and safe a ten minute transition period at the start and end of contact so the foster carer(s) and birth parents can communicate regarding the baby’s needs, preferences and progress, and build a positive, supportive relationship. If this is not possible then it should raise questions about contact being in the child’s best interests.” – Barnardo’s.

“The contact arrangements established when children are in foster care impact on future arrangements both in terms of formulating the actual plans and the how successful they are in operation. At the very least there needs to be application of good practice guidance to ensure that foster carers are supported and have all the tools and information to enable positive contact to take place between siblings. Do they for example all have photographs of the other siblings; do they know when the birthdays are of the other siblings and therefore can ‘mark’ them?” – CVAA.

“The article on infant contact by Schofield (UEA) and Simmonds (BAAF) (Schofield & Simmonds 2011) emphasises the importance not only of ascertaining the purpose of contact but also its developmental impact when determining both frequency and arrangements for contact. Thus unfamiliar and changing escorts or supervisors are likely to leave the baby feeling unsafe and anxious, which will affect emotional and physical development. Indeed, inappropriate escort and contact supervision should be identified by Ofsted as poor practice. However, the role of a secure base foster carer in supporting a baby at contact may reduce the risk of the baby feeling overwhelmed by anxiety. . . . Our recent ‘Supporting



Direct Contact after Adoption' study (Neil et al, 2011) made a number of suggestions about contact support, in outline these being:

- the balance of benefits, risks and challenges should be kept under regular review in each case
- contact support should address the key challenges of contact for example building and sustaining relationships, understanding one's role and the role of others, making sense of family boundaries, coping with the strangeness of the event, dealing with complex feelings raised by contact.
- ensuring that the contact support provided is matched to the needs and wishes of children and families, and the strengths and risks in each particular case
- adoptive parents, birth relatives and adopted young people (where they are of sufficient age) should be included in the assessment of contact and contact support
- support services should be available to all people involved in contact. As children move into their teenage years their views may diverge from those of their parents, and so services provided directly to children are important
- where it is necessary for contact arrangements to be stopped, children, adoptive parents and birth relatives should be supported through and after this process. Alternative plans to meet any unmet needs the child may have e.g. in finding out about their family or history should be discussed."

These recommendations can equally be applied to indirect contact arrangements." – UEA.

"There is a need to review the suitability of current contact arrangements and the structure that surrounds it. Do current contact arrangements need to develop? Consider opportunities to use virtual contact as a legitimate method or agreed Skype contact. See dad's space: [https:// www.dads-space.org/](https://www.dads-space.org/) and 'virtual visitation' in the USA." – DFW Adoption.

"Transport, venue, payment of costs and similar issues should be clarified in writing and reviewed periodically. . . . "We would welcome clear guidance that would support children's social workers and independent reviewing officers to change contact arrangements when this would be in the child's best interests. We hope this will be addressed through training, supervision and guidance." – Fostering Network.

"The contact plan needs to:

- Be based on the needs of the child,
- Be age appropriate,
- Be formulated at the time the child becomes looked after,
- Be negotiated with them,
- Consider all the people that are important to them, and

- Consider & address any disability or health issues of the child and their family.

When considering contact for babies, consideration should be given to recent research questioning the previous understanding that contact should be frequent and lengthy; . . . High levels of contact between birth parents and babies in concurrent planning placements should be discouraged due to the stress it causes the babies, find research by children’s charity Coram.” – Essex County Council Children’s Social Care.

“Contact may not only be through arrangement of formal, supervised, time limited sessions, it can also be:

- Via a letter,
- Over the telephone,
- Through use of Skype, or
- Face to face contact which does not require the involvement of Children’s Social Care.”

“The majority of supervised contacts should take place at the child’s home or the home of a family member, the foster care’s home, a Children’s Centre, or a Family Centre. Where these are not used, a contact venue should be assessed with regards to:

- Age-appropriateness,
- Being appropriate to the needs of each individual child,
- Risk, including the supervisor’s ability to successfully supervise that contact, and
- Confidentiality.”

The person(s) escorting the child to and from contact should be;

- Familiar to the child wherever possible and consistent, and
- Have an awareness of any risks or other issues.

“Report writing should be undertaken with the following in mind;

- Progress of the child and their family over time, particularly in relation to CIN, CP and Care Plans,
- Recording the child’s wishes, feelings and presentation,
- Being succinct and relevant,
- Differentiation between fact and opinion,
- Clarity, free from jargon, checked for spelling and grammar, proper structure,
- Significant events clearly signposted and with consideration that these may be presented as evidence in court proceedings,
- Clear analysis of parenting capacity & interactions,
- Use of the appropriate format (see Appendix 1),

- Ideally, records will be written up immediately after the contact, however where this is not possible they must be received by the allocated social worker within 5 working days, and
- Where there are significant areas of concern following contact, these should be immediately notified to the allocated social worker or their team manager.”

Essex County Council Children’s Social Care.

“The central tenet for social care involvement will be not only safeguarding but also organising the attachment and providing a secure base. . . . Disruption t the care routine and frequent back and forth from one care routine with current carers to another from contact with birth parents may be counterproductive to this aim, even where the plan would be for eventual reunification.

Given the contact plan should be tailored to their individual needs, it is not reasonable to offer guidance on fixed levels of contact but . . . it is possible to propose a theoretical maximum to minimise any negative impact contact may unintentionally bring about.....

Where the child is an infant, where possible the majority of transport time should be borne by the other parties involved, not the infant themselves” – Eastern Region practice note” – Eastern Region practice note.

“The focus should be on quality and not the quantity of contact. This seems to be supported by research studies in the UK and in other countries” –Children in Care Manager, Halton LA.

“Adopters need the fullest information possible about the extended birth family. Frequently it is not the parent but another family member who will make contact through social networking sites. If adopters have as much information as is available they can be more vigilant” –Social Worker, Coventry City Council.

“We remain very concerned about the length of time that some infants and young people have to travel for contact” – IRO, Norfolk Children’s Services.

“In an ideal world, children would be escorted to contact by dedicated and familiar workers, and retain social workers throughout the life of their case” –Project Manager.

“The role of foster carers in helping to facilitate contact should be emphasised and payments for travel expenses and additional work addressed more readily than at present.” – Consultant.

“The importance of life story work and how it relates to the potential effectiveness of letterbox contact. Guidance is required for the use of letterbox contact in order

to promote its benefits for the adopted child whilst maintaining the control of the adoptive parent over its timing” – PAC.

“Where children are in foster care, training foster carers specifically to manage contact and be present during the visit makes it less distressing/emotionally damaging for the child. Ideally foster carers should transport a child to and from contact to avoid further changes in carer, with children alternatively having the same contact worker wherever possible” – PAC.

“Key features of good practice in contact for infants subject to proceedings:

Contact supervisors: The role of supervisor (observation, intervention, modelling, teaching, evaluating) is crucial and highly skilled. Supervisors should:

- be confident, knowledgeable about baby care and development (NNEB, NVQ);
- have experience of working with young children;
- have the ability to look at what is going on for the baby and how s/he is reacting/responding;
- have the ability to relate to parents – be calm, supportive, non-collusive, and able to set boundaries;
- have regular supervision of her/his work;
- have continuity, to provide parents with an opportunity to learn or improve baby care skills; and
- be able to exercise authority to intervene if they observe that a child is distressed.

Foster carers need:

- training to enable them to support contact for infants, and to develop a co-operative and supportive relationship with the parents; and
- support to enable them to manage the stress involved in managing contact.

Travel:

- The onus (as far as possible) should not be on the child to travel, particularly where more frequent contact is thought to be appropriate.
- Where possible, contact should be provided less than 20 miles or one hour’s travel time from the child’s and birth parent’s home.
- Where the above travel time is not possible, it should be clear that longer distances between homes are not grounds to deny contact automatically. Local authorities need to resource travel requirements to ensure contact is not denied on the grounds of feasibility without good reason.
- Escorts should be consistent, secure and reliable.

#### Timing:

- Length of time for contact should be relevant to the plan for the child – this may mean contact sessions of no more than 2 hours unless the placement is moving towards a planned return home, but some flexibility is needed to reflect individual circumstances of the child and family.
- Where a positive relationship can be facilitated, include around ten minutes of overlap in care for the infant between birth parent and foster carer to allow for information exchange and an interactive handover process sensitive to the child's needs in the moment.
- In addition to attention to frequency, there is a need for recovery time for the child both at the start of the placement and between sessions. Infants should have a chance to establish a routine within a new household before contact starts – a week without contact after placement could be a standard expectation to allow the baby to establish new routines.

#### Contact facilities:

- Quality of environment: Welcoming, comfortable, clean, appropriate range of toys in good condition, facilities for heating food, making bottles.
- Space is needed for foster carers to wait at the contact centre so that they can be available to be on hand if needed during contact.

#### Key processes:

- Reports: Factual, reflect careful observation, offer evaluation in separate section from observation, written within a few days of contact.
- Contact reviews: Informal opportunity to talk with parents about how contact is going and to listen to their wishes and views and to let them know what supervisor/ social worker feel is going well and what needs to change.
- Feedback and complaints: Allow parents to give their views on contact on a weekly basis if they wish. Listen to and deal with parents' complaints about any aspect of contact or the child's care promptly and, where possible, involve some direct discussion between carers and parents.
- Ongoing review: Hold informal reviews with parents and supervisor, using them to talk transparently about any concerns about aspects of the parent's care of the child, or similar issues." Coram.

"Life-story work and "truth-telling" is, again, an important aspect of managing contact. Children need to have an age-appropriate and honest understanding of their origins and birth family and this needs to be addressed throughout childhood and adolescence." – Adoption UK.

- Professional Training and Qualifications on Contact

“We would welcome steps to disseminate evidence and a renewed emphasis of the importance of evidence based practice in this area [contact], particularly where this is focussed on the courts. We welcome the reference to ‘all family justice professionals’ in this regard. Evidence must be a tool for professionals to use in making assessment and decisions – the emphasis must remain firmly on making decision on a case by case basis.” – ADCS.

“Professionals require training in the relevant skills and concepts to develop effective and purposeful contact plans that respond to and meet the needs of the child and this requirement should be reflected in guidance.

Training should be informed by research on the implications of contact, arrangements for child development and mechanisms which allow a closer link between research and frontline practice should be encouraged. There should be an annual training event to explore research and judgements. . . . Barnardo’s would welcome more training for professionals in child development” – Barnardo’s.

“There is in many areas a lack of opportunities for social workers and other professionals to hear the views of adopted young people, adoptive parents and birth parents about contact and yet there are a range of resources available. ‘Adopted Children Speaking’ (C Thomas et al) remains an important source, but more recent research brings new insights. Independent services for birth relatives of children being adopted (some being delivered by VAAs) have produced excellent training materials); the Ari provides some excellent resource material; work with young adopted people (again via some VAAs) has similarly produced good resources for training professionals and prospective adopters.” – CVAA.

It is clear that making decisions about post adoption contact is a challenging area for professionals. This area of work can involve conflicts of interests between different parties. Different professionals may understand and interpret the same concepts (e.g. identity, the child’s wishes and feelings, attachment, safety) in different ways. Social workers may lack training in relevant skills and concepts and often do not have a working knowledge of empirical evidence regarding the risks and benefits of contact.

We would recommend, therefore, that social workers and other professionals are provided with specific training, information and practice guidance/practice tools to improve their decision making and help them to weigh up the risks and benefits of different forms and amounts of contact (including no contact) for each individual child, throughout their particular adoption journey. This could result in all professionals contributing to the decision making process from an informed and evidence based position and contact/contact support plans being more individually tailored to the particular needs of the child and the adoptive family.” – UEA.

“Strengthening the capacity of the workforce to understand children’s wishes, thoughts and feelings, to work directly with children and adults and facilitate and promote relationships in a way that is meaningful to the child is what would make the biggest difference.” – BAAF.

“BAAF have recently published Good Practice Guidance on Planning for Contact (Adams 2012). . . BAAF is planning to re-draft its current materials for preparation courses including contact issues . . . BAAF has published practice guidance on [unsolicited contact] (Fursland 2010; Fursland 2011)” – BAAF.

“Any academic/professional studies about the effects of contact should be collated and included as part of training for all professionals involved in dealing with children in care or who are adopted.

A local or regional panel could be convened of independent observers/adoptive parents who can explain the effect a variety of contact arrangements have had on their adoptive children and families. This shouldn’t take the place of professional assessment but could complement and inform the views of social workers and family justice professionals.” – Adopter.

“In law, contact has to be “reasonable”. The concept of “reasonable” contact should be comprehensible to trained professionals.” – Fostering Network.

“Better training so that contact can be seen in the context of child development, attachment formation and trauma reduction. Family justice professionals tend to have a rather short term view of the child’s needs.” – Manager, Family Futures.

“Practitioners need to have a good grasp of the evidence base. It is this that provides the basis for making sound decisions about the amount of contact that will be in a child’s interests on a case-by-case basis. Good dissemination of research findings and training is needed to assist in this process. . . . The recent training and publicity within the socio-legal system about research conclusions on the impact of frequent and lengthy contact on infants is a helpful means to inform practice, and could be further developed. . . . Most helpful will be interdisciplinary training for social workers, lawyers and judges. For example Nagalro put on a recent successful conference on the subject of ‘Interim Contact – Meeting the Needs of Infants’, and we run a number of well-regarded training courses on key topics in the socio-legal field relating to child care issues.” – Nagalro.

“We favour change through encouraging best practice; embedding better training through from basic social work degree level to post graduate and on the job training; and proactively promoting the capacity for high quality professional social work judgment in the profession as envisaged in the Munro Review of Child Protection.” – Nagalro.

“A major concern is the variability in the quality of contact supervision. Many of those who have responsibility for monitoring and recording what happens in contact sessions are not fully qualified social workers. While some family workers are skilled, too often workers lack specialist training and a sound theoretical framework for interpreting and evaluating the behaviour they observe. It is hard for courts to be confident in making decisions that have the most far-reaching consequences for children when the evidence before them is not convincing. Again this is a training issue as it is damaging for children if decisions about their relationships are based on ill-informed observations. . . . More access to training, dissemination of research findings and best practice examples, as already discussed. Nagalro runs a varied training programme that provides high quality training relevant to social work and legal professionals in the field of statutory child care, and we would be pleased to be consulted about our experience. It may be that there needs to be wider availability of training related to the impact of abuse, neglect and trauma on young children, and training about using the existing law to protect children’s interests.” – Nagalro.

“General social worker training should include more input on permanency planning, and to understand the legislation and guidance that is already there” – Oxfordshire County Council Adoption Team.

“Sharing best practice and ensuring that research is undertaken and widely circulated would be helpful” -Children in Care Manager, Halton LA.

Increased knowledge and understanding around the effect of contact arrangements on children, particularly babies and young children would be beneficial to all those involved in formulating and carrying through contact arrangements” –Buckinghamshire County Council Adoption Service.

“Feedback to social workers and family justice officials of the impact and outcomes of decisions they have made may better inform their judgement. . . Access to what research is available presented in an accessible form would be helpful [for adopters]” –Buckinghamshire County Council Adoption Service.

“The current research “Baby on Board” etc is not widely known. . . . Outdated ideas regarding “bonding” and “attachment are often used as arguments for lengthy and frequent contact. . . Better access to research. More research” – Social Worker, Coventry City Council.

“IROs need training in the current research. Also they would benefit from attending court on occasions in care cases so that they gain first-hand experience



of the negotiations and arguments used for parents in care proceedings” –Social Worker, Coventry City Council.

“We support the proposal for greater training and support for family justice professionals . . . , and suggest that there are many benefits in having this training organised on a multi-disciplinary basis” – IRO, Norfolk Children’s Services.

“Investment within training on child development, the attachment process and barriers to this would be useful. Guidance underpinned by solid, relevant and credible research should be created to enable decision making. LAC documentation needs to be amended to reflect the purpose of contact and why a level of contact has been determined as best meeting the needs of the child.” – Family Contact Manager, East Riding of Yorkshire Council.

“Judges and legal professionals appear to have too little understanding of how children show distress, and it is often expected that if children do not scream throughout contact or refuse the contact then they welcome the contact. . . . We need access to research evidence. But cannot get access to this unless LA subscribes to relevant journals, which is unlikely in cutbacks” – Children’s Social Worker.

[Recommended support for professionals:] “Access to research and the capacity to digest and reflect on this. Time for reflection and learning and development opportunities. Networking and sharing best practice. Recognition as experts in their field.” – Project Manager.

“Cambridgeshire County Council would welcome evidence and research being circulated to Family Justice professionals and Children’s Guardians in relation to the impact of contact for children who are adopted. Joint multidisciplinary training would be beneficial to ensure a shared understanding of the complexity of maintaining positive contact arrangements throughout childhood.” – Cambridgeshire County Council.

“Dissemination of case experience and of research. Ideally this should include timelines and decision making and outcomes – to consider how recommendations worked out in practice over the course of the years. Input by adoptees, adopters and birth relatives.

Awareness of disruption and whether contact, relationships with birth family etc., had a significant role. This is not to suggest that the birth family may have actively undermined the child’s placement (though a minority may do so) but more to inform understanding of when children are able to put down roots in a new family and when, in contrast, some children cannot do so because the cost for them of ‘losing’ their birth family may be too great.

We need to monitor placement outcomes far more effectively i.e. what works well? As much as what proves difficult and what might contribute to higher rates of placement breakdown. Using a common format nationally would be exceptionally helpful.” – Adoptive parent

“Social workers and other professionals should certainly be trained and supported to base all child care decisions on carefully assessed evidence. They need training and support to apply the often complex conclusions of research. This point applies to all aspects of adoption. PAC believes there is an urgent need for a post qualifying award for professionals working in the field” – PAC.

“The following points may be of benefit:

- Regular updated training in relation to the advances and increasing new body of evidence from the neuroscience field linked to the importance of contact short, long term including the impact of negative contact up the child/ren.
- Regular updated training leading to a more sophisticated understanding of early attachment issues. To have access to specialist service / research / experienced professionals with expertise in the area of contact.
- Ensure workers are experienced in this area of work (i.e. not newly qualified) and have effective supervision that is not influenced by LA’s current focus/trend regarding contact.

Government support for on-going research into impact of contact arrangements on CYP, including more focused research into adopted young people’s views of contact”. – After Adoption (VAA).

“Social workers need more adoption and attachment training (including training about contact issues) both as part of undergraduate social work training and in training post qualification. Workers need regular access to research findings to keep their practice informed and up to date. Local authorities whose structure allows for some workers to specialise in working with looked after and adopted children rather than doing the whole range of child care work are more likely to have staff in these teams who understand the relevant issues.” – Adopt Together (Faith in Families Adoption Service).

“Durham County Council was responsible for the planning and delivery of a regional contact conference earlier this year. It became clear that there was limited knowledge and expertise across the range of professionals. This highlighted the impact that poorly planned contact could have on children. We were particularly concerned about Court Guardians, legal advisors and members of the judiciary who acknowledged their lack of training in this area. . . . We would be happy to share the content and outcomes of the conference with DfE officials should this be of assistance. Any training that strengthens understanding of

adopters, Social Worker, CAFCASS officers, Legal advisers, Judiciary and foster carers would be welcome” –Head of Children’s Social Care, Durham County Council.

“The basis of the problem is that we have a diluted, half-hearted approach to contact in this country which naturally, therefore, does not always work . . . You truly have to go to New Zealand, and to look at the earlier New Zealand research, to get a full appreciation of this topic . . . [Recommends] Mullender, A. 9ed.) (1991) Open Adoption: The Philosophy and the Practice, London, British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering. – Ruskin College, Oxford.

“A publication on the messages from the Adoption Research Initiative findings, which link these with longer standing research findings, is expected. Promotion of information on the practical implications of these findings should be supported through training, conferences and similar events” – Coram.

“Social workers and family justice professionals would benefit from training in the complexities of contact, how it affects all parties involved and how it relates to child behaviour and emotional development. The training should incorporate a focus on developmental trauma and the impact of contact and explanations around the value of contact but also how it can re-traumatise. This training may also focus on how personal expectations and views may affect decision-making.

There also needs to training around “truth-telling” and life story work, particularly for social workers. Children need the truth about their past in an age appropriate way that creates an honest life story that they can process and understand. Social workers need to be trained in this type of work in order for them to support foster carers and adoptive parents do the same.

In relation to contact, there is often a focus in the court system on promoting contact for the purpose of building identity only. Family justice professionals would benefit from training centred on contact as a whole and not just one aspect of its value.” – Adoption UK.

“All Social Workers / IRO’s / Children’s Guardians / Legal Professionals need to be fully informed about the issues you mention. They should only be allowed to ‘practice’ if they are able to demonstrate understanding of and commitment to these issues!!” –Independent Adoption Panel Chair.

- Adoption Support for Contact

Social workers and family justice professionals should be better supported by other multi-agency professionals, for example mental health workers, to ensure that adoptive parents, the birth parents and the child receive the support they need to manage contact arrangements. Many birth relatives of adopted children are

likely to be experiencing a high level of distressing psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress. They may also need practical support. It is important that the impact of adoption is recognised by mental health workers and that mental health issues are recognised by adoption support providers. – Barnardo's.

“Social workers and adoptive parents have to face up to the challenges of social networking and agencies should ensure practical training is provided to aid their understanding.

Many agencies now deliver group services for young adoptees and the challenges and risks associated with contact can be explored in those arenas.

Agencies should aim to build trust with adopters and most importantly with young adoptees, and offer mediation services, so that young people may be persuaded to make contact via an intermediary rather than directly (Many of the skills and the learning developed in working with adult adopted people and birth relatives are readily transferable).

Agencies can proactively make contact with adoptive families as children reach certain ages, offering training and support on issues that may be arising.” – CVAA.

“Workshops for adoptive parents which look at how children's feelings about birth family contact may change over time could be a useful addition to post-adoption support programmes.” – UEA.

“We believe that as children grow up through middle childhood they should have professional help with making sense of their birth parents, their early life experience and the meaning of adoptive parenting. This needs to be an evolving and developmentally age appropriate process, and issues around contact need to be woven into this life story work. Children cannot make decisions or parents give advice on contact in a once-and-for-all way as the meaning and significance will change with the child's deepening understanding of their life experience.” –Family Futures.

“Post adoption support should include reviews of contact arrangements” – Essex County Council Children's Social Care.

[Recommends] “opportunities for adopted children and young people and for adopters to learn about potential issues ahead of time i.e. ‘top up’ training and learning at key developmental stages. Provide several ‘Later Life’ letters e.g. geared to respond to questions that the adoptee might have at age 8, 12, 15, 18 years old.” – Adoptive parent.

“Our agency provides additional training around contact and unauthorized contact, supporting adoptive parents with this difficult subject. This is done through drop in

‘surgery’ style opportunities and set training, as well as through our more comprehensive SafeBase training programme which covers the impact of early attachment difficulties in detail and provides adopters with the tools and confidence to tackle many issues which occur within their family, including the emotions which can arise relating to contact or the lack of contact with birth family members. . . . Adopters can benefit from an understanding of research that has been done on this subject – what works/what doesn’t work e.g. being informed by the findings from the current Contact After Adoption Study being undertaken by UEA. . . . Specific training on technological advances can help adopters come to terms with the potential impact and likelihood of unstructured approaches between adopted young people and birth family members” – After Adoption.

“We have leaflets about social media for adopted young people and for adoptive parents. We have also run a seminar for adopters and include the subject in our preparation groups. We are exploring the possibility of organising an engagement project with young adopted people to involve them in the production of a dvd or social media tool which addresses how adopted young people can consider and address the risks and dangers of social networks and media and contact” – Adopt Together (Faith in Families Adoption Service).

“Contact should be considered as part of post-adoption support. This may be in helping adoptive parents manage contact and their child’s expectations and needs, as well as practical and financial issues that may be considered” – TACT (The Adolescent and Children’s Trust)

“Training for adopters at an early stage is no substitute for access to support in time of need later on in the adoption process. . . . There is a limit to what training in advance of dealing with a particular situation in real life can provide. . . . Regular and reasonably frequent post-adoption contact reviews would also ensure adopters feel supported as their child develops. Improving post-adoption support will involve:

- consistent careful work in relation to enabling suitable practical arrangements to be planned and implemented; and
- emotional support to adoptive parents, and directly to children and young people, to enable them to explore the complexities raised by contact in a safe non-judgemental setting. It should be recognised that this work has significant resource implications. Coram provides group-based direct work with adopted young people, and this has provided a very positive way to address these issues over time. This work has been accepted by C4EO as promising practice. – Coram.

“Additional post adoption support should include (and should be on a continuing basis):

- Learning about behaviours – changes....related to contact (post or non)

- Life-story work and “truth-telling”
  - Support/learning around expectations, boundaries and reassurance (for children and adults involved)
  - How to respond if asked to support contact arrangements that they don’t believe are beneficial
  - Support around anxieties and emotions about having to ‘share’ their child
  - Support around having to face abusive/neglectful parents.”
- Adoption UK.

Schofield and Ward (2011) found that contact was far more likely to be successful where good support was available for the birth parents, as well as foster carers and children. In particular foster carers need to be helped to work positively with parents wherever possible and this should be an important element of the recruitment, training and matching processes. The focus must be on high quality, well supported contact rather than frequency. This is as true for adolescents as it is for infants.” – UEA.

■ Training for Adopters

Training should also incorporate strategies and the skills adoptive parents need to deal with birth parents who are likely to be living with a number of social and psychological problems which can make positive participation in contact more difficult.

Training should involve specific input from adopted parents whose children have birth family contact and who have successfully managed it.

Independent support for birth parents at all stages must not be overlooked. This is very important but despite potentially lessening very expensive adversarial, complaints and mental health processes, it is currently an area subject to funding cuts. . . . Barnardo’s preparation of prospective adopters includes social media training and support. A summary of our training pack can be made available to the Department for Education if this would be helpful.” – Barnardo’s.

“There is a case for both pre and post adoption approval training for prospective adopters to help them understand the possible consequences of denying contact to the children” – Tri-borough Adoption and Fostering Services.

“In our agencies we already provide the following [post-adoption support]:

- Regular quarterly evening seminars organised with all the agencies through our consortium seminars including regular sessions on contact.
- Partnerships with independent adoption support agencies to provide a range of post adoption services to complement and enhance those we already provide.
- We are planning a post approval workshop with one of our partners on contact and managing letterbox contacts.

- An annual review with adopters of their contact arrangements – direct and indirect
  - Provision for an assessment of needs as required by regulation; this can include a rapid response and home visit.
  - Access to independent and LA advice lines for adopters, adoptive families, birth families and children
  - Safe Base training for adoptive and special guardianship families
  - An annual training programme organised through the consortium open to adopters including special seminars for those adopting from overseas where issues of tracing, identity and contact are additionally complicated.
  - Support group for Black and ethnic minority adopters.”
- Tri-borough Adoption and Fostering Services.

“Information and training needs to start from the position most prospective adopters are at, which is generally being very anxious about ‘contact’. It then needs enable them to gain a thorough understanding and increased confidence possibly by focussing on:

- the continuum of contact, what are we really talking about;
- the overall purpose of contact, for the child, birth family and adopters
- the various forms of contact
- how contact is likely to change as the needs, understanding, wishes of the child change;
- how the capacity of the birth family to engage in contact may change;
- what support all parties can expect and how that can be accessed;
- the specific challenges of social networking

Many agencies will already be incorporating all these aspects into their training and preparation; the information will need to be appropriately and sensitively made available via the Gateway’s web based resources.

Engaging young adopted people, adopted adults and birth parents in delivering training directly or via use of DVDs etc can be very powerful and informative. . . .

Within a shortened assessment process it will be necessary to provide tools for self-directed learning for prospective adopters, which enables them to ‘go on a journey’ along a continuum of contact, with messages from all parties illustrating the importance of contact, the challenges and the benefits; of course any self-learning will need to be accompanied by direct social work input, and assessment.” – CVAA.

“Adoptive parents should be helped to think about contact from the child's point of view. Training could include education about the impact of adoption on children, especially in relation to issues of loss, separation and identity. This could be achieved through the use of materials presenting the child's point of view and/or discussions with adopted young people or adults.

Adoptive parents need to be able to explore their feelings and anxieties about contact freely. It is not helpful if preparation emphasises a need to agree to contact at the expense of this exploration (Neil, 2002); such an approach might change what adopters say, but not always what they feel and fears and anxieties may remain unresolved. Adoptive parents need space to openly explore their feelings about contact without feeling their attitudes are being constantly assessed. Some assessment does need to be undertaken however and prospective adopters should be assessed in relation to their broader capacity for 'adoption communication openness' as opposed to simply their expressed willingness to agree (or not agree) to certain types of contact.

Evidence from research can be used to help prospective adoptive parents understand the challenges and benefits of contact (initially some prospective adopters may focus more on the latter than the former). Such evidence should be used to enable adoptive parents to make the right decision for the child that they will parent. In our experience a key anxiety of adoptive parents is that post-adoption contact will prevent them forming a close relationship with their child and feeling like the child's "real" parent. There is actually very little evidence to support such anxieties (except in isolated cases) and adoptive parents could be reassured that contact is unlikely to undermine their parental position, and it may strengthen it.

Contact works best where adoptive parents and birth relatives can have an understanding of each other's point of view, both working in the best interests of the child. It would also be helpful therefore if adoptive parent preparation considered the point of view of birth relatives, and again the use of DVD material or presentations from birth parents could be helpful here.

Adoptive parents may also benefit from the opportunity to talk to other adoptive parents who have experience of post-adoption contact of various types.

It is important that adoptive parents have a sense of control over contact (Neil et al, 2011) and at an early stage prospective adopters need to be reassured that they will be involved in planning and reviewing any contact that their child has and that if they are concerned that contact is having a negative effect on their child plans can be reviewed and if necessary altered (including stopping contact)." – UEA.

"Incorporate virtual contact into training [for adopters]. Stress the importance of communicative openness within adoptive families." – DFW Adoption.

"We agree with additional training for adopters on contact, but consider further training is needed post approval. A 1 day course with case studies and input from adopters who manager direct contact is suggested, with advice on considering the long term issues. It is vital that adopters are helped to understand that in the age of social networking the nature of adoption has altered and old style controlled



“closed” adoptions are not relevant.” – Essex County Council Children’s Social Care.

“Adopters need to understand where there is a need for contact, when contact proves unhealthy for the child . . . , and recognising and dealing with distress before and after contact. . . Foster carers and adopters should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to control online use and ensure online safety. For example, many parents hold passwords to or restrict use of social network accounts” –Project Manager.

“Cambridgeshire County Council would welcome strengthening the training about contact, especially on-line contact, for prospective adopters” – Cambridgeshire County Council.

“It is important that unsolicited contact is not just managed at the time, but prepared for – social media awareness should be included in adopter training and preparation.” – Coram.

“Prospective adopters need to receiving training in:

- Court processes around contact
- “truth-telling” and life-story work
- Contact as a whole – how it can be beneficial, setting boundaries, understanding expectations
- Why and how contact can re-traumatise – learning the triggers and understanding their child’s behaviour post contact
- How contact needs can change over time
- Support with unauthorised contact, especially via social networking sites”

Adoption UK

■ Training for Adopted Children

“The negative and destructive impact of unsolicited contact is only as strong as the ignorance and unawareness of the child about their birth family life experience. The other source of resilience for the child is the strength of their attachment to their adoptive parents. The strength of this attachment can be greatly enhanced during infancy and middle childhood if there has been therapeutic facilitation of secure attachment, as we know that secure attachment needs nurturing and can be inhibited by unresolved trauma in the child.” – Family Futures

“Unsolicited contact is an increasingly fraught area for adoptive families . . . It is difficult to see how any system of coercive restriction could be introduced, monitored or enforced in a world of ever increasing digital reliance and sophistication. Because of this, TACT would advocate that adopted children who are aware of the fact that they are adopted be offered advice, training and

counselling on how to approach attempts by birth parents to make contact” – TACT (The Adolescent and Children’s Trust)

“Coram is . . . interested in exploring the potential for a ‘life education’ module for children and young people” – Coram

- Support for Birth Relatives

[Problem because of] “lack of counselling and support for birth relatives; research and practice evidence the progress many birth relatives can make in understanding the part they have played in the current situation of their child, participating positively in future direct or indirect contact, making different decisions in respect of their own futures. All these factors impact positively on outcomes for an adopted child and his adoptive family, but they require resourcing in terms of skills, and time. . . . Where VAAs also deliver independent counselling services to birth relatives of children being adopted, those agencies have noted the positive impact on all the agency’s staff, and on adopters being assessed, of knowing that that agency also delivers invaluable services to birth families.” – CVAA.

“Many parents have some form of learning disability and may require support and encouragement that truly takes account of their needs to understand and absorb what is expected of them during sessions. Continuity of social work staff who support and manage contact is a significant issue in some areas and inhibits parents progress during contact. Similarly there is a lack of constructive feedback for many parents as to how contact is working and whether they are achieving what is expected of them.

Feedback from foster carers and children is also important in promoting contact that is of good quality and beneficial to children.” -Adoptive parent.

“Guidance should include working with birth families through the legal process and after a care order has been made” – TACT (The Adolescent and Children’s Trust).

## Annex B

### Views of children: adoption with siblings, and contact with parents

The Children's Rights Director, Roger Morgan, was also asked to invite the views of children and their carers on these proposals. A separate exercise was completed in August 2012 through a series of focus groups. This report has been published and is available on the Institute of Education's website<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> *Adoption with siblings: contact with parents*: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/15501/>



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