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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH BRIEFING, JUNE 2020

Post-adoption contact and adoptive parents' receptiveness to direct contact in the four nations of the UK

Authors: Dr Christine Jones, University of Strathclyde; Dr Mandi MacDonald, Queens University Belfast and Rebecca Brooks, Adoption UK.

Background to the study

This briefing paper reports key findings from a recent study of direct contact between adoptive families and birth relatives within the four nations of the UK. The study involved secondary analysis of a data set generated from the Adoption Barometer¹, a large-scale annual survey of adoptive parents conducted by Adoption UK (n=3,470). The analysis focused on data relating to actual direct contact between adoptive and birth families in 2018, and anticipated future direct contact. The key purpose of this study was to compare experiences of adoptive families across the four nations of the United Kingdom: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Key findings

- Rates of direct contact between birth families and adoptive families vary considerably across the UK from a low of 16% in Wales to high of 54% in Northern Ireland.
- In addition, there are differences in rates of direct contact with various categories of birth relative such as birth parents and birth siblings.
- A significant minority of adopters across all four nations are receptive to considering additional direct contact with birth relatives than is currently experienced, particularly, with birth siblings.
- The variations across nations in rates and types of contact suggest that decisions regarding a child's best interests are open to considerable interpretation.
- Some opportunities for positive ongoing contact between adopted children and birth family members, especially siblings, may be being missed.

Direct contact following adoption typically involves face-to-face meetings between adoptive and birth family members, annually or occasionally more frequently². This can benefit children's wellbeing and identity development, but for some can also bring risks, especially following maltreatment. Court orders mandating contact are rarely used in any of the four nations. Instead a written voluntary agreement between adoptive and birth family is recommended, formalised with the help of an adoption agency.

There are no official UK statistics regarding these voluntary contact arrangements. Instead we are reliant on studies of relatively small non-random samples of families within UK nations. Neil³ et al's 2018 study in England of 255 adopters found direct contact rates of 25% between adopters and siblings and much lower rates (3%) with birth parents. Meakings⁴ et al's 2018 study of 96 newly formed adoptive families in Wales reports face-to-face contact plans for a quarter of children with siblings living elsewhere, and none with birth parents. MacDonald's⁵ survey of adopters having contact in Northern Ireland estimated that up to a fifth of children adopted from care had face-to-face contact, mainly with birth mothers and siblings. Jones and Henderson's⁶ 2019 study of siblings in permanent placements in Scotland found that seven in 10 sibling relationships were estranged.

Policy and legislation give primacy to the best interests of the child when the question of direct contact is being considered. There is agreement amongst professionals and researchers that decisions must be guided by individual need and circumstances. Little is known about how such complex decisions are weighed up. However, a presumption that adopters are reluctant to agree to direct contact can be an influencing factor⁷.

Aims of the study

- To compare rates of direct contact experienced by adoptive families within the four nations of the UK.
- To determine differences in rates of direct contact with various categories of birth relative.
- To quantify the level of receptiveness to direct contact among adoptive parents not currently experiencing this.

Methodology

The first Adoption UK Barometer, a UK-wide online survey of adoptive parents, was completed during February and March 2019. The anonymous survey was administered through Survey Monkey and consisted of 165 questions covering a wide range of topics including approvals and matching processes; post-adoption support and training; contact arrangements with birth family members; education, health and special educational needs. After an initial set of general questions, the survey was split into groups of questions for particular sub-categories of families, for example, prospective adopters undergoing an approvals process in 2018, new adopters of children placed in 2018 or established adopters of children placed before 2018. The analysis reported here relates to the latter group of established adopters.

Data were available on the direct contact experiences of 2,447 adoptive parents.

In analysing the results, data for every question was filtered by nation so that comparisons could be drawn between the experiences of adoptive families across the UK. Data were captured in Excel and descriptive statistics were generated relating to the relevant questions. Attention was given to the context in which the question was asked to avoid any misinterpretation of data.

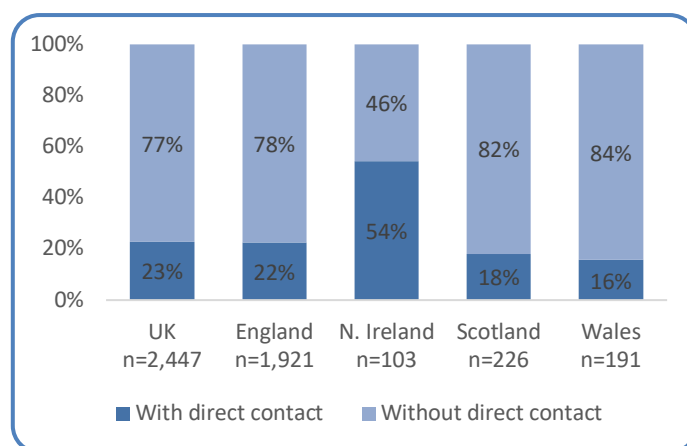
Findings

Rates of direct contact between adoptive families and birth families vary considerably across the UK

Overall, 23% of adoptive parents reported direct contact with a birth family member or members in 2018. These 558 adoptive families were in direct contact with a minimum of 729 birth family members. This figure of around one in four is broadly in line with Neil et al (2018) findings in England. However, these rates varied considerably from nation to nation. Adoptive parents in Wales reported the lowest rates of direct contact at 16%, while Northern Ireland reported the highest at 54% (see Figure 1).



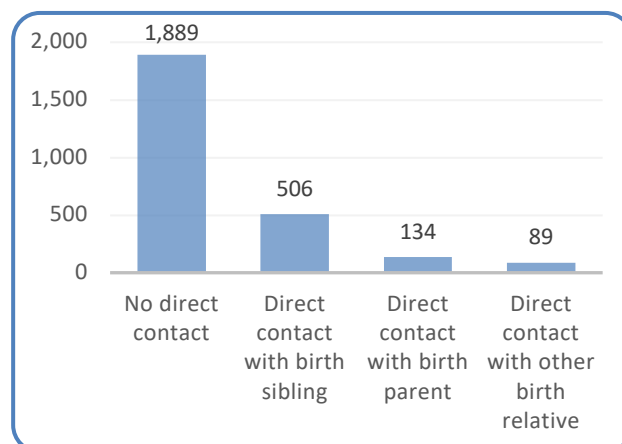
Figure 1: Proportion of adoptive families experiencing direct contact with a birth relative in 2018



There is substantial variation across UK nations in rates of direct contact with various categories of birth relative

The families having direct contact (558 or 23%) were then asked the category of relative with whom direct contact was taking place (see Figure 2). Of the relatively small proportion experiencing direct contact this was mostly with birth siblings with a much smaller proportion of contact taking place with birth parents and other relatives.

Figure 2: Category of birth relative with whom adopters reported direct contact in 2018



The most common category of birth relative with whom direct contact had taken place in 2018 was birth siblings (505 of 555 families). A much lower proportion of adopters reported direct contact in 2018 with a birth parent (134 families) and even fewer with other family members (89 families).

There was variation across nations in relation to the type of birth relative with whom families had direct contact. Across the UK, 91% of adopters with direct contact reported that this was with a birth sibling. Adopters in Scotland reported the lowest proportion of sibling contact at 78%. The pattern of contact in Northern Ireland suggests that direct contact with a birth parent is given greater priority than in the other three nations. Direct contact with a birth parent was reported by 68% of adopters in Northern Ireland, compared to 18% in England, 34% in Scotland and 21% in Wales.

Families reported high usage of formal voluntary agreements in Northern Ireland and Wales, particularly in relation to direct contact with birth parents (89% and 83% respectively). Such agreements appear to be much less common in Scotland being used by only one in five families with direct birth parent contact and around one in ten families with direct sibling contact.

A significant minority of adopters across all four nations are receptive to greater levels of direct contact with birth relatives than is currently experienced, particularly with birth siblings.

Established Adoptive Family respondents with no direct contact during 2018 were asked “Have you considered initiating direct contact, or would you consider it in the near future” and with which birth relatives. Of the 1742 valid responses, a total of 1083 (62%) indicated that they had *not* considered initiating direct contact with birth relatives. Responses to this question were similar across the four nations with a range of 63 to 66% in England, Wales and Scotland and a slightly lower rate of 56% in Northern Ireland.

Table 1: Receptiveness of adopters to considering future contact with birth relatives

	UK		Eng	N. I	Scot	Wal
	n=659		n=501	n=16	n=56	n=53
	n	%	n	n	n	n
Would consider direct contact with siblings	431	25	331	7	46	45
Would consider direct contact with birth mother/father	207	12	163	8	18	17
Would consider direct contact with wider birth family	142	8	113	4	14	10

The remaining 659 adopters or 38% of families indicated that they had considered initiating direct contact or would consider it in the near future. These respondents were asked to indicate which relative they had or would

consider making contact with (see Table 1). They were able to select multiple categories.

A total of 431 families would consider direct contact with birth siblings, 207 indicated they were open to considering direct contact with a birth parent, and 142 open to considering direct contact with wider birth family members. Taking into account that these categories are likely to overlap, the data suggest that a minimum of 431 adoptive families responding to the survey are receptive to initiating direct contact with at least 780 birth relatives with whom they do not currently have direct contact.

Implications of the study

Given that the needs of children and profile of adopters are unlikely to differ significantly within the four nations of the UK, the apparent variation between nations in rates of direct contact raises important questions about possible historical or contemporary conditions within each national context that produce such divergence. The variation may reflect differences in legal frameworks, policy priorities, approaches to permanence, tacit assumptions of professionals or other factors requiring further exploration.

While a degree of flexibility is necessary to ensure that the needs and circumstances of each child and their family are uniquely considered, it may also leave room for inequity. In the absence of national data on contact decision-making and child outcomes, critical reflection is needed in the day-to-day practice of legal and welfare professionals and other decision-makers to ensure the best interests of children are prioritised. This should be informed by the experiences of adopted children and their families, and may require a reassessment of assumptions that permeate adoption and shape contact assessments.

There is a need to develop cross-agency approaches to assessing whether, and in what way, contact might serve a particular child’s best interests. Systematic use of a common framework for planning contact such as that developed by Baynes and Neil⁸ could help practitioners determine for which children, and in which circumstances, direct contact may be beneficial and to articulate this fully in recommendations. This would ensure a more consistent approach to contact assessment that is less susceptible to the influence of individuals or the agency and court structures they practice within.

There appears to be some untapped potential for direct contact between adoptive and birth families. The receptiveness of adopters to sibling contact in particular is of interest given the recent research^{4,6,7,9} and policy focus on this issue^{10,11}. Such apparent receptiveness is at odds with the generally held belief that adopters veto direct contact⁷ and chimes with recent suggestions that direct contact could be considered in more cases¹². In order for any expansion of direct contact to be successful for families, and to safeguard children’s safety and welfare, a commitment is needed to further investment in post-adoption support services and capacity building among practitioners responsible for planning, facilitating and reviewing contact arrangements.

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