

CVAA Practice Workshop: Assessing Adopters, Nov/Dec 2018

Please find below a summary of discussions at CVAA’s Practice Workshop held in Birmingham on Thursday 22nd November and in Edinburgh on Thursday 6th December 2018. We hope this helps you to reflect on the day, share the learning and have similar discussions within your own teams.

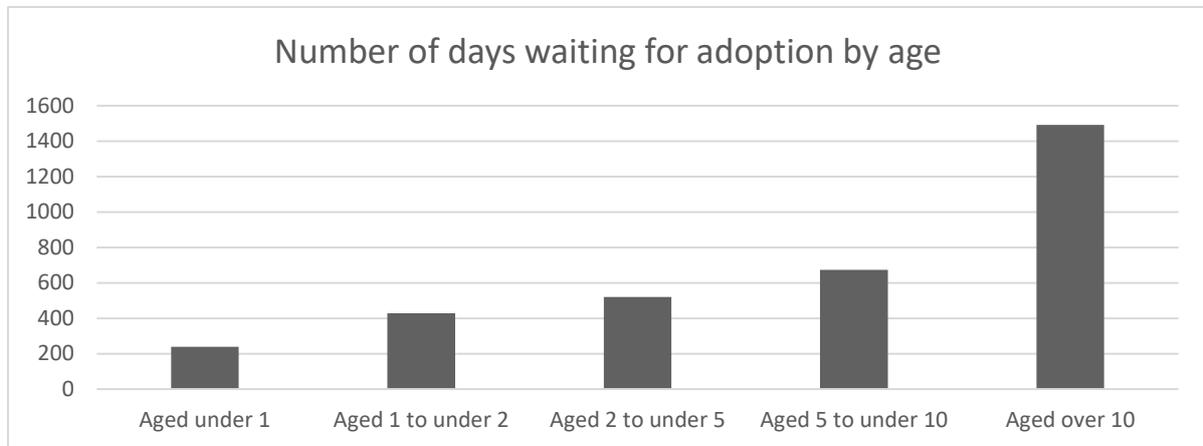
CVAA are grateful to Adoption Focus and St Andrew’s Children’s Society for hosting these workshops, and to Leigh Smith, Adoption Focus, for speaking to delegates about the Attachment Style Interview, Jo-Ann Swanston King, After Adoption, for discussing personal support networks, and Stephen Small, St Andrew’s Children’s Society, for addressing assessment of single adopters.

If you are a CVAA member please take a look at the members area of our website which holds a wealth of resources to support your CPD needs, including video recordings and presentation slides from these workshops. Register for our website by [clicking here](#).

What the latest data tells us

Who are the children who need families and which children wait the longest?

- As of March 2018 in England there were 2,571 children waiting with a placement order but not yet placed. These children had already been waiting on average 505.91 days. 1,340 were in sibling groups (318 of those in groups of more than two) and 1,113 were single children. 116 had a disability and 483 were from a BME background.



- As of March 2018 in England there were 1,998 adopter families approved and waiting to be matched. 1,599 were approved by LAs and 399 were approved by VAAs. Of all adopters 7% were single adopters and 11% were BME adopters. In comparison, 9% of VAA adopters were single and 16% were BME adopters.
- Whilst there may be under-reporting in Scotland, core ALB data does not include the Celtic nations, information gathered indicates that as of March 2018 in the UK’s Celtic nations there were 33 adopter families approved by VAAs and waiting to be matched. Of these, 9% were single adopters and 18% were BME adopters.

The research base

Whilst the research and writing cited in these workshops does not focus solely on assessment of adopters, it all makes significant reference to issues pertinent to this aspect of services. Some highlights include:

Neil, Beth et al. "The joys and challenges of adoptive family life: a survey of adoptive parents in the Yorkshire and Humberside region." *Centre for Research on Families and Children, UEA* (2018). <https://www.uea.ac.uk/documents/3437903/0/Yh+report+may+2018/d4acf363-9a5d-ee95-c52e-ae65878d091b>

- A high percentage of adopters would have had their own baby if this had been possible: 40% are unable to have birth children and chose adoption as a first option and 29% are childless but explored other options as well.
- 72% of adopters remained clear regarding the type of child they could parent. 46% cited increased understanding and knowledge as significant in changing their preferences.
- 29% of adopters were attracted to a specific child and 22% adapted their preferences to increase their chance of adopting. However, Farmer and Dance (2015) showed that placements are at higher risk where adopters' preferences have been pushed.
- Generally adopters found adoption both more rewarding and more challenging than expected.
- 77% of adopters felt generally well prepared, but less well prepared for their specific child than they would have liked. Absence of information about their child was a key issue.

Featherstone B, Gupta A, Mills, S. "The role of the social worker in adoption – ethics and human rights: An enquiry." *BASW* (2018). https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_55505-10_1.pdf

- Page 18: 'The pressure on services and targets around timely completion of adoption assessments cause difficulties. The complex emotions involved in adoption require detailed assessments of adoptive parents. There is concern that issues for adoptive parents, such as infertility and feelings of loss, and not assessed rigorously enough.'
- Page 25: 'My social worker knew me and my support network and could make a well informed judgement when commenting on a potential match'.

Selwyn J, Wijedsa D, Meakings S. "Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, interventions and adoption disruption." *School for Policy Studies, Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, University of Bristol*, (2014), 115 – 118.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/301889/Final_Report_-_3rd_April_2014v2.pdf

- Over 75% of adopters had come to adoption as a result of infertility, a small number for altruistic reasons and a small number had been foster carers for the child they adopted.
- Adopters displayed mixed views regarding the assessment and preparation process. Many admitted they had downplayed difficulties or not been entirely honest to increase their chances of success. These difficulties included a marriage under strain or not having come to terms with previous miscarriages.
- Where there were birth children in the family there was little evidence of a lot of preparation work having been done with them.

Mumsnet can be a useful source for understanding the feelings of those who have experienced or are approaching an adoption assessment. <https://www.mumsnet.com/>

- *“You're basically marketing yourself to people you don't know and will never meet.*
- *“The social worker will want to know everything about you; partner, family, social life, friends. You will start with your life story and family tree. It sounds daunting but, I found that it just flowed nicely. All they ask is that you are open and honest throughout.”*

Group discussion

Group discussions were divided into issues affecting the social workers who are carrying out assessments, and difficulties adopters may bring to the process. The various issues and suggested tools and methods useful for overcoming them listed below, were all shared and identified by those who took part in CVAA's workshops.

Supporting social workers

- **Evidencing gut feelings:** workers reported that often it is a gut feeling, rather than anything more tangible that concerns them about progressing an adopters' assessment. Below are some suggested methods for airing and dealing with this type of concern.
 - *A culture of openness is key – social workers should feel confident to share concerns even if they can't evidence them. They may well be picking up on something crucial that needs to be explored further.*
 - *Share the burden - hold a joint visit with another worker to help you identify if there is something to be concerned about, or if simply your personalities clash with the prospective adopter. You could also share the case and your feelings with others in the setting of a team meeting.*
 - *Make time for self-reflection after a visit. Be prepared to admit you may be wrong.*
 - *Ask the question, will my gut instinct affect their suitability to adopt? Or is it simply something to be managed?*
 - *Refer to research – is what is being displayed explored in any research or writing?*
 - *Carry out in depth interviews with referees to help identify if nervousness could be affecting the characteristics displayed by the prospective adopter. It is important to remember that we do ask a lot of adopters, many of whom may not be at all used to speaking with professionals about extremely personal things. The research shows that some adopters find the assessment process 'degrading'. Would they feel this way if they fully understood why it needs to be so in depth? Explaining this further for some applicants could aid our relationships with them.*
- **Managing applicants' own trauma and loss:** attendees recognised that they carry out a difficult job and are often required to help adopters through their own trauma. This is a lot to carry. It is important to remain mindful of the welfare of workers as well as adopters: applicants' trauma can reawaken social workers' own experiences.
 - *Adoption Focus staff have access to a clinical psychologist four times per year. Staff typically spend half the session discussing their cases and half the session discussing their own wellbeing.*
 - *Faith in Families have a psychotherapist attend agency meetings monthly to discuss cases. This could also cover the effect of those cases on staff.*
 - *Supervision is key, though you may not be comfortable discussing the effect cases have on yourself with a formal manager. It is important if this is the case to identify where you can go to discuss this.*
- **The impact of previous disruptions for social workers:** this can understandably cause workers to feel disheartened and lose confidence.

- Remember that you have learnt from this experience, and that you are required to take risks in order to place children.
- Unpick your disruption. If you are able to identify any possible causes, put tools in place to help you address these issues in future assessments. This will help you feel more confident to take forward any future similar cases.
- Take an agency wide approach and make time as a team to consider whether there have been any common denominators over the agency's disruptions.
- Peer support is invaluable throughout our work – knowing a colleague did not pick up on an issue either will comfort workers who are inclined to place blame on themselves.
- Disruption meetings can help bring closure for workers and are a crucial learning tool for staff and panels.
- Remember, sometimes there is nothing you could have done differently, sometimes the ingredients simply don't work.
- Managing panel
 - Use of the PAR or Form F – ARC NE have created a bespoke form which follows the government guidelines but in reality is closer to a Form F and provides a narrative which panels find useful. Contact [Ayesha Foster, ARC NE](#), if you would be interested to learn more about this.
- Relationships with LAs / RAAs
 - Remember, something that is relationship based is always going to be variable and at times challenging. The better assessments we do, the more we strengthen these relationships.

Supporting the assessment process: tools and techniques

- Adopters who are returning to adopt for a second time
 - Agencies present varied as to whether they chose to keep the same worker or purposely choose a different worker. If using the same worker second opinion visits are useful.
- Prospective adopters who are adopted themselves
 - They will likely have a primal wound. Whilst this is not their fault it is a risk factor. It is most important to understand to what extent they are at peace with their birth family. Try not to feel apologetic about obtaining the information you need. Personal experience of adoption can be a great 'plus', but its impact needs to be understood.
- Adopters who have existing birth or adopted children
 - Adoption Matters have a social work assistant who goes with social workers on visits specifically to spend time with existing children. This is popular with the children and young people involved, and allows social workers to benefit from a member of their team's view of the children in a slightly different capacity than they see themselves.
 - ARC Adoption NE similarly assign a specific worker to all existing children who are over the age of seven. They carry out direct work with the young person during assessment.
 - Adoption Focus hold an existing children workshop. Children receive an 'all about me' book and hear from a birth child talking about their own experiences of gaining an adoptive sibling. All children who take part receive a certificate of attendance.
 - Barnardo's hold brothers and sisters groups for young people.
- Adopters with unequal motivations to adopt
 - Look for ways in which their partner might alleviate the risks in this situation.
 - This requires careful analysis and evaluation.

- Adopters who live in multi-generational families
 - *Use a strength based approach – this should not be about what the obstacles are in multi-generational families but about what the strengths are.*
 - *The entire model of the assessment should be considered at the beginning, based on the situation adopters are in. For example, consider working within a family group model right from the start of this assessment.*
 - *Hold a family group conference to discuss who in the family can provide what support and when, to make the most of this placement and personal support networks. This could also be done via a mobile app for convenience.*
 - *Invite grandparents and other family members who are likely to be heavily involved in raising the child/children to prep and training sessions.*
 - *“It takes a whole village to raise a child...” – this can be a very strong placement.*
- Assessing single adopters [NB see [Stephen Small's presentation](#) for more information on this issue].
 - *The challenge is often: how do you help someone who is used to achieving and solving everything on their own and doing so with success, that this is something where they will need support? It is our duty to help them understand that this is unpredictable and they may not be able to combat all the challenges a child brings on your own.*
 - *We must help people realise that as adults they have the power to change, and children do not, particularly when first placed.*
- Assessing Support Networks
 - *These are crucial to single adopters. It is important to consider, will those in support networks be able to provide constructive challenge to the adopter when necessary?*
- “Stretching” or holding onto the final approval terms
 - *Activity days may lead adopters to change their view on the type of child they want to adopt – becoming more or less expansive.*
 - *“Holding on” to adopters approved for complex children or a sibling group when a more straightforward or single child is linked is a challenge.*
- Prejudice within LAs/ being risk aware/ assessing adopters’ capacity to manage ‘LinkMaker’
 - *Adopters will need to be robust, resolute and flexible. The ACE (adverse childhood experiences) scoring questionnaire is a great tool for understanding this. Find more information [here](#).*
 - *The attachment style interview will help you understand your adopters. (NB see [Leigh Smith's presentation](#) for information about this).*
 - *Consult referees, they know your adopters and will help you determine their suitability and resilience.*
- Managing expectations vs reality
 - *We should share more widely positive statements of how rewarding adoption can be.*
 - *We need robustly to assess adopters’ resilience; how they deal with stressful situations and how they make difficult decisions. Take a look at First4Adoption and CoramBAAF resources, and look back at the Channel 4 series, “Find me a Family” which created specific challenges for prospective adopters to help them consider adopting Harder to Place children. Tasks set included a couple working together to build IKEA flatpack furniture, arranging a childrens party, being interviewed by a panel of care-leavers, and individually getting experience of caring for a child in their own home.*
 - *Ask adopters to ‘write a letter to a birth parent’.*

- *Allow adopters to hear from those with experience as often as possible, including birth relatives, adopters and adoptees. Research in Practice have a number of useful sources, including video recordings of young people discussing their experiences of contact: <https://contact.rip.org.uk/case-studies/>*
- *Invite prospective adopters to agency events for adoptive families and encourage them to get involved by offering them a role. This will be a useful and rewarding experience for them, and allow you to witness them interacting with young people.*