



Department
for Education

Adoption

Research priorities and questions

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General approach to research needs and priorities

This paper is one of a series of 15 which aims to:

- promote the importance of robust quantitative evidence, in combination with other methods, to increase understanding of ‘what works’ in education and children’s services;
- identify evidence gaps and promote discussion of them with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders;
- initiate collaboration with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders to research these issues; and,
- support work that helps understand and tackle the barriers to evidence based practice, including how to make evidence accessible to practitioners.

The principles behind the Department’s research strategy are inspired by Ben Goldacre’s vision¹ in the Department for Education Analytical Review². In future, the development and use of evidence should be increasingly driven and owned by the research community, sector bodies and practitioners.

The published suite of priority and question papers between them cover the department’s key areas of work and provides a coherent strategic context for the research community, sector bodies and practitioners as well as the department, to plan and prioritise research. The department will continue to commission research, informed by the published priority questions

Views about the research questions and priority papers, recent findings, on-going research or evidence gaps are warmly welcomed. We will also be arranging a series of discussions throughout 2014 with practitioners, the research community and other stakeholders to discuss views and help shape departmental plans to filling evidence gaps. If you want to be involved please email us at: Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk, follow us on Twitter (@educationgovuk) or like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk).

¹ Goldacre, B.(2013), [Building Evidence into Education](#)

² The Department for Education (2013), [Analytical Review: The Department](#)

Adoption: the policy context

Improving the quality of childhood and attainment for the most vulnerable children is a key priority for the Department of Education. In 2012-13, 70% of children who were adopted had previously suffered abuse or neglect³. They are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children in society. Adoption offers them the chance of a stable and happy future.

There is excellent work being done by social workers, local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and others in the system to support children and prospective adopters and to create loving families. There were 3,980 looked after children adopted during the year ending March 31 2013, an increase of 15% on the previous year⁴. This is the highest level since 1992 (when the data collection started).

However, a key weakness of the adoption system remains delay, with children taking on average 2 years and 7 months between entering care and adoption. Reducing delay in the system is fundamental to improving children's outcomes. The evidence shows that a child's chances of adoption are reduced by almost 20% for every year they spend in care⁵ and disruption to attachments formed early in life has a lasting negative effect. Many children for whom adoption is decided to be the best outcome are never adopted and instead remain in the care system.

One of the main causes of these issues is that the number of adopters being approved has not been keeping up with the needs of children waiting for adoption. The number of children waiting with a placement order at the end of March 2013 was 6,000, up 15% from 5,230 in 2012. We are also aware that support offered to adoptive families is patchy, and too often does not meet the particular needs of children adopted from care, especially in relation to attachment issues.

Our aim is to ensure that all children's services are delivering the best possible outcomes throughout their adoption services, from decision making for children, to adopter approval, to matching and post adoption support. We know that performance varies significantly within and between services for vulnerable children and families. The Government's ambition is therefore to support the sector to build on its efforts to eradicate unnecessary delay; identify and address the need for improvements in services using the available evidence base; and to continue to collaborate and work in partnership to strengthen the evidence base.

³ DfE (2013) [Statistical First Release Children looked after in England](#) (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2013.

⁴ DfE (2013) *ibid*

⁵ Selwyn, J., Sturgess, W., Quinton, D. and Baxter, C. (2006) [Costs and outcomes of non-infant adoptions](#), British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF).

This is why the Department is focusing on improving the adoption system in the following ways:

- **Increasing the supply of adopters** by improving both approaches to recruitment and approval processes, and by supporting change in the market structure of adopter recruitment;
- **Speeding up the child's journey** by tackling delays in decision making, court proceedings, and in matching children with suitable adoptive parents; and
- **Improving adoption support** to make sure that children and their adoptive families have both the universal and specialist support services they need to help them achieve the best possible outcomes, including improving the educational attainment of adopted children.

Research Summary and gaps

The Department publishes regular statistics on the number and background characteristics of children adopted in England⁶. These statistics will include, from autumn 2014, data to allow for the identification of children entering care where the child has previously been adopted or left care through another route to permanence. Ofsted also publishes regular statistics on the Adoption services provided by Local Authorities (LAs)⁷. In addition, the Department funded a recent programme of research to evaluate the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002⁸ and is taking forward new work on Special Guardianships (due to report summer 2014) and adoption disruption (due to report spring 2014) and adoption support (due to report autumn 2014). In May/June 2014, new data will be available that will allow us to compare the Key Stage 2 attainment of adopted children with those of Looked After Children and the wider population of children.

Increasing adopter supply

As highlighted above, if we are going to meet the needs of all looked after children for whom adoption is the best outcome we need to recruit greater numbers of prospective adopters, especially those willing and able to adopt children who are more difficult to place, for example, children from ethnic minorities⁹, children in sibling groups and children who have special needs or disabilities^{10 11}.

Both the number of approved families and new applications approved increased in the year to 31st March 2013. During 2012-13 a total of 4,093 new applications were approved, up 34% from 3,048 in 2011-12¹². Despite this substantial increase, the gap between the number of adopters needed and those available at the end of March 2013 was estimated at around 3,100, up around 1,100 from the previous year.

Recent market research by Kindred estimated that around 658,000 adults in England felt they were certain or very likely to consider adopting in the future¹³. The study made

⁶ DfE (2013) Op. cit.

⁷ Ofsted (2013) [Adoption quality assurance and data forms statistical first release](#)

⁸ Thomas, C. (2013) [Adoption for looked after children: messages from research.](#)

⁹ Selwyn, J. et al (2010) [Pathways to Permanence for Black, Asian and Mixed-Ethnicity Children](#). University of Bristol.

¹⁰ Quinton, D. (2012) [Rethinking Matching In Adoptions From Care](#): A Conceptual And Research Review. BAAF.

¹¹ Dance, C. et al (2011) [Family finding and matching](#): A survey of adoption agency practice in England and Wales ARi Universities of Bristol, Bedfordshire and Kent

¹² Ofsted (2013) Op. cit.

¹³ Scott, A. and Duncan, C. (2013) [Understanding attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption and fostering](#) Kindred Market Research.

some suggestions about how these people could be encouraged to come forward, noting a need for myth-busting and updating perceptions of adoption and fostering. However, more work needs to be done to understand the most effective means of targeting, reaching, recruiting and retaining these people, particularly those who are willing and able to adopt children who are more difficult to place.

The way agencies (both local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies) organise and manage services can have an impact on their effectiveness in recruiting adopters¹⁴. More work needs to be done to identify and share effective practice in recruiting and approving prospective adopters, and the expertise and organisation of services required to maximise their resources for recruitment.

The child's journey

The Family Justice Review¹⁵ published in November 2011 underlined the importance of an understanding of child development for professionals within the family justice system. A Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre review¹⁶ reported the importance of the first three years in terms of attachment to care givers and the development of the brain. It found that children who experience extreme abuse and neglect in these years are more likely to develop problems in later life and highlighted the importance of recognising the rights of both children and adults, and the need to support children through timely and effective early action.

Some of the studies undertaken as part of the Adoption Research Initiative^{17 18 19} identified the need for changes to the system to ensure more children achieve permanence more quickly once they have entered care. On average it takes 2 years 7 months between entry to care and adoption²⁰. The length of this process can potentially lead to placement instability while a decision is reached. The cost of processing an adoption is estimated at between £7,614 and £19,934.

A range of reforms have been introduced to reduce the delays experienced by children. These have included using multiple pathways concurrently to search for adoptive families, re-assessing the criteria on which children and families are matched and improving the decision making process.

¹⁴ Selwyn, J. et al(2010) [Adoption and the Inter-agency Fee](#). Universities of Bristol and Loughborough

¹⁵ DfE & MoJ (2011) [Family Justice Review: Final report](#)

¹⁶ Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (2012) [Decision making within a Child's timeframe](#).

¹⁷ Farmer, E. et al (2011) [An investigation of family finding and matching in adoption](#). Universities of Bristol, Beds and Kent

¹⁸ Dance, C. et al (2011) Op. cit.

¹⁹ Dance, C. et al (2011) [Linking and Matching: A survey of adoption agency practice in England and Wales Universities of Bristol, Beds and Kent](#)

²⁰ DfE (2013) Op. Cit.

The Adoption Research Initiative²¹ concluded that relatively little is known about children's views of the effectiveness of adoption process and support. A better understanding of children's views could enable the adoption system to be more focussed on supporting their needs. The initiative also noted the lack of longitudinal studies of adopted children and the need to understand more about outcomes in later life.

The evidence also highlights the importance of the journey experienced by different groups of children. The proportion of children who were waiting to be matched to adoptive families was higher among disabled children than for all children (60% compared to 46%)²². DfE statistics reported that very few older children are likely to be adopted in any given year. More research is needed to understand how to make the journey better for these particular groups of children.

Improving adoption support

There is limited evidence on adoption breakdown and support, in part because of the difficulty in identifying and monitoring adopted children post adoption order.

Current research suggests there is between 4%-11% chance of adoption disruption in the longer term, typically when a child faces a transition such as school or adolescence^{23 24}.

The evidence is reasonably consistent regarding the factors associated with disruptions.

These include:

- child related factors such as older age at placement and behaviour difficulties;
- birth family factors such as child maltreatment and domestic violence; and
- system related factors such as delay and lack of support to families²⁵.

The total cost of adoption and adoption support for a child from age 4 up to 16 is estimated at around £270,000²⁶; if breakdowns can be avoided at any stage in the placement then up to £3,000 per year could be saved. However, these estimates are quite basic and the quality of investment decisions could be improved substantially with more robust cost data.

²¹ For more information see the [Adoption Research Initiative website](#)

²² Ofsted (2013) Op. cit.

²³ Bonin, M-A. et al (2013) [Supporting adoption and supporting families that adopt: value for money](#) Working paper no. 21 Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre

²⁴ Biehal, N. et al (2011) [Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in long term foster care and adoption](#) SPRU York.

²⁵ Coakley, J.F. & Berrick, J.D. (2008), [Research Review: In a rush to Permanency: preventing adoption disruption](#).

²⁶ Bonin, M-A. et al (2013) Op. cit.

In principle, improving adoption support should be cost-effective, through increasing the number of prospective adopters for children with complex needs, reducing breakdown and improving the outcomes of adoptive children more generally.

The Department for Education has commissioned the University of Bristol to carry out new research on the frequency and causes of adoption breakdown. This research aims to address the knowledge gap in relation to the rate of, and reasons for, adoption breakdown after an adoption order has been granted. The research commenced in December 2011 and will report in spring 2014. We will also begin collecting data from local authorities in 2013-14 about the number of adoption breakdowns occurring, so that we can monitor this important indicator of whether adoptions are lasting.

There have been several surveys of adopters' views on support^{27 28}, reviews drawing together evidence from adopters and stakeholders^{29 30 31 32} and a small amount of work on the efficacy of adoption interventions³³. These studies show that:

- A significant proportion of adoptive children have high levels of need which can manifest much later in life and can include issues such as complex behavioural and psychological problems;
- Parents want better awareness of adoption in universal services; more timely access to targeted support such as CAMHS; and more access to and availability of specialist support such as therapeutic parenting. Some parents, particularly those adopting siblings, call for more financial support;
- There appears to be a lack of understanding of current entitlements to an assessment of need for adoption support (Adoption UK, 2012); and
- Assessments of needs do not always appear to happen when requested and even when needs are identified parents feel that they have to fight for services. Yet, where support is provided, parents report its effectiveness and the impact of therapeutic interventions on outcomes can be significant.

²⁷ Adoption UK (2012) [It takes a village to raise a child: Adoption UK survey on adoption support](#)

²⁸ Sturgess and Selwyn (2007) [Supporting the placements of children adopted out of care](#), Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 12, 1, 13 – 28

²⁹ Evan B. Donaldson Institute (2010), [Keeping the Promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed](#), Donaldson Institute

³⁰ Rushton (2007) [Research review - Adoption preparation and post placement support for adoptive parents of older children placed from care](#)

³¹ Holmes, L. et al (2013) [Post adoption Support](#): A rapid response survey of local authorities in England - Working Paper no. 19 CWRC

³² Bonin, M-A. et al (2013) Op. cit

³³ Rushton, A. and Monck, E. (2009) [Enhancing adoptive parenting: A randomised controlled trial of adoption support](#) ARi, Kings College, London and Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education

The Department has also recently commissioned a study to map out adoption support services and inform the development of an Adoption Support Fund in 10 prototype areas. The aim of the Fund is to provide access to therapeutic services – such as cognitive therapy, play and music therapy and intensive family support – helping children recover from their previous experiences, bond with their adoptive families and settle into their new lives. One of the key gaps in this area is better understanding of what post-adoption support services work best, for which children and in what circumstances.

The adoption system

Preliminary research has been undertaken to monitor the impact of reforms to reduce delay. Alongside some basic management information (MI)³⁴, qualitative research has looked to explore LAs perceptions of and responses to the adoption reforms³⁵. This research highlighted: concerns about the extent to which the new National Gateway will deliver enough adopters to meet demand; the importance of ensuring adopters continue to have sufficient time to prepare for adoption; and the importance of retaining sufficient time and expertise to prepare children for adoption.

There is a need to understand better how LAs are leading and organising their adoption services to enhance the timeliness of the process while promoting best outcomes for children.

In addition, there is limited evidence around the cost effectiveness of adoption services and this is a further area for investigation to improve local commissioning.

Finally, new research is generating estimates of the numbers, skills and competencies of the adoption workforce and this is likely to raise questions about skills gaps and how best to allocate scarce staff resources.

Improving adoption outcomes

There are some significant challenges in measuring and comparing the outcomes of adoption with other types of permanent placement, notably in tracking adopted children over time and controlling for their background characteristics.

Research by Biehal et al³⁶ reported that adopted children make similar educational progress to children in *stable* long term foster care; children in '*unstable* care' did

³⁴ DfE (2013) [Voluntary Survey on Adoption and Adopters](#)

³⁵ Munro, E. et al (2013) [Adoption reform: Messages from local authorities on changes in processes and timescales](#) Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre

³⁶ Biehal et al (2009) Op. cit.

significantly worse on all measures of education participation and progress. Overall, looked after children do significantly worse on measures of educational outcomes and the strongest predictor of doing badly at school was severity of initial emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is crucial that adoption reforms support the educational attainment of adopted children.

This research is based on relatively small samples and follow up periods are for five and eight years only. Further research on the long-term impacts of professional decision-making and the effectiveness of services provided to children has the potential to improve outcomes. Likewise, it would be useful to understand more about the different pathways to permanence for children, notably Special Guardianship and Residence Orders, and to assess the impact on wider outcomes.

As noted above, there are currently gaps in understanding of what best practice looks like throughout the adoption system, especially for those children who are considered hard to place. These include those with disabilities and complex needs, such as children suffering from Foetal Alcohol Syndrome or the effects of maternal drug taking. Further research would help policymakers and services design their interventions to support these vulnerable groups more effectively. International evidence from countries like the United States, Canada and Australia, where adoption systems and practice are similar to that of the UK, has influenced the recent improvements in adopter-led matching in the UK, but more could be done to identify successful practice which might be utilised in the UK.

Even where best practice has been identified this does not always result in the systematic change to implement what research has identified as effective. Further work on how to implement change and drive evidence based practice effectively would maximise the value of existing research, not only for adoption services but also for children's services more generally.

Future Priorities

The areas and questions set out below are intended as broad prompts to help identify where further analytical and evaluative work might most usefully be undertaken to drive forward these policy ambitions, whether by government, independent researchers or practitioners within children's social care.

This is likely to be an iterative process as work is completed, some questions are answered and others arise. However, underpinning all this is the requirement to better understand how to implement research findings in practice.

Increasing adopter supply

- What are the motivations and demography of adopters, particularly those who adopt harder to place children or adopt more than one child? What personal, social, economic and environmental factors enable a person to become a successful adopter? How well developed is the knowledge of adopters about what adoption entails?
- What is the overlap between those who choose to foster and subsequently, or in parallel, also choose to adopt? What are the important factors in making the decision to foster rather than adopt, and to adopt rather than foster?
- What is the size and capacity of the workforce? Does it have the necessary skills and knowledge to recruit effectively the numbers and type of adopters required?
- What are the most effective strategies for converting enquiries into parents waiting to adopt? How does one best retain applicants through the approval process? What role does adoption support play in achieving this?
- How well do the markets for adoption recruitment and support services work? What are the options for more delivery by VAAs or the private sector?

The child's journey

- What are the views of adopted children about the current adoption system from care onwards and how it might be improved?
- What does best practice look like throughout the care and adoption system for children who are considered hard to place? These include sibling groups, older children, those from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with disabilities and complex needs.
- What factors support quick, high-quality matching of children with suitable adopters?
- How specific do we need to be in matching parents' assessed capacities and characteristics to children's needs in order to achieve good adoption outcomes?
- Do different approaches to matching make a difference to outcomes, both in the short and longer term?

Improving adoption support

- What types of adoption support, generally and at specific times of transition and risk, have most positive impact on the outcomes of adopted children (such as social, emotional and behavioural outcomes)? What are the reasons for any differences in outcomes? What types of adoption support do adopters most value?
- What are the unit costs of support? What is the optimum mix of spend to support child outcomes?

The adoption system

- What are the important factors for delivering a high quality service to adopters and children, including in the face of funding constraints? How far is this evidence underpinning current policy and practice?
- What skills and knowledge do social workers need to achieve and support timely, high-quality adoptions for children?
- What is driving the differences in LA adoption service performance, including implementation of reforms? How can LAs who need to improve elements of their services learn from other LAs?
- What factors help enable, or make it more difficult for, local authorities to have a strategic and systematic approach to understanding needs, costs and outcomes in relation to adoption?
- What incentives and structures deliver the most effective practice in matching and linking? For example, current examples in this area include agencies working in consortia and the equalisation of fees paid when adopters are transferred between agencies.
- What are the underlying reasons for variations in local authorities' use of different kinds of permanent placement?
- What is the impact of different social work team structures and operating models on the quality of decision making and on overall timeliness and, in particular, the speed and quality of family finding?
- What are the barriers to implementing research findings into practice, and what are the factors which lead to successful implementation of new evidence based policies and practices?
- Is the adoption system becoming more adopter-led?
- What is the role of VAAs is and the scope for innovation in the adoption system?

Improving adoption outcomes

- What are the long-term impacts of decisions by professionals on children's outcomes and are these improved by effective use of research evidence and

understanding in those judgements? How do adoption breakdown rates compare to other permanence arrangements?

- How do adopted children's educational and health outcomes compare with those of children in care, those subject to a Special Guardianship Order who were previously looked after and the wider population of all children? What are the reasons for any differences in outcomes?
- What features of adoption practice contribute most effectively to the improvement of educational outcomes?
- How have the changes made to speed up the system changed the outcomes for children?
- What represents international best practice in relation to designing and delivering an efficient and effective adoption system?

Engaging with Future priorities

We would like individuals or organisations to respond to this and you can do this in various ways:

- Share with DfE any existing research evidence or current work relevant to questions. Email to Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk.
- Prioritise research effort or bids in the light of the evidence questions.
- Debate evidence gaps and priorities with your own associations or other stakeholders. DfE would be interested to hear any views emerging - email as above.
- Follow us and join the discussion on Twitter (@educationgovuk)
- Like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk)



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