



Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium

Adopter Views of Support Research Summary

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Foreword

We are very pleased to publish this ground breaking piece of regional research about what adopters in the Yorkshire and Humber Region think about the support they have received from their adoption agencies. There is a lot of evidence that much of the support is well aimed, of the right quality and greatly valued. There is also evidence of gaps in services, where adopters felt unsupported and where communication should have been better.

The report provides a blueprint for a way ahead and an encouragement to all those involved: the local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies, the private providers and the most importantly the adopters and adopted young people themselves. There is much to be celebrated but also much to improve. This report and the separate outline forward plan document, are a good opportunity to establish a better dialogue and stronger partnership between the providers and the users of these key services for some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

We are grateful to **agenda communication**, the organisation commissioned to undertake this research. They did so with skill and sensitivity which enabled adopters to speak freely about their experiences, good and bad, and they have produced a truly helpful report. We are grateful to the adopters who gave their time and their honesty in completing the online survey and to those who were part of follow-up focus group discussions and telephone interviews. We intend that this will be the start of a genuine dialogue between support services and those they are intended to benefit.

This document outlines the main findings from the research and the conclusions and recommendations drawn up by the researchers at **agenda**. Also available is our outline plan to address the issues raised, including the establishment of a regional adopter advisory group.

Nic Haughton
Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium Manager

Summary of findings

The majority of adopted children will have come through the care system having been removed from abusive or dysfunctional family situations. The average age at which a child is adopted is four, and yet even by that time, these youngsters may have experienced neglect, abuse and trauma (not least from the loss of their principal care giver) that will have caused them psychological problems and resulted in difficult behaviours for their new family and for the professionals they have contact with at school and elsewhere.

Adopters are therefore presented with a wide range of challenges. In most instances simply adapting to having a child in their household (as with any new parent) brings some tensions, but adopters also have to deal with a range of behaviours and needs which are complex and demanding. For most adopters, the joy of creating a new family, often with more than one adopted child, outweighs any difficulties, but there is no doubt that many adoptive parents who are loving and supporting some of the most vulnerable children in our society need experienced professional support at various times.

This research was commissioned in September 2014 by the Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium (YHAC) to find out more about the views of adopters across the region in terms of the support they have needed and the support they have received – where things work well and where improvements need to be made.

YHAC is an umbrella organisation created to maximise opportunities to share services and best practice around adoption matters in the region – both attracting and recruiting adopters and then supporting them during the pre-adoption process and after they have adopted. All with a view to developing consistently high practice standards. The Consortium is made up of 15 local authorities and two voluntary adoption agencies (see list of members at the end of this section). Each of the local authority members has contributed a portion of its adoption reform grant to the Consortium to implement a regional plan.

The research methodology consisted of an online survey, focus groups and a number of telephone discussions with individual adopters. It was conducted with the help of adoption support and marketing officers at each of the agencies who distributed information to the adopters on their mailing lists and encouraged them to participate. The response from different agency areas varied considerably.

The adopters we heard from in the research welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of support and their commitment shone through the whole exercise. For the most part, these people were constructive and eager to contribute to an exercise that they hoped would help the next tranche of adoptive families coming through the system. They were articulate and had clearly acquired an impressive level of experience and expertise around issues such as attachment and the various therapeutic interventions that might help their children.

The pre-adoption journey for most of our contributors had been a positive experience. Adopters reported that they felt supported throughout their assessment and training - with 84% of our respondents to the survey saying that they had found the information they received helpful in preparing them for adoption, and 86% saying that the training had been helpful.

It was at this pre-adoption stage that adopters developed some important relationships - both with social workers - several of whom were singled out in verbatim comments as being wonderful, supportive 'partners' - and with other adopters going through the process and often sharing the same concerns. The quality of these relationships and the ease of access to these same people beyond the adoption order being granted (i.e. the point at which a child is legally part of the adoptive family) was a crucial element in deciding whether adopters felt supported and was a recurring theme in the research.

So far so good...up to the point at which their child was legally adopted, adopters felt well supported. However, what we found was that that sense of support diminished quite significantly for many people soon after the adoption order was granted. Having had lots of attention throughout the process of adopting a child, there was then something of a vacuum in support.

Those early days were where many adopters talked about feeling isolated – sometimes becoming depressed. They felt that they faced a dilemma. They wanted support but surely, having been through the assessment and been approved as an adopter – shouldn't that mean that they could cope?

It is at this stage, which could continue for some months, that adopters said they really needed someone to talk to and crucially, they did not want to have to ask for that support. They wanted to feel that they were making good progress but they needed practical feedback and reassurance from the professionals in an informal setting.

In addition, adopters wanted assistance and training to help them develop their own therapeutic parenting skills in the early days of adoption, to enhance their efforts in creating a stable family life long-term.

As the new family relationships unfolded, many adopters talked about facing challenges around their child's behaviours and having difficulties in arranging assessment of their needs and identifying the right sort of support for their child. Bureaucratic processes, lack of a sense of urgency on the part of professionals and an awareness that everyone was dealing with a diminishing budget, all contributed to a less than satisfactory situation in this area. There were experiences amongst our participants of hugely beneficial therapies, but they were not universally available and clearly were costly. This seemed to be a clear case of where the Consortium's buying power might help improve things.

Agencies also appeared to take different approaches to another vital dimension of the adopted child's life - the relationship with their birth families. Completion of life-story books (which help the child to understand about their past) and the letterbox contact (the exchange of letters with birth family members) was often disorganised and confusing for all concerned and adopters felt strongly that they needed more support and guidance on this.

One of the most consistent messages from adopters in this research was around the difficulties in communicating and getting the right sort of support for their child in school. Adopters were surprised at how little awareness there seemed to be on the part of teaching staff about the particular needs that an adopted child might have. Some adopters had gone into school to talk to teachers about the challenges that an adopted child might bring to the classroom, and where this had happened it really seemed to make a difference. Certainly this is further evidence of the need

for the planned Consortium conference this spring addressing schools and education issues and the adopted child.

As commented previously, the adopters taking part in this research were pleased to have an opportunity to voice their concerns and all those we spoke with expressed an interest in contributing further to the adoption agenda in the region – whether through membership of steering groups or support groups or via online forums etc.

This research exercise has identified good practice and excellent service in certain areas – particularly around the pre-adoption experience. There are also some significant areas of focus for improvement – communication, more proactive support in those early days post adoption and improving awareness amongst education professionals amongst them. Perhaps, most importantly, this exercise has opened up the dialogue with adopters on a more strategic level – and there is clearly enthusiasm amongst adopters for that to continue.

Members of YHAC

Barnsley Council
Bradford Council
Calderdale Council
Doncaster Council
East Riding Council
Hull Council
Kirklees Council
Leeds Council
North Yorkshire Council
North Lincolnshire Council
North East Lincolnshire Council
Rotherham Council
Sheffield Council
Wakefield Council
City of York Council

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After Adoption Yorkshire

Conclusions

Having analysed the details of the findings from the research, we identified a number of key themes and conclusions which are outlined below:

Relationships are all-important...

For many adopters, the quality of the relationship with professionals is at the heart of whether they feel supported or not. We heard many positive examples of good working relationships with social workers and other professionals - individuals who listened to adopters' concerns and needs, guided them through the complexities of identifying and accessing the right support, and worked with them to address issues in the child's school or elsewhere.

Others, however, felt that some agencies threw up barriers to their getting the support they needed. Many adopters recognised that this was partly as a result of the resource and budgetary constraints within social services functions but there was some sense of a lack of strong expertise around therapeutic options which meant that adopters felt that their concerns were sometimes dismissed.

There was also a sense of 'them and us'. For many getting support was a 'battle,' they felt they had to fight just to be heard.

In the school environment many adopters felt that there needed to be a greater understanding of the needs of adopted children on the part of teaching staff and more of a sense of partnership between adopters and teachers in supporting children appropriately.

... but communication's not far behind

Effective communication is fundamental to a mutually beneficial relationship.

Much of what adopters were concerned about came down to a lack of effective communication between professionals and adopters - and vice versa.

In communication terms, adopters wanted:

- More information - about the services available, about where to go to for help, about what service would best meet their needs, about what was happening with their case and so on
- To be listened to and respected. Whether it was to let off steam, get advice, ask a question or ask for help - they wanted someone at the end of the phone or across a desk or in a school to hear them, take on board what they said and act accordingly
- A timely response to their request
- Clarity and transparency - whether that was about their entitlement to support, to financial assistance, what was best for their child etc.

Pre-adoption support

The research indicated that, broadly speaking, the support provided to prospective adopters prior to their adopting a child was of good quality and met their needs at the time. Preparation training in particular was well-received.

The importance of regular, consistent communication and contact with social workers during the latter stages of the process (matching, introductions, the court process) was clear - but it was not always forthcoming. People were also unclear about their adoption support plan - what it was and how it helped them.

There were also elements of the pre-adoption process that impacted upon how supported people felt post adoption order:

Firstly, during the pre-adoption process significant emphasis was placed on the issues and challenges that adopters were likely to face - the effects of trauma, abuse and neglect on their child's development and behaviour. This was welcomed by the majority of adopters we heard from - they recognised the need to go into adoption with their eyes open.

However, since this pre-adoption stage is all about assessing potential adopters' capabilities, those prospective adopters often felt that they had to prove they could cope with these challenges in order to be approved. Once they had adopted their child, this could then make it all the more difficult to ask for help when those very same challenges presented themselves.

Secondly, this gave rise to a frustration amongst adopters. By highlighting the challenges ahead, the professionals were acknowledging that times would get tough. And yet when those difficulties manifested themselves, many of our respondents reported hesitance amongst professionals to step in and support/intervene.

Thirdly, the issues around attachment and its impact on a child's world-view and behaviour were well communicated during the pre-adoption process, according to our participants. However, post adoption, when adopters might need help to deal with the problems that arose around attachment, – there appeared to be very few services or professionals available to help them.

The early days are critical

For many we spoke to, the early days of adoption were a critical time. For some, the most important aspect was the opportunity to get on with being a family. For others there was a sense of isolation, anxiety, even depression combined with a reluctance to ask for help. The reduction in contact with social workers post adoption compared to what adopters received pre-adoption was mentioned several times.

There was a general consensus that the lack of proactive support in those early days was counter-productive. Many talked about how some form of training at this stage would have been hugely beneficial, in terms of giving them the skills, the approach, the behaviours to provide their adopted children with the firm foundations they needed. Those who had received therapeutic parenting training, said that they had found this to be of significant benefit.

Differences in provision across the region

Our discussions with people based in different areas of the region revealed a disparity in service provision. This was particularly apparent in the focus groups where representatives from different council areas compared notes on what support services were available to them.

While there was recognition that smaller local authorities might not have the resources to be able to provide the same level of support services as a bigger authority, there was general agreement that where you live in the region should not have a detrimental effect on the support available to you.

Therapeutic support

Many of the adopters we spoke to had at some point experienced significant behavioural and/or emotional challenges with their child. These included hypervigilance, anger, aggression, inability to concentrate in school, emotional dysregulation and so on.

Some of these adopters had had access to a range of therapeutic services and interventions, mentioning FIS, MST, EMDR amongst a number of others. While they generally felt these had had a positive impact on their child's behaviour there was some concern about a seeming lack of consensus amongst some therapeutic professionals as to the effectiveness or appropriateness of different approaches. Adopters had themselves become experts in order to be able to navigate their way through what was on offer or indeed to identify what their child needed or to advocate that their child needed a certain type of help.

Other adopters did not have access to these sorts of services in their area. Some had purchased services privately, others were travelling to access services outside the region.

Education, education, education

Getting the right support in the school environment was a real concern for many participants. The limited understanding amongst some teachers and other education professionals about the needs of adopted children had a number of unwelcome consequences:

- Discipline procedures that made behaviours worse
- Children having a miserable time at school e.g. being bullied
- Children missing out on educational opportunities through exclusion etc
- Pupil premium not being utilised effectively
- Inconsistent access to educational therapies
- Adopters feeling they had to fight with schools to get what their children need or go it alone
- Concern amongst adopters about how to choose the right school for their child.

When therapists, CAMHS and/or adoption teams (and in some cases, adopters themselves) went into schools to explain the needs of specific adopted children, things did improve.

Helping children understand about their past

All of the adopters we heard from understood that most, if not all, of the challenges they would face resulted from their child's past and that as adoptive parents, they needed to support their children to deal with that past, understand why they were adopted and maintain a relationship with their birth families.

Aspects such as letterbox contact, life-story work and social media were all raised as areas where adopters felt they needed more guidance, training and support. People felt there must be best practice out there for how to deal with all these things - particularly given they're common to all

adopted children - but that their own experience was variable. There was a sense that these matters were not always high on professionals' agenda – life-story books in particular were felt to be of varying quality.

Accessing support - the practicalities

On a practical level, people were prepared to travel to access support services and felt that regional provision of some services wouldn't prove to be a major barrier for them - although this depended on the type of support under discussion. Many were happy to contemplate travelling across the region to access training for themselves, but on balance felt that it was more helpful to have more local access to things like support groups, therapeutic interventions for their children and social workers.

Other commitments - work and family ties - could also be a barrier to accessing support. Training and therapeutic interventions often took place during the day making them difficult for working parents to get to.

The role of the Consortium and adopters

The Consortium had rather a low profile amongst the adopters we spoke to but, when we'd explained a little about its constituents and its activities, people were generally positive about how it might be able to improve adoption support across the region.

It was felt that the Consortium would be well placed to address the need for better access to support, and to facilitate the sharing of good practice. There was also a sense that the Consortium's existence might mean there was an opportunity for some services to be provided at a more regional level e.g. assessment services for adopted children, provision of therapeutic interventions, a helpline and website for adopters to access 24/7 support.

Most adopters we spoke with were also happy to get involved themselves. They appreciated the fact that they were being asked for their input into this research and many thought the idea of including adopters in steering groups/on committees to advise on support was a good idea.

Recommendations

Engaging with adopters – post adoption

The evidence suggests a largely positive picture for pre-adoption support but more of a chequered image post adoption.

Recommendation 1 – further engage with adopters (post adoption) and communicate that: ‘we’re on your side’

The Consortium (and agencies) needs to find ways to more actively engage with adopters and communicate that ‘we’re on your side’ – a commitment to working more closely together (adopters and professionals) in the best interests of the adopted child. A commitment that promotes:

- support for both adopter and child
- open and honest two-way communication
- mutual respect and involvement.

i) This will be a commitment characterised by ongoing dialogue with adopters. The message is that this research has been a useful eye-opener to the concerns of adopters and a springboard to engage with them on a more strategic level. The Consortium’s role here will be as facilitator to:

- agree a shared way forward with agencies – how will agencies and the Consortium work together to keep an open dialogue with adopters and find ways of addressing concerns?
- invite adopters to come forward to join a Consortium steering group – perhaps creating three groups reflecting the sub regional areas – to be part of the ongoing ‘conversation’.

ii) Alongside these discussions, there will be opportunities to create tools (with adopter and social worker input) to support the ‘we’re on your side’ ethos including:

- best practice guides for professionals and adopters
- ideas and perhaps a protocol for effective communication between adopters and adoption support professionals dealing with accessibility, listening, acknowledging needs, keeping in contact, being respectful even when there is disagreement about what support is required or how best to deliver it
- ensuring that any brand development and enhancement for YHAC and the Being Family website etc. reflects the sense that ‘working together’ doesn’t just mean agencies but adopters too.

iii) In addition, the philosophy could be written into an agreement/contract signed by both adopter and adoption support team that sets out general principles, expectations and responsibilities (similar to the foster carer agreement). It will also mean of course that all parties will need to make a commitment to do all they can to fulfil the agreement and live the principles.

Pre-adoption support - the adoption support plan

The online survey revealed that some of our respondents were not clear about their adoption support plan – they felt it could be more user-friendly and outline more of the day-to-day support they might expect rather than the big picture support elements in place.

Recommendation 2 - revisit the Adoption Support Plan 'template' and develop a YHAC approach to it in collaboration with adopters

Is there a way of making the plan more practical and useful for both adopters and social workers? It may be that the activity around drawing it up i.e. the negotiation and discussions between adopters and social workers would be the most important helpful element of the plan. Could the Consortium act as practice leader in this area and develop a best practice model for sharing with Consortium members?

Focusing on support during the early days of adoption

A consistent message from adopters was how much they would have welcomed more contact and support in the very early days after their adopted child had arrived with them.

Recommendation 3 – develop a best practice model for supporting adopters in the early stages of adoption

Whilst not something that all adopters would want, many felt that having an experienced person (a trusted social worker or another adopter acting as a buddy) on hand to talk to over the phone or have a cuppa and a chat with would be hugely beneficial. The key factors are to make it 'light touch' – i.e. no structured meeting or form filling – just an informal opportunity to catch up, share concerns and early experiences and most importantly for it to happen without the adopter having to ask for it.

The model might simply be some ideas about the sorts of prompts/questions to ask to get under the skin of how things are going for the adopter and might also look at frequency of visits/calls. In addition, are there materials and training that would also be useful for the adopter at this early stage?

The therapeutic parenting training programme offered by one adoption agency was cited by all who had experienced it as excellent. Would there be a possibility of extending the opportunity to attend such a programme to others in the Consortium region?

We would recommend the model is developed with input from adopters (and learning from any other work done around the UK) and then tested with new adoptive parents before being refined and then shared more widely across the region.

Birth family relationships

Recommendation 4 - Supporting adopters to help their children understand their past

We heard many concerns from adopters about the way in which adoption agencies managed the potentially very challenging interface with birth families and associated activities including life-story

work and letters between children and their birth family members. There did not appear to be any consistency in approach across agencies.

Our recommendation here is therefore again around creation of best practice guides and training, pooling good ideas and any elements of good practice from around the region (or accessing those produced by other agencies) for dissemination around the Consortium area so that there is a recognised approach to this important subject. We recommend that the Consortium develops the following with input from adopters or, if it already exists, buys in from other providers:

- A best practice guide on the production of life-story books for professionals and adopters with associated material for adopted children
- Training and guidance for adopters on life-story work
- Training and guidance for professionals and adopters on working with birth families, letterbox contact and social media, again with related material aimed at adopted children and teenagers
- Training and support materials for professionals and birth families to help them deal with contact appropriately.

Are there opportunities to use technology for constructing life-story books and email for letterbox activity to bring things into the 21st century?

Access to therapeutic services

Recommendation 5 - regional coordination of therapeutic services

We understand that the regional coordination of therapeutic services is under consideration by the Consortium. The views and experiences of adopters would support this initiative. Of course, they want to understand what their child's needs are, understand what's out there to support those needs and have timely access to high quality therapists – preferably within the region.

From an adoption agency and Consortium point of view, will it be more cost effective to coordinate access to therapies across the region? Will there be economies of scale?

To maximise the opportunities for cross regional therapeutic support and work towards a situation where all adopted children in the YHAC region have access to appropriate therapies we recommend that the Consortium considers:

- A regional 'centre' where needs can be assessed - to ensure consistent and wider access to appropriate support
- Ways to ensure quality control – user reviews and testimonials (as suggested later for the website) may be one way of giving feedback on quality
- Some attention to innovations and new ways of working. Perhaps setting up a sub group of the Consortium to stay abreast of the most up-to-date, relevant and evidence based therapies and ensure, where possible, that there is access to these within the region
- Encouraging and, if possible, supporting existing therapeutic practitioners in the region to attend to their succession planning so that more therapists are coming through the system and the retirement of practitioners doesn't leave a gap.

Education support

Recommendation 6 - Helping adopted children get the support they need in school

While some agencies, professionals and adopters are working hard to help individual schools understand and respond to the individual needs of adopted children, there are major gaps in knowledge and awareness in schools.

We're aware that there are plans to focus attention on this issue in a Consortium led conference this year and our findings from this research may be valuable for discussion at that conference.

We recommend that the Consortium invites representatives from schools onto its steering group/committee in order that the educational perspective can be understood and the needs of adopted children shared.

We must not lose sight of the fact that adoptive parents will also have a key role to play in introducing their child to teaching staff and to maintaining contact with their child's teachers throughout their schooling – keeping an open dialogue with the school will be a shared responsibility.

We recommend that guidance, training and support are developed for educational professionals and support staff in schools and adoptive parents - with input from specialists and from adopters themselves (or materials produced by other agencies are identified for dissemination around the Consortium area) to include:

- training and related materials to help adoptive parents understand their role in communicating with their children's school
- training and related support materials (which might include video/DVD/online resources) for teachers, support staff to deal with attachment and strategies for dealing with associated behaviours
- training and materials for teachers and support staff to raise awareness of other issues presenting challenges for adopted children in school including the importance of family name changes, birth family issues, bullying etc.
- guidance and ideas for making the best use of the Pupil Premium
- is there an opportunity to feed these ideas into teacher training establishments too so that student teachers are exposed to these issues before even arriving in the school environment?

Communication

Good quality, consistent and regular communications are an important part of effective adoption support, but, for many of our adopters, these were lacking.

Recommendation 7 - develop a Consortium website (extension of Being Family) for adopters and professionals

The Consortium is currently considering developing a website to inform, advise and support adopters (and professionals). Feedback from adopters suggests that this would be of significant value and use to them.

Suggested content (most of which was suggested by adopters themselves) would include:

- information and advice on key topics – new legislation etc
- entitlements (adoption passport)
- where to go to for help - sign-posting and links to local, regional, national sources of help and book/article reviews
- directory of support services – up-to-date guidance for adopters and professionals including therapists, new techniques and training, local facilities etc (possibly including user reviews)
- what's going on in the region - training courses, conferences, support groups, events etc
- case studies of good practice
- adopters' stories
- adopter discussion and advice forum
- sign-up/subscribe link to capture adopter details
- blog/interactive content perhaps written by an anonymous adopter.

Recommendation 8 - develop a regional newsletter for adopters

There are a number of benefits to the Consortium developing a regional newsletter for adopters in partnership with adoption agencies and with input from adopters. The newsletter could help to address many of the issues raised in this research with adopters including:

- convey region-wide service news, share good practice and create a sense of a wider community
- provide up-to-date, relevant best practice hints, tips and guidance
- ensure all adopters get regular and consistent information
- help adopters access support available outside their own local area
- complement and enhance materials already produced by individual agencies
- provide content for agencies not currently producing their own materials
- promote the Consortium as a reliable 'go to' source for adopters across the region
- act as another vehicle for adopters to get involved.

We suggest that this is an online newsletter downloadable from the website and/or sent to adopters registered with agencies.

Recommendation 9 - provide a helpline for adopters in Yorkshire and Humber

So often, adopters told us they just want someone to talk to, somewhere to go for some advice, a friendly ear or a first port of call in their search for the right support.

Recognising that individual adoption support teams are often too stretched to deal with this sort of contact, is there scope for the Consortium to provide a centralised helpline to offer advice and signpost people to where to go next? It would ensure adopters got advice in good time, it might mean small problems faced by adopters didn't become large, insurmountable problems and it would enable the Consortium to monitor common themes in terms of what issues were being raised and flag up where a more strategic solution might be needed.

Recommendation 10 - sharing good practice in conferences, workshops and support groups

There is evidence of good practice by individual agencies and indeed by adopters themselves. This needs to be shared cross region so that more professionals and adopters can benefit.

Some of this will be facilitated by the mechanisms mentioned above (website and newsletter) but perhaps this could also be done via conferences and workshops hosted by the Consortium where agencies and adopters share ideas and good practice and discuss ways to develop further.

In addition, many adopters talked about how valuable they found adoption support groups – and they urged agencies to make sure they continued to operate and be supported. One adopter commented that they would access information/resources on an adoption website and print them off to take along to their adoption support group for discussion.

Recommendation 11 - support agencies to improve mailing lists

We discovered during the development stage of this research project that many agencies didn't always have up-to-date email lists for adopters and others only had postal addresses making communication a slower process.

We recommend therefore that the Consortium encourages and supports individual agencies to update their database information of adopter contact details and as far as possible move communications online. There are many free services online (e.g. mailchimp, campaign monitor) that enable better management of contact lists and the distribution of communications.

Recommendation 12 - promoting the Consortium

The Consortium needs to raise its profile amongst adopters. A key activity will be to develop a brand for the organisation to ensure Consortium communications are recognisable, consistent and professional. This can then be used across all publications, materials, website etc.

Taking the opportunity to be present at local events - celebration days, support groups, training sessions etc - will also help to raise the profile of the Consortium.