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## Post adoption support: a rapid response survey of local authorities in England

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# Post adoption support: A rapid response survey of local authorities in England

Working Paper no. 19



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Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre

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The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre is an independent research centre with funding from the Department for Education. It is a partnership between the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) and other centres at the Institute of Education, the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University and the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU) at the University of Kent.

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## **Introduction**

The Adoption and Children Act (2002) places a duty on local authorities to maintain an appropriate service for adoption support. The Adoption Support Services Regulations of 2005 require authorities to conduct assessments of adoption support needs when requested by an adoptive child, their parents, natural parents or former guardians.

At present in England there is an emphasis on adoption reform and in the *Action Plan on Adoption: tackling the delay* (Department for Education, 2012) the government sets out its plan to improve the system of adoption in England. The government propose to reduce the delays in the adoption process and make improvements to the recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters (Pennington, 2012).

Existing research suggests a child's adverse experiences in previous environments can result in a complex range of needs arising for some time after the child has been adopted (Rushton, 2003; Neil *et al.*, 2010; Pennington, 2012). Support available, post adoption, takes many forms. Support for adoptive families might come from universal providers and/or specialist services, aimed at meeting the needs of adoptive families. However, evidence suggests that adoptive parents find it difficult to access the support they require (Adoption UK, 2012). The government's proposal (Department for Education, 2012) includes a plan to improve the support offered to adopted children and their families. Increased provision of adoption support has the potential to improve outcomes for adopted children and reduce the likelihood of adoption breakdowns.

### *Aims of the study*

The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (CWRC) was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to carry out a fast response survey of local authorities in England (July-August 2012). The aims of the study were to explore how post adoption support teams and services are structured and to identify barriers and facilitators to effective provision.

## *Methodology*

In July 2012 an online survey (see appendix 1) was distributed to a stratified sample of 50 local authorities in England<sup>1</sup>. The sample was stratified by region, type and indicators from the Adoption Scorecard (Department for Education, 2012). Further information about the sample (broken down by region, authority type and Adoption Scorecard indicators) is presented in appendix 2. The survey was designed for completion by adoption, or adoption support managers and included questions that were devised to:

- determine how services are structured and what services are provided in house and what is provided by other agencies or sub-contracted to other providers;
- examine similarities and differences in authority approaches to assessing adoption support needs;
- identify causes of delay in providing services to meet identified needs;
- explore what local authorities perceive to be the main barriers to the provision of post-adoption support services;
- improve understanding of what management information system data local authorities routinely collect and collate on requests for, and provision of, adoption support services.

Twenty two local authorities responded to the online survey (44% response rate). Follow-up emails and phone calls were made to encourage local authorities to complete the survey to increase the response rate; however the short time frame for completion of the survey limited some authorities' capacity to participate. Four authorities completed the survey anonymously, that is, the respondent did not state which local authority they were from. The remaining 18 gave the name of their local authority. Of the authorities that provided the name of their authority, nine were ranked in the top 25% for indicator A3 (percentage of children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family). Three were ranked in the lowest 25% and the remaining six were in the middle 50%. For indicator A4 (percentage of adoptions from care), three local authorities were ranked

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<sup>1</sup> It was not possible to invite all local authorities to complete the survey: the study was undertaken over a short timescale (six weeks) to provide findings to inform the adoption reform agenda, limiting the amount of available time to carry out the analysis.

in the top 25%, four in the lowest 25% and the remaining 11 authorities were in the middle 50%<sup>2</sup> (see table A.3 for further details). In just over two thirds (n=15) of authorities the survey was completed by an adoption team or service manager, in about a quarter (n=5) it was completed by an adoption worker, the remaining two were completed by a practice consultant and administrator, respectively. In addition to the online survey, the research team carried out 11 in-depth telephone interviews in a sub sample of the local authorities<sup>3</sup>. All the authorities were invited to participate in a telephone interview (contact was made either by telephone or email). The research team arranged interviews with all authorities that expressed an interest in participating, except in the authorities where the potential participant was not available during the fieldwork time period. Interviews were conducted with seven adoption managers, three adoption support managers and one head of the adoption and fostering service. The interviews were used as a method to enter into a dialogue about the key issues for the local authorities that impact on the availability and provision of post adoption support. The telephone interviews focused on the availability of post adoption support services and their effectiveness, assessments of need and adoption support plans, recruitment of adoptive carers and means of publicising post adoption support (see appendix 3 for interview questions). Whereas the survey focused on determining the structure of teams and services provided, approaches to assessing adoption support needs, possible causes of delay in providing services to meet needs, barriers to the provision of post adoption support and information on data routinely collected by local authorities.

### **Summary of key findings**

- Two fifths (n=9) of the survey respondents reported that they have a separate or distinct post adoption support team that is responsible for delivering adoption support. In the remaining authorities (n=13) post adoption support is carried out by an adoption team that covers all aspects of adoption.

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<sup>2</sup> Department for Education (2012) Adoption scorecards: 2008-11. Available at: <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/adoption/a00208817/adoption-scorecards>

<sup>3</sup> The online survey was anonymised and not all respondents provided the name of their authority, therefore it was not possible to determine the level of overlap between online survey respondents and those authorities that contributed to the telephone interviews.

- Twelve survey respondents reported that they held some information on their management information system about the number of adoptive families that requested an assessment of need for post adoption support. The quality and accuracy of those data, however, were mixed and half of the survey respondents reported limitations with their data. The nature and availability of data on adoption support services, may, however, improve with the uptake of the recommendations set out in the *Action Plan on Adoption* (Department for Education, 2012).
- Survey data suggested that it was common for families to request an assessment at crisis point, with just over three quarters (n=14) of local authorities stating that families ‘very often’ or ‘often’ request an assessment at this stage.
- The findings highlight the difficulties faced by adoptive parents in requesting support and suggest that preparation of prospective carers, normalising the need for support, along with continuity of adoption staff and services may improve the extent to which adoptive parents feel able to request help.
- Services most frequently requested by families were also those most commonly identified as gaps in provision by the interviewees. In particular, gaps in provision were identified among Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and therapeutic services, as well as educational support.
- The specialist knowledge and expertise held by adoption managers and practitioners was highlighted as being central to facilitating effective assessments and service provision.
- Additional training and knowledge, across the children’s workforce, about the impact of early childhood trauma and the specific needs of adopted children were identified as having the potential to improve the identification of needs and the provision of appropriate services.
- Participants reported concerns about pressure on resources and the capacity of adoption services to fully meet the needs of adopted children and their families. Furthermore, participants raised concerns that these pressures may be exacerbated in the future by budgetary constraints and increases in the number of children being adopted.

## Structure of adoption teams

### Structure of the teams delivering post adoption support

Two fifths (n=9) of the survey respondents reported that within their authority they have a separate or distinct post adoption support team who are responsible for delivering adoption support. In the remaining authorities (n=13) the survey respondents reported that the adoption team covers all aspects of adoption, including post adoption support. Of these 13 authorities without a distinct post adoption support team, three reported that they have designated workers with a post adoption support role.

The data from the online survey highlights the variability in the size and structure of adoption services in the participating authorities<sup>4</sup>. The size of the teams and types of personnel are summarised in Table 1. The composition of the teams have also been summarised in Appendix 2 (Table A.6) in line with the categories used by Selwyn and Colleagues (2009).

**Table 1: Size and structure of teams delivering post adoption support in the local authorities participating in the online survey (n=22)**

Practitioner	Reported number of FTE workers by team type			
	Adoption Team		Adoption Support team	
	Range	Average (mean)	Range	Average (mean)
Managers	0.3 – 1.3 FTE	0.9 FTE	0.3 - 1 FTE	0.6 FTE
Social workers	2 – 6.5 FTE	3.8 FTE	1.5 - 11.5 FTE	3.6 FTE
Family support workers or equivalent	0.8 – 2.5 FTE	1.6 FTE	1.2 – 2 FTE	1.7 FTE
'Letter box' workers	0.75 – 1 FTE	0.9 FTE	0.75 – 1.5 FTE	1 FTE
Administrator	1 – 2.4 FTE	1.5 FTE	0.5 – 1.5 FTE	1 FTE
Other practitioners	1.5 FTE	1.5 FTE	0.5 – 1 FTE	0.8 FTE
Total team members per authority	3.5 – 8.5 FTE	6 FTE	2 – 11.5 FTE	5.7 FTE

As Table 1 shows, the size of the teams ranged from 2 to 11.5 full time equivalents (FTE) workers, although the size of the team is likely to be indicative of the size and

<sup>4</sup> Not all of the participating authorities were able to provide a full breakdown of the staffing and their tasks. Therefore, the number of FTEs in the adoption teams covers all aspects of adoption work rather than just adoption support.

type of authority. All but two of the authorities employed a worker to coordinate letter box schemes<sup>5</sup>. Two authorities also employed a family support worker specifically to work with birth parents, one employed a Clinical Psychologist to work specifically with adopted children and their families and another a play therapist.

Five of the interviewees from local authorities without specific post adoption support teams referred to the importance for families of continuity of staff throughout the adoption process, and the potential for *'each aspect of the role to inform the others.'* This view was echoed by one of the survey respondents, who reported that:

*'Most workers are expected to carry a mixed case load so that they gain knowledge and skills in all areas of adoption using this to inform their practice.'*

However, this viewpoint was not reiterated across all the participating authorities: one of the interviewees reported their adoption and adoption support teams had recently merged. As a result, support work was now undertaken by all workers in this newly restructured team. The respondent in this authority reported that some of the workers were reluctant to carry out post adoption support work and as a result the local authority had lost some staff members.

*'We used to have a separate post adoption team. But there has been amalgamation of the adoption team and post adoption support team because we had to undergo a restructuring to save some money. So the adoption support work is done by all the social workers in the team. That hasn't proved as successful as I'd hoped because there are a lot of people who are not interested in doing adoption support work. Whereas my theory was 'if they all did it, it would inform the other parts of the job, you know the assessment and the family finding and everything.' So some [workers] really struggled with it and we've also lost staff, who have left because they didn't like the restructure.'*

#### *The number of families receiving support*

Thirteen local authorities (survey respondents) provided data about the number of families that *requested* an assessment of need for post adoption support. This data

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<sup>5</sup> Letter Box Schemes have been established to enable birth relatives and adoptive parents to receive and exchange information on behalf of adopted children.

is detailed in Table 2. The number of families requesting an assessment ranged from two to 91. In three fifths of cases (n=8), ten or less families, in each authority, had requested an assessment.

**Table 2: Number of families that *requested* post adoption support in 2011-12**

	Number of families that <i>requested</i> post adoption support					
	10 or less	11 to 50	51 to 100	101 to 150	151-560	Total
Survey respondents	8	3	2	0	0	13

Twelve authorities provided data about the number of families *offered* support, post adoption order, in the 2011-12 financial year. These data are shown in Table 3 below. The number of families offered support ranged between one and 559. Three quarters of these authorities (n=9) offered support to 50 or less families.

**Table 3: Number of families that were *offered* post adoption support in 2011-12**

	Number of families that were <i>offered</i> post adoption support					
	10 or less	11 to 50	51 to 100	101 to 150	151-560	Total
Survey respondents	5	4	0	2	1	12

Thirteen local authorities provided data about the number of families that *received* post adoption support in the 2011-12 financial year. These data are shown in Table 4. The number of families ranged from one to 599. Just over three quarters of authorities (n=10) were providing post adoption support to 50 families or less.

**Table 4: Number of families that *received* post adoption support in 2011-12**

	Number of families that <i>received</i> post adoption support							
	10 or less	11 to 50	51 to 100	101 to 150	151 to 200	201 to 250	251-600	Total
Survey respondents	5	5	0	1	0	1	1	13

As a result of the short timeframe for the completion of the online survey, local authorities reported that it was problematic to provide complete data sets; nine of the authorities were able to provide partial data sets, but raised concerns about the accuracy of the data. Consequently it was not possible to identify the number of adoptive families in the local authorities and link this with the number *requesting* or *receiving* an assessment for post adoption support, or the number *offered* and *receiving* support.

However, in a recent study of 455 adoptive families, Pennington (2012) identified that 30% had requested an assessment. Of these only 63% went on to receive an

assessment of need. Eighty one per cent had support needs identified, however only 31% received services in full. Yet evidence suggests that many adopted children require additional support to that of 'normal parenting', owing to the abuse and/or neglect they are likely to have experienced prior to entering the care system (Pennington, 2012; Randall, 2009). Two interviewees reported that where good systems of on-going support are in place throughout the adoption process fewer assessments for post adoption support are required, because families are already in receipt of services to meet their needs. One interviewee noted:

*'I am sure that we are underreporting [the support offered to children and families] compared to other areas because we have a good system of continuity, but because we don't close the file at the point of an order and hand over to a separate adoption team, then we don't have a clear break.'*

Furthermore, five interviewees reported that where possible, post adoption support is considered to be a continuation of the support provided as a result of the adoption plan.

Survey respondents were asked to specify when families are likely to request an assessment of need for post adoption support. Data suggested that it was common for families to request an assessment at crisis point (when the adoption is at risk of breakdown), with around three quarters of local authorities (n=14) stating that families 'very often' or 'often' request an assessment at this stage. The majority of respondents reported that families only 'occasionally' or 'rarely' (n=16) request an assessment in response to advice from a partner agency and only two fifths of families (n=8) will 'very often' or 'often' request an assessment when difficulties first emerge.

**Table 5: Point at which adoptive parents are likely to request an assessment for post adoption support**

	<b>Very often</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Occasionally</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Total<sup>6</sup></b>
When difficulties first emerge	3	5	<b>8</b>	3	19
In response to advice from a partner agency	0	2	<b>11</b>	5	18
At crisis point	<b>9</b>	5	5	0	19

<sup>6</sup> Not all survey respondents answered this question.

Two interviewees suggested that families will often approach children's social care services as a last resort, when all other sources of support have been exhausted. One interviewee stated that it is uncommon for adoptive parents to request an assessment for post adoption support, instead adopters contact the adoption service stating that *'they can no longer cope'* and it is at this stage that an assessment of need might be suggested. One interviewee also suggested that parents are not always aware of where to go for support or may not approach adoption services for support unless encouraged by children's social care or a partner agency.

### *Assessment of need and adoption support plans*

#### The assessment process

The findings highlight that the process by which adoptive families' needs are assessed is varied, complex, and is dependent on a number of factors, including:

- the level of identified need;
- the extent to which the family is 'known' to the adoption service;
- the agency with whom the adopters are assessed and the child is placed.

All of the interviewees (n=11) noted that within their authorities they have a 'menu' of services including support groups and celebration events (such as Christmas events and Summer trips) and Letter box support that all adoptive families known to the local authority are invited to attend without the need for an assessment. Five interviewees reported that assessments are carried out for families that are new to the area, for those that have not had contact with the authority for some time or if the children were placed by another local authority or Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA). Assessments are also carried out for the provision of some specialist services not included on the 'menu', such as clinical psychology and financial support.

Fifteen survey respondents provided details on the timeframe between a request for an assessment for post adoption support and its conclusion. As shown in Table 6, timeframes varied from immediately (within less than five working days) to 3-6 months<sup>7</sup>. Three fifths of authorities (n=9) reported that completion occurred within

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<sup>7</sup> Analysis was undertaken to explore whether there were any differences in timeframes for completion of assessments according to types of teams and the practitioners responsible for adoption support

two weeks or less. All of the survey respondents reported that they felt the timeframe between a request for an assessment for post adoption support and its conclusion was appropriate.

**Table 6: Average timeframe between a request for, and completion of, an assessment for post adoption support**

	Timeframe							Total
	Immediately	5 days	10 days	2 weeks	6 weeks	7 weeks	3 to 6 months	
Survey respondents	2	1	2	4	1	2	3	15

In the majority of authorities (n=17) that completed the online survey, the provision of most post adoption support is agreed by the adoption team manager. Although, three of these reported that a senior manager agrees the provision of intensive support (for example a clinical psychologist or financial support). In a further three local authorities the provision of intensive support services was agreed by a resource panel.

Fifteen of the survey respondents provided data on how differences in perspective in the assessment process are resolved and all but one of these participants reported that these are resolved through a process of discussion between key personnel including the adoptive family. The survey respondents highlighted that they consider resolution of differences in perspective to be a process that starts with discussions, then involves support from a team manager and if the difference fails to be resolved a formal complaints procedure is invoked. The respondents reported that on-going discussion with the adopters was essential to ensure that differences in perspective can be resolved.

#### Reviewing post adoption support

The findings indicate that a variety of arrangements are in place to review adoption support plans. Just over one third of the survey respondents (n=7) reported that the frequency with which the families' cases are reviewed is set by the social worker according to the level of identified need. Just under one fifth of the respondents (n=4) also reported that financial support and those services with a higher cost, such as

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(e.g. post adoption support team or adoption team), however the number of survey returns were too low to be able to provide meaningful analysis.

specialist therapeutic interventions are reviewed either annually or at the end of the agreed period of provision. Four respondents reported that cases are reviewed on an on-going basis during supervision. One respondent reported that cases are reviewed via the multi-agency adoption panel in the authority.

The extent to which adoption support plans remain open and are subject to review was of concern to one adoption manager who reported in the interview: *'what's missing is...an adoption support plan that runs in a joined up way throughout a child's life'* and noted that *'most [adoptive families] go away quite happily and we never hear from them again.'*

What factors facilitate and inhibit quality assessments?

The survey respondents were asked to identify any factors that support or inhibit the completion of quality assessments. A number of key factors were identified and these are summarised in Table 7.

**Table 7: Factors that support or inhibit the completion of quality assessments for post adoption support services**

Supporting factors		Inhibiting factors	
	Number of respondents		Number of respondents
Having specialist knowledge and expertise	4	Lack capacity in the adoption and post adoption team	8
Good working relationships with other teams	2	Lack resources	4
Good adopter engagement with the process	3	Lack of specialist knowledge	2
Clear guidance on what to include in an assessment	1	Family not previously known to team	1
		Workers requiring training	1

Just over one third of the survey respondents (n=8) reported that the capacity of those completing assessments was limited due to workload pressures. One respondent reported:

*'There is little capacity in my team to meet the demand of the number of adopters seeking support.'*

The specialist knowledge and expertise of adoption team workers was identified as a key factor that facilitates the completion of quality assessments by both survey respondents and interviewees. Three interviewees reported that the quality of the

assessment may be inhibited where the family is not previously known to the team, or has moved into the area. One interviewee noted:

*'Those families can just come up out of the blue and we can have no knowledge of them and that is really difficult in order to know what services you need to provide, you know, it's not possible to plan very well.'*

A lack of specialist knowledge about the needs of adopted children (i.e. the impact that trauma, abuse and neglect is likely to have had on their physical, emotional and behavioural development) among professionals from other agencies was identified as an inhibiting factor (c.f. Pennington, 2012; Brown and Ward, 2012). One interviewee noted that that the parents of adopted children are *'judged very quickly'* whereby some professionals are not able to identify the specific needs of adopted children and therefore the most appropriate support is not provided. The issue was summarised by a survey respondent:

*'Quality assessments require social workers with specialist knowledge of the complexities of children who have experienced trauma and the impact this has had on their brains, development, behaviour and on those caring for them. This knowledge and understanding is sometimes lacking in other professionals which can inhibit a shared view of the issues/solutions.'*

Four interviewees suggested that specific training provided to other professionals working with children and families may improve the quality of both assessments and the subsequent support provided to adopted children and their families.

#### *Availability of services and their effectiveness*

##### What services are available?

Survey respondents were asked to detail the adoption support services available in their local authority area<sup>8</sup>. The services available were wide ranging and varied from low level support such as 'support groups' to higher level 'therapeutic support' (the range and type of services are presented in Table 8). The most common post

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<sup>8</sup> Please note this is the number of services available to adopted children and/or their families. Information was not collected on how many of these services were accessed to provide support to adopted children and/or their families.

adoption support service available was counselling with 38 services identified across 22 authorities. The least available service was short breaks, for adoptive families, with only 13 short break services identified across the 22 authorities. This finding reiterates those from a recent Adoption UK survey of adopters which identified that while 30% of adopters requested short breaks (respite), only 7% received the service (Pennington, 2012).

Just under two fifths of services were identified as children's services department provisions (n=121) and around one quarter were made available through an adoption support agency (n=74). Very few of the identified, available services were provided by private (n=8) or voluntary adoption agencies (n=21).

Assistance and support for contact arrangements was mostly undertaken by children's social care (n=13) followed by an adoption support agency (n=9). Contact with birth families was identified as an important service by the interviewees. As it has also been reported by Neil *et al.*, (2010) the interviewees identified that some families require substantial preparation for contact, in addition to the support to arrange contacts:

*'Most of our contacts we try to not just facilitate the contact but also prepare people for the contact, particularly for difficult situations, before the contact happens [...] We have quite a bit of success.'*

**Table 8: Reported types of services available in the 22 local authorities, by category of provider**

	Voluntary adoption agency	Adoption support agency	Children's social care	Education	Health	Private provider	Other
Financial support	0	7	<b>13</b>	2	2	0	0
Educational support services	0	3	8	<b>15</b>	0	0	0
Pastoral support within an educational setting	0	1	6	<b>14</b>	1	1	1
Parenting classes	3	6	<b>12</b>	2	3	1	0
Therapeutic parenting training	1	7	<b>10</b>	0	4	2	1
CAMHS	0	2	7	1	<b>13</b>	0	0
Other counselling/mental health service	5	7	6	2	<b>12</b>	3	3
General advice and information	2	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	2	2	0	1
Services to enable discussion related to adoption, e.g. support groups	4	<b>11</b>	10	0	0	0	2
Assistance and support for contact arrangements	4	9	<b>13</b>	0	0	0	0
Short breaks (i.e. respite care)	0	1	<b>12</b>	0	0	0	0
Services to assist in case of disruption	2	8	<b>12</b>	2	2	1	0

Financial support was mainly provided by children's social care services (13). The interviewees reported that financial support tended to be means tested and was provided to assist families in a variety of ways, for example funding to enable children to participate in activities, funding for nursery placements, or financial support to enable parents to take time off work.

One third of the interviewees (n=4) reported that advice and general support was commonly sought by families. Two of the interviewees highlighted the importance of adoptive parents feeling able to ask what they feared were 'silly' or 'simple' questions. Four of the interviewees also noted that peer support, through the provision of

groups and events for adoptive families was an important source of support. One interviewee noted:

*‘What we have found is that they [the parents] get so worn out with trying to support these children and their support networks disappear, and the adult, sort of counselling support, doesn’t seem to be there [...] You can say to the adults ‘you need to get some support’ but by the time they get to that point it’s too late, they’re exhausted.’*

#### Partnerships with other agencies to deliver post adoption support

The survey respondents provided information on the local authorities’ partnership and commissioning arrangements with Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs).

Voluntary Adoption Agencies may provide adoption support services to families in their locality. Table 9 shows the types of partnership arrangements, and use of VAAs in the participating authorities.

**Table 9: Partnership arrangements with Voluntary Adoption Agencies**

	<b>Total</b>
<b>Commission VAAs to deliver services</b>	<b>11</b>
Commission VAAs to deliver services + Spot Purchasing	1
None	4
Part of a regional consortium commissioning VAAs to deliver service + Commission VAAs to deliver services	3
Part of a regional consortium commissioning VAAs to deliver services	2
Spot Purchase	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>

Over three quarters of the local authorities (n=17) reported that they had formal arrangements with a VAA to deliver adoption support and as Table 9 shows, these arrangements varied. The majority (n=12) of authorities with formal arrangements commissioned VAAs directly to deliver adoption support, and the remaining five were part of a regional consortium which commissioned VAAs regionally.

In addition to partnership arrangements with VAAs a number of the interviewees reported that they have arrangements with other statutory agencies. Three interviewees reported that Service Level Agreements (SLAs) were in place with CAMHS. Other SLAs identified by interviewees included a virtual head to assist

parents and social care staff find suitable school places for adopted children and a range of therapeutic support services for either birth parents and/or adopted children and adoptive parents.

### Strengths and limitations of partnership arrangements

Partnership working with other departments within children's social care, other agencies and the voluntary sector were identified as central to the effective provision of post adoption support by both interviewees and survey respondents. However, in a recent study carried out by Adoption UK over half of the participating adopters (259, 57%) reported that the joint working between agencies did not always work well (Pennington, 2012).

Eleven of the survey respondents identified a number of strengths and limitations to working with VAAs and other partner agencies. The strengths of working in partnership with other agencies included:

- independence that VAAs offer to families (n=6);
- specialist knowledge and skills (n=4);
- innovations in models of service delivery (n=4);
- value for money (n=2).

All of the interviewees reported that they were part of a regional consortium, which consisted of other local authorities and VAAs. One survey respondent reported that working as part of a consortium enabled them to:

*'pool creativity and expertise and develop new initiative in adoption support [...] and generally reach people that would not be reached were it the local authority working alone.'*

However, five of the survey respondents raised concerns about the availability of resources provided by other agencies to support adopted children and their families. Five of those respondents who identified limitations of working with VAAs reported that commissioning arrangements can limit the capacity of the local authority to evaluate and monitor service delivery and trends in adoption across the locality.

### Commonly requested services

The post adoption support services available in the participating authorities were outlined in Table 8. Survey respondents were also asked to identify which three of these services were most frequently requested by adoptive families. Twenty one respondents provided this information. The most commonly requested services were CAMHS (n=12), general advice and information (n=12), educational support services (n=7) and assistance and support for contact arrangements (n=7). Further details are provided in Table 10.

**Table 10: Services most frequently requested by adoptive families**

<b>Services</b>	<b>Number of survey respondents identifying that this service was one of the three most commonly requested</b>
CAMHS	12
General advice and information	12
Educational support services	7
Assistance and support for contact arrangements	7
Services to enable discussion related to adoption, e.g. support groups	4
Financial support	4
Services to assist in case of disruption	3
Other counselling/mental health services	3
Parenting classes	2
Other	2
Pastoral support within an educational setting	1
Therapeutic parenting training	1
Short breaks (e.g. respite care)	1

### *Gaps in service provision?*

The findings highlight that the services that were most frequently requested by families were also identified by the interviewees as being the services where there were the biggest gaps in service provision: CAMHS and therapeutic services, and educational support.

### CAMHS and therapeutic services

This study and previous research (Rushton, 2003; Pennington, 2012) have identified gaps in the availability of CAMHS and therapeutic services for adopted children and their families. Five of the interviewees reported an increase in the workload of

CAMHS services within the last 12 months and consequently highlighted that the availability of the service to adoptive families had been reduced:

*'[CAMHS are] increasingly limiting their work to clearly identifiable mental health issues and they are not dealing with children with attachment difficulties and they are turning children away who have attachment difficulties.'*

Just under one third of the survey respondents (n=7) also cited workload issues and a lack of capacity within CAMHS as a key source of delay in families receiving support.

All of the interviewees made reference to the importance of understanding attachment theory and addressing any attachment difficulties. Four of the interviewees raised concerns that the CAMHS in their area were not offering specialists to address any attachment difficulties. Furthermore, two of the interviewees raised concerns about a lack of knowledge within the service of the specific difficulties associated with adoption.

### Education

Research has indicated that some adopted children achieve lower educational outcomes than their peers (Rushton, 2003; Pennington, 2012). Half of the interviewees in this study reported that improvements were needed in the availability of education support for adopted children. The interviewees specifically cited a need for education colleagues to help adopters obtain a statement of special educational needs, or to provide the appropriate support within schools to address emotional or behavioural difficulties. Furthermore, three of the interviewees noted that improvements in schools are needed to understand the needs of adopted children, and how best to address these needs within an education setting.

The interviewees also highlighted the need for additional support during periods of transition, such as moving between primary and secondary schooling. However, four of the interviewees also acknowledged that a shortfall in the support offered within schools was often as a result of limited resources and a lack of capacity to provide additional support or services.

It was evident that some of the local authorities were carrying out work to address gaps in provision. Three interviewees revealed that they carried out specific work in schools highlighting the needs of adopted children and their families. This work encompassed the circulation of information packs, undertaking workshops, creating links between school and other agencies (e.g. CAMHS) and working with staff to address the needs of individual children. Three interviewees also reported that attempts had been made through SLAs to improve the CAMHS provision available in their authority, and one interviewee reported that they were developing their own therapeutic provision:

*'What we'd like to do is we'd like to have a seamless model where we've also got a family therapist and a trauma therapist. We don't have those two things. What our intention is, is to create a multi-disciplinary team so that we can have those therapists working on a model that is geared towards adoption rather than generic issues.'*

*What facilitates effective post adoption support?*

Overall, while gaps in services were identified, the interviewees were positive about some aspects of the support offered to adoptive families, and were of the view that they were able to meet the needs of adopted children and families. The interviewees cited the preparation of prospective adopters, 'normalising' the need for post adoption support and a continuity of service throughout the adoption process as facilitators of effective post adoption support.

Most of the interviewees (n=10) reported that their authority included information about post adoption support services in their advertising material and that this information helped to prepare prospective adopters.

Pennington (2012) found that 15% of adoptive parents were concerned that they would be perceived as failures by agencies when asking for support. To counteract these concerns, just over a third of the interviewees (n=4) reported that normalising the need for support was essential for facilitating the provision of effective support services. One interviewee reported:

*'Our bottom line [with prospective adopters] is that adoption will have its challenges and we need to be ready to help people, [...] We don't see*

*asking for help as a sign of weakness, but a sign of a good adopter who wants to do the best for their child, so we promote that model.'*

Three interviewees also reported that continuity of workers throughout the adoption process made it easier for families to ask for help because of the pre-existing relationship:

*'People will pick up the phone and have a chat, or at the parties and picnics will have a chat and they are comfortable to do this because they have known us a very long time.'*

The interviewee further argued that continuity was facilitated through the structure of the team:

*'I do think not having that separation at the point of an order and having a separate post adoption team is important. Although it is pressure on the individual workers because they are juggling recruitment, assessment, the rest, the family finding and the support: each bit of that work informs another bit of that work and it does mean that adopters aren't passed to someone completely strange at a time when they are very vulnerable. So if we had a separate post adoption team or work at the point of the order I think we would lose a lot.'*

*What inhibits effective post adoption support?*

### Resources

All of the interviewees reported that insufficient resources inhibit the provision of post adoption support (see below). Limited resources within CAMHS and education were identified as a source of delay in assessments of needs and accessing services. The interviewees also reported that limited capacity within the adoption teams had delayed the implementation of new support services:

*'There is such a lot you can do [to support children and families] with the right resources, but, you know, we are a local authority, things are very very tight.'*

Half of the interviewees reported that the number of children being placed for adoption had increased in their local authorities in the last 12 months and that the

increase is placing further strain on limited resources. In addition to the number of children placed for adoption, half of the interviewees also raised concerns about the capacity of all services working with adopted children to meet the complex needs, specific to this population. These interviewees highlighted a lack of knowledge among some professionals working with adopted children about the specific impact of early childhood trauma on their development (c.f. Neil *et al.*, 2010; Pennington, 2012). These interviewees noted that improved training may reduce the time taken to identify difficulties and put the appropriate services in place. One of the survey respondents summarised the issues:

*'[The] demands of increasing numbers is stretching us all. [...] Concerns particularly for the future as the children we are placing nowadays are ever more complex and will need on-going support from all services at a time of reorganisations and budget cuts across all services including health and social care.'*

#### The status of adopted children

Three of the interviewees noted that while adopted children have a similar complexity of needs as looked after children, their status as adopted children means that they do not have access to some of the additional support mechanisms as their looked after peers, such as designated teachers for looked after children:

*'Children who are looked after do get additional resources and adopted children, don't. [...] I think there needs to be better clarity about the fact that these children are likely to need an enhanced service and if they don't, then great, but actually CAMHS services [for example] should be providing a service for these children, who have had these very adverse backgrounds.'*

These participants also reported that they perceived that adopted children were less of a priority than looked after children. They highlighted concerns that there was a lack of acknowledgement about the impact of prior trauma, abuse or neglect experienced by adopted children.

### *Management information systems (MIS)*

The amount and availability of data held about adoptive families varied between the participating local authorities. Twelve survey respondents reported that data was held on their management information system (MIS) about the number of adoptive families that had requested an assessment of need for post adoption support; eight authorities reported that this data was held on a local electronic recording system<sup>9, 10</sup>. Further details of the data held and the type of system used are outlined in Table 11. Data from the surveys indicate that not all local authorities routinely collect and electronically record information about adoptive families. Data about the type of support provided, the duration of support and characteristics of adoptive families receiving support was particularly limited.

**Table 11: Number of local authorities that routinely record electronic data about adoptive families<sup>11</sup>**

	Yes on the management information system	Yes on a local electronic recording system	No - data not recorded
Number of adoptive families that request an assessment of need for post adoption support	12	8	2
Number of adoptive families that are offered additional support, post adoption order	10	9	3
Number of adoptive families that receive post adoption support	11	8	2
Number of adoptive families receiving each type of specific support	3	4	11
The length of time adoptive families access post adoption support	8	3	8
Characteristics of adoptive children receiving post adoption support	4	3	11

### *Recruitment of adoptive carers*

The interviews also included a section to explore the recruitment of adopters. The interviewees identified a range of methods to recruit prospective carers including

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<sup>9</sup> Some authorities use their own local electronic recording systems, for example Microsoft Excel databases.

<sup>10</sup> Some survey respondents reported that data was stored in both MIS and local electronic recording systems.

<sup>11</sup> Five local authorities did not answer all the questions about routinely collected data about adoptive families.

advertises in local newspapers, noticeboards in community centres and websites, drop in sessions and information evenings at adoption services. Nine interviewees reported that word of mouth is the primary way in which prospective adopters hear about the adoption service.

The interviewees noted that they have little difficulty in recruiting prospective adopters; however, they did have difficulty matching some of the carers with children. Three interviewees reported that they had or were about to attempt to recruit carers for harder to place children, for example, older children, sibling groups, children from ethnic minority backgrounds and those with disabilities.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

This study has identified a number of factors which facilitate effective post adoption support. The findings suggest that a range of services are provided to adopted children and families, and the local authorities participating in the study have developed a range of ways to ensure that adopted children and their families access support.

It is however, apparent that a lack of resources within adoption teams, wider children's services departments and other agencies working with adopted children and their families, is of considerable concern to the adoption managers and practitioners interviewed for this study:

*'I think it is all very well pushing for timescales to be improved and more adopters to come forward, but you know, if the support isn't there for the adopters in the long term, then you are not going to achieve the positive outcomes. The danger is, by moving things quicker we might end up with more families who need support. And it's not been on the agenda, it's not high profile, adoption support. And so it's hard as a local authority to allocate resources to adoption support when you are trying to meet the targets, and trying to focus social workers to place more children for adoption and assess more adopters, but there definitely needs to be more resources available.'*

CAMHS and other therapeutic services, and educational support services are two areas which have been identified in this study as requiring additional resources to

ensure that there are sufficient services available to meet the needs of adoptive children and their families and to ensure that they do not experience a long wait between referral and receipt of a service.

Additional training about the impact of early childhood trauma and the specific needs of adopted children across the children's workforce, may improve the identification of needs and the provision of appropriate services to meet those needs.

Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of accurate management information system for the monitoring and planning of services for vulnerable children and their families (Gatehouse, Ward and Holmes, 2008; McDermid 2008; Holmes and McDermid, 2012). This study has highlighted limitations in the data available about families requesting, being offered or receiving post adoption support.

A very small number of survey respondents (n=2) were optimistic that improvements to both the quality of post adoption support services and the information about those services would be improved through the implementation of targets as proposed in the *Action Plan on Adoption* (Department for Education, 2012).

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## Appendices

### **Appendix 1: Online survey<sup>12</sup>**

The Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University has been commissioned by the Department for Education to undertake a survey to explore the strengths and limitations of existing post adoption support and what action could be taken to improve provision to meet the needs of children and families. It provides an important opportunity to inform developments in adoption policy and practice.

The survey will collect data to:

- Determine how services are structured and what services are provided in house, what is provided by other agencies or subcontracted to other providers;
- Examine similarities and differences in local authority approaches to assessing adoption support needs;
- Identify causes of delay in providing services to meet identified needs;
- Explore what local authorities perceive to be the main barriers to the provision of post adoption support services;
- Improve understanding of what management information system data local authorities routinely collect and collate on requests for, and provision of, adoption support services.

This survey is designed for completion by adoption managers; however, you may wish to seek contributions from other colleagues to inform your response. You may feel that there are sections of the survey that you are unable to complete. If this is the case please leave these sections blank; we would value all the information you are in a position to supply.

Completion of this survey is voluntary but we would be really grateful for your input. We appreciate how busy you are and have sought to keep the survey as short and simple as possible. It should take approximately 45 minutes to one hour to complete (although this will vary depending upon the number of staff you consult with and what data are available).

We would be extremely grateful if you could submit the online survey no later than 27th July 2012. We apologise for the short timescale, this is because the findings are intended to contribute to the adoption reform agenda.

This online survey is confidential – only the research team at CCFR will see this completed survey and the information we use from it will be anonymised. You may withdraw your survey data from the study at any time up until publication of the findings by contacting Clare Lushey (see below for contact details).

All data will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

If you have any queries please contact xxx

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<sup>12</sup> This appendix lists the full set of survey questions in Word format. The survey was distributed as an online research tool using Survey Monkey, 'Skip Logic' was used to adapt subsequent questions based on the responses to previous questions.

Please record your job title:

2. How is the adoption service structured in your authority?
3. Which team has responsibility for post adoption support (for example, separate post adoption support team, adoption and special guardianship support)?
4. Please outline the number of staff responsible for supporting the delivery of post adoption support, along with their job titles, whether they are full or part time and respective roles and responsibilities (for example, two full time adoption social workers undertaking assessments of needs and developing support plans; one 0.5 administrator).
5. What role, if any, do voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies provide to support the delivery of post adoption support?
6. Are there any particular strengths or limitations with partnership working arrangements?
7. Do you routinely collect the following data? Please tick all that apply:

	Yes, on the local authority management information system	Yes, on another local electronic recording system	No
The number of adoptive families that request an assessment of need for post adoption support, post adoption order.			
The number of adoptive families that are offered additional support, post adoption order.			
The number of adoptive families that subsequently receive post adoption support.			
The number of adoptive families receiving each specific type of post adoption support.			
The length of time adoptive families' access post adoption support.			
The characteristics of the adoptive children receiving post adoption support (for example, age, ethnicity, sibling group and also needs such as emotional or behavioural difficulties or developmental delay).			

8. For data that are collected on either local authority management information systems, or any other local electronic recording system, please provide local authority data for the last financial year where available (1st April 2011 – 31st March 2012) on the following:
- The number of adoptive families in your area.
  - The number of adoptive families that *request* an assessment of need for post adoption support, post adoption order.
  - The number of adoptive families that are *offered* additional support, post adoption order.
  - The number of adoptive families that subsequently *receive* post adoption support.
  - The number of adoptive families receiving each specific type of post adoption support.
  - The length of time adoptive families' access post adoption support.
  - The characteristics of the adoptive children receiving post adoption support (for example, age, ethnicity, sibling group and also needs such as emotional or behavioural difficulties or developmental delay).
9. Please use the space below to provide further information about the availability and quality of data relating to the assessment, provision and uptake of post adoption support.
10. In your experience when do adoptive parents tend to request an assessment for post adoption support?

	Very often	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
When difficulties first emerge					
In response to advice from a partner agency					
At crisis point					

11. On average, what is the timeframe between a request for assessment for post adoption support and its conclusion?
12. Do you consider this to be an appropriate timeframe?
- Yes
  - No
13. What are the main causes of delay in completing the assessment?
14. What time frame, for the completion of the assessment, would you consider to be appropriate?
15. Are there any factors that support or inhibit the completion of quality assessments for post adoption support services?
16. Who decides whether adopters should be offered post adoption support and is the decision determined by the type of service required (for example, signed off by a manager, consensus reached via panel)?

17. What mechanisms are in place to review the post adoption support plan?
18. How are any differences in perspective concerning the support plan reconciled?
19. Which of the following post adoption support services are available in your local authority area. For those that are available, please outline who provides these services. Tick all that apply.

	Voluntary Adoption Agency	Adoption Support Agency	Children's Social Care	Education	Health	Private provider	Other
Educational support services							
Pastoral support within educational setting Parenting classes							
Therapeutic parenting training							
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)							
Other counselling/mental health services							
General advice and information							
Services to enable discussion related to adoption, e.g. support groups							
Assistance and support for contact arrangements							
Short breaks (i.e. respite care)							
Services to assist in case of disruption							

Other (please specify)

20. Of the post adoption services that are available in your area, which three are most frequently requested? Tick three services.

Financial support

Educational support services

Pastoral support within educational setting

Parenting classes

Therapeutic parenting training

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

Other counselling/mental health services

General advice and information

Services to enable discussion related to adoption, e.g. support groups

Assistance and support for contact arrangements

Short breaks (i.e. respite care)

Services to assist in case of disruption

Other (please specify)

21. What do you perceive to be the strengths of existing post adoption support services in your area?

22. How common is it for adoptive families to experience delays in receiving post adoption support services?

- Very often
- Often
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

23. What are the main causes (if applicable) of delay? (for example, waiting list to access a specific service).

24. What difficulties do you face in providing or securing quality adoption support services that meet the level of need in your area?

25. What changes would be necessary to overcome these difficulties?

It would be valuable for the research team to be able to determine how representative the survey sample is and to be able to cross reference the data provided with information from interviews that are being undertaken with a number of adoption managers. If you are happy to do so, please record in which local authority you work. Please note: no individuals or local authorities will be identified in the final report or the findings that are shared with the Department for Education.

26. Local authority

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

## Appendix 2: Background information about the sample

**Table A.1: Survey returns by local authority type**

<b>Local authority type</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
London Borough	4
Metropolitan	1
Unitary	8
County	5
Not specified	4
Total	22

**Table A.2: Survey returns by geographical location**

<b>Geographical location</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
North East	2
North West	1
West Midlands	1
East Midlands	1
Yorkshire and Humberside	0
East of England	3
Inner London	2
Outer London	2
South East	3
South West	3
Not specified	4
Total	22

**Table A.3: Survey returns by Adoption Scorecard indicators (A3 and A4) (n=18)**

This table shows how the survey respondents (for those that recorded the name of their authority) performed against Adoption Scorecard indicators A3 and A4; percentage of children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, and percentage of adoptions from care.

Indicator A3 <sup>2</sup>	Indicator A4 <sup>3</sup>		
	High <sup>4</sup> % of children adopted	Middle <sup>5</sup> % of children adopted	Low <sup>6</sup> % of children adopted
High <sup>4</sup> % of children waiting less than 21 months	1	7	2
Middle <sup>5</sup> % of children waiting less than 21 months	1	2	2
Low <sup>6</sup> % of children waiting less than 21 months	0	2	1

<sup>1</sup> Only 18 of the 22 survey respondents recorded the local authority name.

<sup>2</sup> Percentage of children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

<sup>3</sup> Adoptions from care (% leaving care who are adopted).

<sup>4</sup> Where high is classified as being within the top 25% of authorities.

<sup>5</sup> Where middle is classified as being within the middle 50% of authorities.

<sup>6</sup> Where low is classified as being within the bottom 25% of authorities.

**Table A.4: Interview participants by local authority type**

Local authority type	Frequency
London Borough	1
Metropolitan	1
Unitary	4
County	3
Not specified	0
Total	9

**Table A.5: Interview participants by geographical location**

Geographical location	Frequency
North East	0
North West	0
West Midlands	1
East Midlands	1
Yorkshire and Humberside	1
East of England	2
Inner London	1
Outer London	0
South East	1
South West	2
Not specified	0
Total	9

**Table A.6: Size and structure of teams delivering post adoption – staff types combined in line with Selwyn et al (2009)**

Practitioner	Reported number of FTE workers by team type			
	Adoption Team		Adoption Support team	
	Range	Average (mean)	Range	Average (mean)
Managers and adoption social workers	0.3 – 6.5 FTE	3.9 FTE	0.3 - 11.5 FTE	3.8 FTE
Other practitioners	0.75 – 2.5 FTE	1.5 FTE	0.75 – 2 FTE	1.7 FTE
Administrators	1 – 2.4 FTE	1.5 FTE	0.5 – 1.5 FTE	1 FTE
Total team members per authority	3.5 – 8.5 FTE	6 FTE	2 – 11.5 FTE	5.7 FTE

## **Appendix 3: Interview guide**

*Comments and notes in brackets are guidance notes or examples for the interviewer.*

**Purpose:** to explore strengths and limitations of existing adoption support and what actions could be taken to improve provision to meet the needs of children and their families.

### **Background**

How is the adoption service structured in your local authority? (size of adoption and adoption support teams, responsibilities and *internal* working relationships between teams).

What links do you have with VAAs, education, health, and/or other partner agencies to help provide post-adoption support?

Are there any particular strengths or limitation with these arrangements? (Discuss)

### **Recruitment of adoptive carers and publicising adoption support**

How do you go about recruiting prospective adoptive carers in your area?

In the past 2 years have you targeted specific groups in your recruitment strategies (and if so, which and why)? (For example, targeted efforts to increase the supply of prospective adoptive carers for children who are harder to place (older children, sibling groups, BME children)).

How effective have these recent recruitment strategies been in increasing the supply of prospective carers to meet the needs of looked after children awaiting adoption in your area? (Explore success or challenges in securing sufficient carers for 'hard to place' children).

Do recruitment campaigns and/or information packs for prospective adoptive carers include information on the adoption support services available in the area?

Do you have any regional or sub-regional recruitment protocols?

**Availability of services and their effectiveness** (e.g. financial support, educational support services, pastoral support, parenting classes, therapeutic parenting training, CAMHS, counselling, support groups, short breaks (respite)).

What services are available in your area?

Have there been any changes in the availability of services and/or changes in thresholds for service provision over the last 12 months? (Please specify).

Have any of the services available been formally evaluated and if so, what did the evaluation(s) reveal?

Based on your experience how effective do you perceive services to be?

Which seem to you to be the most and least effective in meeting the needs of adopted children and their families?

Have you identified any specific gaps in service provision? What implications does this have (both on decisions to adopt and post- Adoption Order)?

### **Assessments of need and adoption support plans**

#### *Pre-placement and post placement but pre-Order*

What services are most commonly requested by adopters (pre- placement)?

What needs are most commonly identified during the assessment process and to what extent do the local authority (in partnership with other agencies) feel able to provide services to meet these?

How long are services provided for and what mechanisms are in place to review arrangements and monitor progress?

How are differences in perspective concerning Adoption Support Plans reconciled?

How common is it for prospective adoptive carers to request additional support post-placement and how often are support plans amended or put in place at this stage in the process?

#### *Post adoption order*

Approx. how many assessments of need are undertaken post Adoption Order each year?

Have you identified any patterns or trends concerning *when* and *why* families seek post adoption support? (e.g. emotional and behavioural difficulties emerging in adolescence; at 'crisis point' when placements are at risk of breakdown).

Do families tend to request services from children's social care services when the need first arises and/or because other avenues of support have been exhausted? (e.g. difficulty securing CAMHS provision; reduction in informal support provided by extended family).

What services do families most commonly request?

What proportion of cases result in the provision of post adoption support services?

## **Concluding questions**

Based on your experiences what actions do you think need to be taken nationally to improve the provision of adoption support services to meet the needs of children and their families?

What actions could be taken locally without national change?

Do you have any further comments or reflections on adoption support services that you feel are important to inform policy development in this area?