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Parents who wait: Acknowledging the Support Needs and Vulnerabilities of Approved Adopters during their wait to become Adoptive Parents

Abstract

There is a significant amount of existing research exploring adoption policies, processes, and the experiences and safeguarding of children. However, whilst much research has children at the focus, little research has been conducted into the experiences of approved and waiting adopters. Where research has included adopters, focus tends to be on how adopters can aid an adoptive placement and what support they can provide to an adoptive child. In this article, the experiences of approved and waiting adopters are at the centre. This article reports on a digital ethnographic research project, which used unobtrusive methods to conduct a thematic analysis of over 600 posts made by waiting adopters on publically available UK online adoption forums in 2015. Online posts discussed the perceived over-recruitment of adopters; the decision making behind adopters' initial preferences; and the negative emotional effects of the waiting period following approval. This article argues that more consideration needs to be given to the needs of and support for approved adopters whilst they wait for an adoptive child.

1. Introduction

There have been momentous changes to the adoption landscape in England, and a significant push by central government from around 2013 to speed up the time that children who cannot be cared for by their birth family have to wait for an adoptive home. This included a massive recruitment drive to increase the pool of waiting adopters, an increase in media attention on the need for more adopters, and significant changes to adoption policy in terms of assessment, approval and post-adoption support. As a consequence, the pool of approved adopters increased by 16% between March 2013 and 2014 to 5,795 (Ofsted 2014) and by 42% between 2010 and 2015 (Department for Education 2016). However, the relationship between the numbers of waiting adopters and the numbers of children with an adoption plan is complex. Although it is true that there have been increases year on year in the numbers of children entering the care system, this did not automatically translate into an increase in the numbers of children with a plan for adoption. Since 2013 there has been a reluctance by Agency Decision Makers to apply for a Placement Orders for looked after children and a reluctance by the courts to grant Placement Orders (a Placement Order is the order giving a child's social worker permission to go ahead with an adoption plan). This is largely a consequence of the 2013 ruling made by Judge Munby, which stated that wherever possible, local authorities should consider placing children with extended family members in 'kinship care' rather than placing them for adoption. The related Re B-S judgement, had stated that orders contemplating non-consensual adoption (where birth parents have not

given consent) are to be ‘...a last resort’ and ‘only to be made where nothing else will do’ Re B (A Child) [2013] UKSC 33 . In the year that followed, adoption decisions reduced by 40% and placement orders by 45% (Stevenson 2016). Consequently, despite the number of children coming into care increasing, the number of placement orders actually dropped from 9,800 in March 2013, to 9,580 in 2014 and again to 7,320 in 2015 (House of Commons 2015).

Significantly, the increase in the pool of waiting adopters and the decrease in the numbers of looked after children with a plan for adoption led to an unprecedented shift in balance and in 2015 and 2016 there were more approved adopters than there were children needing adoption. This shift in balance meant that thousands of approved adopters were waiting longer than ever to be matched with a child. At the end of March 2014, 42% of adopters (2,435) who had been approved within the last year were still waiting to be matched with children (Department for Education 2014). There was also a mismatch between the needs of the children and the preferences and abilities of adopters. Older children, sibling groups, children from ethnic minorities and those with health difficulties or special needs wait longer to be adopted and are ‘harder to place’. Most prospective adopters have a clear preference for adopting younger children (Burge et al., 2015 and Selwyn et al., 2015) and ‘...the older the child, the less likely their plan for adoption will be realised’ (Anthony et al 2016, p185). Given this, it is not surprising that whilst adoptions continued to rise in 2015 and 2016, the increase was not experienced equally by children across all age brackets. Instead, school age children continue to be harder to place and over 75% of children adopted in 2014 were under school age (Department for Education 2014). Referring to ‘the great adoption mismatch’, Donovan wrote in 2015:

‘In the outer edges of one half of the diagram are the children considered ‘hard to place’; older children, those with complex needs, large sibling groups and those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. In the other are prospective adopters who have been approved to adopt an easier to place child or children. Many will have come forward while the numbers of children waiting were significantly higher and before the recent and much talked about drop in children with a placement order’ (Donovan 2015).

The focus of this article is specifically on the approved adopters who were waiting to adopt in 2015. Whilst research has been published on adoption in terms of the matching process and recruitment of adopters (Dance 2010, Farmer and Dance 2015), little research has focused on the prospective adopters, and none has been published since the recent changes to the adoption landscape, and the subsequent shift in balance between the number of waiting adopters and children. Rather than focusing on the process, the policy changes, or

the statistics behind the changes, this article takes an innovative approach to the research area, using unobtrusive methods and virtual ethnography to conduct a thematic analysis of over 600 posts made by waiting adopters on publically available, online adoption forums in 2015.

2. Methods

Using 'unobtrusive methods', this article offers a thematic discourse analysis of over 600 online posts made in 2015 by approved adopters on three separate publically accessible internet forums. There has been a long tradition in social research of using research methodologies which do not require active participation from respondents (Duxbury 2015; Magnet 2007; Schaap 2002; Scoats 2015; Slater 1999). The proliferation of the use of the internet for social networking, blogging and discussions in public online forums makes it increasingly possible for researchers to gather in-depth qualitative data (Rife et al 2016; Murthy 2008). Such 'unobtrusive measures' also have the advantage of providing access to naturalistic material, and avoiding the risks of the researcher influencing the forms of interaction and discourses produced (Jowett 2015).

However, whilst a great deal of online data is publically available, it is not safe to assume that it is ethically appropriate for research use. Much of the debate around the appropriateness of these data relates to the extent to which internet forums are considered 'public' or 'private' spaces. Speaking of this, Seale et al (2010) and Walther (2002) argue that postings made to publically *accessible* forums are by definition in the public domain. Despite this, it is clear that some online forums are more private than others, and this is specifically the case for those with invitation only membership, those requiring approval from an administrator or moderator to join and those requiring registration in order to view online posts. In addition to the need to protect those using private online spaces, a key consideration for research of this kind is also the need to protect the anonymity of posts that have been made in 'public' spaces, including the 'persistence and traceability' of posts (Beaulieu and Estalella 2012, cited in Roberts 2015). Consequently, this research has taken a number of measures to protect the anonymity of posters. This includes: a) not identifying the online forums used; b) only using publically accessible online forums that do not require registration, invitation or approval to view posts; c) removing usernames and personal information; d) checking against search engines to ensure quotations cannot be identified; and e) where appropriate either making minor changes to quotations so they cannot be traced, or paraphrasing quotations (Malik and Coulson 2013; Hewitt-Taylor and Bond 2012).

Following the discourse analytic and poststructuralist tradition, this article argues that the role of social science is to offer a 'critical understanding of social reality'. Whilst the term 'discourse analysis' has been overloaded in the analysis of speech and conversation (Cousins and Hussain 1984), the conceptualisation of 'discourse' used here is similar to that of Potter

and Wetherell's conceptualisation, in that it covers 'all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kind' (Potter and Wetherell 1987, p7). Many criticisms of the discourse analysis of data sets such as online discussions are based on positivist assumptions over the nature and 'real' meaning behind the data, including the perceived need to clarify and control for the sample of posters or qualify the meanings behind the posts (Jowett 2015). However, as Jowett explains, 'those working within more relativist paradigms of research may argue that the meanings of texts are never simply transparent' (ibid, p288). Moreover, '...the 'real' identity of speakers is arguably of less interest to the researcher than their membership of the group in which they are speaking and the way in which they construct an identity within the interaction itself' (ibid). For example, there is a possibility that the analysed posts are more likely to come from dissatisfied posters and, as such, are not representative of the experiences of all waiting approved adopters. However, following the Foucauldian tradition, this research borrows from a form of discourse analysis that is not concerned with uncovering the specific or 'true' authors behind the written text. Instead, the emphasis is on the subject positions made possible within the texts under study 'and not authors who speak through the text as if it were a kind of transparent screen upon which the writer's intentions were displayed' (Parker 1994, p100, cited in Jowett 2015, p289). As such, whilst the posts analysed in this article may well reflect the views of a certain number of approved adopters, the analysis is very much of the *posts* rather than the *posters*.

The thematic analysis was conducted through the extensive reading, re-reading and grouping of posts made by individuals from three large online forums in 2015. The posts claimed to be from posters who were either recently matched adopters or waiting approved adopters. The research analysis began from the most recent date in December 2015 and worked historically backwards. Once the analysis went back as early as January 2015, it was clear that data saturation point had been reached and collection was stopped. This process involved the reading and re-reading of over 600 posts.

The initial selection criteria for the 600 posts were that they had to make some reference to adopter recruitment; adopter training; the adopter approval process; or linking and matching between adopters and children. Drawing from the discourse analytic approach, the themes were determined 'themes' by their frequency and themes emerged when they had been referred to enough times for them to easily constitute a 'theme' (Billig and Condor 1988, cited in Fairclough 1995). For example, although interesting, one subtheme involving explicit discussion over whether adopters should apply with their local authority or a voluntary adoption agency had only six references out of the possible 600 and was consequently excluded. Fortunately, upon final reading of the texts it became immediately clear as to what the key themes should be and each of the remaining themes outlined below contained between 30 and 50 discrete references.

All posts making any reference to these were copied and placed into separate files. After further reading and re-reading, it was clear there were some significant emerging themes: a) perceived mismatch between the needs of children with an adoption plan and the abilities and preferences of waiting adopters; b) reasons adopters were not being matched with children; c) frustration at the ongoing recruitment of adopters; d) competitive nature of matching; e) emotional effects of waiting; f) coping strategies used by adopters; g) advice for being successful at the approval and matching panel; h) advice on when adopters should start furnishing a bedroom; i) advice on techniques adopters could use to increase their chances (eg. gain more child care experience; reduce their BMI; reduce their working hours). Following an additional re-reading g), h) and i) were removed from the dataset. These were removed because they focused more exclusively on seeking and providing advice and logistical considerations related to adoption rather than the current adoption policy. In addition, f) the various coping strategies is not covered in this paper because it was extensive and touched on a range of additional policy changes related to foster to adopt and concurrency planning.

3. Context: Summary of the current UK matching process between adopters and children

The matching process between adopters and children is complex and worthy of explanation. Whilst many matches are led by social workers, adoptive families can also use online resources in attempting to find a child (or a 'match'), including conducting their own searches through national online services such as the Adoption Match and Link Maker. Adoption Match is an online database containing basic information on the children needing adoption and the parents hoping to adopt. These details are held on a tightly secured site, used by family finders and the Adoption Match team to search for matches between children and adopters. Many local authorities also subscribe to Link Maker, which is an online, secure service designed to help local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adopters match adopters with children. Similar services were previously provided by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) family finding service, 'Be My Parent', until the closure of BAAF in 2015. In order to select possible adopters from the list, all approved adopters are also required to explain what children's needs or characteristics they feel willing or able to consider on a linking or matching form. Options tend to include age; gender; ethnicity; whether in a sibling group; existing medical conditions; relevant past experience and current or anticipated functioning. Once this is completed, most approved adopters are then free to search through the secure profiles on the site and potentially make contact with children's family finders and request to be considered as a potential match with a child. Similarly, children's family finders can use the service to make direct contact with adopters they think may be a good match for their child. If the adopter, adopter's social worker and child's family finder are happy to consider a match, there will be

an exchange of confidential reports. It is precisely these sorts of 'enquiries' and 'matches' that the majority of posts refer to in the following analysis.

4. Analysis of online posts

This analysis section explores the themes under the following main headings: a) perceived over-recruitment of adopters; b) adopters being unable or unwilling to extend initial preferences; and c) emotional consequences of waiting.

Perceived over-recruitment of adopters

A central theme occurring in the posts was a sense of frustration at the perceived over recruitment of new adopters, especially given the reduced number of children with a plan for adoption. Referring to this, comments included:

'Absolutely zero point rushing prospectives [prospective adopters] through a system which isn't coping anyway,' and 'Why are adopters still being sought through the media, when adopters already approved are still waiting months, years for a match??'

Much of the criticism for this continued recruitment was targeted at the government led recruitment drive or the large number of media campaigns designed to encourage more adopters to apply. In terms of publicity and media engagement, over the last few years there had been wide scale national advertisements for adopters from agencies such as 'First4Adoption'; 'British Association of Adoption and Fostering' (BAAF); The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT); and regional agencies including 'Families for Children'; 'Family for Me'; and 'Being Family'. There was also a national media promotion of adoption through 'National Adoption Week' and many local authorities and voluntary agencies were running their own promotional adoption campaigns throughout the year. In addition, in 2011 the BBC broadcast the television show 'A Home for Maisie' (BBC 2011a) and 'Panorama: The Truth About Adoption', (BBC 2011b), both of which discussed the difficulties in finding an adoptive family for children. In 2012 (BBC 2012), the BBC showed a three part television series called 'Protecting Our Children', which followed social workers as they made decisions over when to take children into care. In 2014, Channel 4 broadcast two prime time television shows '15,000 Kids and Counting' (Channel 4 2014a) and 'Finding Mum and Dad' (Channel 4 2014b), both portraying the negative experiences of children languishing in the care system and the number of children desperately needing adoption in the UK. In addition, there were also numerous newspaper reports, including '...Orphans aged over five left to languish in care because they're 'too old' for adoption' (Daily Mail 2011); 'Wanted: A new home for little Grace before Christmas' (Telegraph 2015a); and the 'Rage at the adoption red tape that denies a child a home: Why is so little being done for the 65,000 children languishing in the care system?' (Telegraph 2012).

Publicity campaigns such as these, where the emphasis was very much focused on the need to recruit more adopters, were countered by a great number of online forum posts, commenting on how 'general adoption publicity doesn't reflect reality' and the sense of setting approved adopters 'up to fail'. One particular post stated:

'There must be a reason why so many approved adopters are still waiting for a match to the point where some of them are giving up. Sorry to rant but I'm finding this matching wait very frustrating, not helped when I see the number of people waiting for a match (even for allegedly harder to place kids) and then see glib comments (particularly this week because of National Adoption Week) about the thousands of children waiting for adopters.'

A similar comment posted was:

'The media are portraying adoption as being so easy and that there are so many children needing a forever home. Ha! Can they tell us then why have we all been waiting months sometimes years without a match?'

The colloquialisms used in the post help to demonstrate the emotional frustration as well as reflecting the alternative lived reality, which ran contrary to official and media discourse highlighting the need for more adopters. Instead, posts suggested adopters were feeling surplus and redundant rather than 'needed' with comments including, 'it makes you feel pretty damn worthless' and 'I guess we sort of thought we'd be doing something amazing, but now feel like we're surplus to requirements and more of a nuisance than anything else'. Significantly, the reality presented by posts was actively contrary to the official or media presentation.

Another area emerging from the posts related to the sense that the waiting time experienced by adopters was not simply due to a numerical imbalance between the numbers of children and adopters, but a mismatch between the needs of the children and the preferences and abilities of the adopters. Although there were technically more approved adopters than children (Department for Education 2015a, Department for Education 2015b), many of these waiting adopters wanted very young 'easy to place' children, whereas the children waiting for adoption were more likely to be older, from ethnic minorities groups, in large sibling groups or with significant health conditions.

Referring to this, one post stated:

'Right now it isn't about numbers of children waiting with placement orders versus number of approved adopters. It's that a large % of the pool of adopters are looking for the same children. I just don't get why, in the current climate, there aren't more targeted campaigns to recruit adopters for the children who, even in this time of competitive matching, are still struggling to find families.'

This frustration could also be identified in the following two posts:

'The LA may have lots of children waiting right now, but I bet a large number of them are over 5. For those under 5 how many adopters will they have looking for them? It's not that there aren't children out there, of course there are but there are not many younger children and there are more and more adopters wanting those younger children.'

'Look, there are children out there but no-one wants to adopt them! Most adopters want a young white child with no major issues.'

In around 2015 some local authorities temporarily stopped recruitment of adopters because of the imbalance between adopters and children. Some adoption agencies subsequently revised their recruitment policies in order to focus more exclusively on recruiting adopters who were prepared to adopt 'harder to place' children. However, this has not been the context under which the pre 2015 approved adopters had been recruited, and it was these adopters who tended to wait the longest. Speaking of this, one post included:

'The reality of huge numbers chasing links in areas where there are few children waiting just doesn't feel like what was 'sold' to us. I don't know about new applicants coming through - I hope they are better prepared.'

Adopters being unable or unwilling to extend preferences

In some posts, there was evidence to suggest the long waiting time had led adopters to reflect on their initial expectations, in that they had become more flexible and widened their original preferences in order to increase their chances of being matched with a child. Conversely, other posts suggested adopters were maintaining their initial preferences, whilst accepting that this meant they would be in for 'a long wait'. Reasons for this decision tended to be either a determination to adopt a young child and experience what posts often referred to as the 'baby years' or because they simply felt ill-equipped to cope with an older child who they perceived was more likely to have more complex needs.

Previous research has explored the notion of 'stretching', which is where approved adopters expand their initial preferences in order to consider children from a wider age range, or with more complex needs than they had initially hoped for (Farmer and Dance 2016). This 'stretching' was identified in the analysed online posts, where there were clear references made by adopters, albeit often quite reluctantly, to extending preferences in order to increase the chances of being matched with a child. However, these changes tended to be isolated to increasing age brackets in order to be considered for older children, or considering siblings when they had previously only felt able to adopt one child, as one post demonstrates:

'I think most of us are stretching what we would be able to accept. However, there can come a point when you have stretched yourself too far just in the interest of seeing more profiles. It is wise to keep an open mind but not to disregard your gut feeling about what you can and can't deal with.'

As indicated in the above quotation, many posts also referred to a fear of changing preferences too far out of 'desperation' and posts made consistent reference to the need to ensure preferences remained a fair and accurate reflection of adopters' own abilities and strengths. Indeed, 'stretching' can be highly problematic and for a long time it has been associated with an increased risk of later adoption disruptions, particularly when the stretching has not been adopter led or when there has been limited information available (Barth and Berry 1988; Valdez and McNamara 1994). However, analysis of the online forums identified an almost equal numbers of posts where there was evidence of a strong reluctance or refusal to amend initial preferences, with posts suggesting some adopters had a clear understanding of their own abilities, limitations and preferences. Such posts tended to be associated with adopters who appeared to be very focused on adopting pre-school children, with frequent references being made to the desire to 'experience the baby stage'. For example, speaking of maintaining a preference for a little girl under one, one post stated:

'Our social worker is family finding for us for a little girl under one year old. This is partly because we want this and partly because it's what the social worker wants for us. It's a decision we are happy with.'

Conversely, a smaller number of posts were very explicit that not changing preferences was not about personal choice, but motivated by an awareness of their own realistic limitations in terms of the expertise and abilities to cope with complex additional needs, including psychological, behavioural, or medical needs. As one post illustrated:

'We wish we were able to offer a forever home to a harder to place child but 20 years in childcare has shown us they we are not equipped to parent children with vastly extensive additional needs.'

Significantly, a larger number of posts were loaded with emotional terminology such as 'sorry', 'apologise', and 'selfish' when referring to a reluctance or inability to widen preferences and consider older children.

'I feel that I have to say sorry for being in the "wants young, relatively straight-forward" category. When I went to an event, I did nothing but apologise.'

This sense of defensiveness is not entirely unsurprising and in 2015 adopters increasingly faced criticism in the mainstream media for having what are perceived to be unreasonable expectations in terms of the needs and characteristics of children they are hoping to adopt. This is reflected in the newspaper headline: 'Getting adopted is straightforward – as long as you're a healthy white baby' (Telegraph 2015b). In defence of these preferences, one post explained:

'So many adopters feel bad (and are made to feel bad, sometimes) for not feeling able to parent children who are older, have siblings or severe needs, but in truth a great many have arrived at adoption through infertility, and want as many of those young years as possible, or don't physically or financially have room for three at once, etc etc etc.'

Referring specifically to the notion of being considered 'selfish' and public perception of approved adopters, another post stated:

'I recently had a friend naively say to me that surely we should just get what we are given! But Joe Public do not know how important a good match is for attachment and therefore the happiness of any adoptee and so if you long for a little one you need to be 'selfish' in that respect because if you then parent an older child, the match may very well fall apart.'

The heavy emphasis on preferences for younger children was seen to have a direct impact on the levels of competition between prospective adopters and when referring to competition, the majority of the posts referred specifically to babies. It remains the case that unless there are health concerns, it is significantly easier for family finders to find adoptive families for babies than it is for older children or children with disabilities or health problems. For example, in 2015, for children under the age of one, the average time between the decision being made that the child should be placed for adoption and them

being matched with adopters was eight months. This increased year by year and was one year and one month for children aged three and four, and one year and three months for children aged seven and older (Department for Education 2015c). Speaking of the increased competition for babies, one post stated:

'I know there are sometimes babies needing adoption, but I also know the chances of me being able to adopt them are practically nil as so many people want them.'

And:

'It is so competitive for babies. I've seen over 100 enquiries for a baby within a couple of days.'

'We wanted to adopt a baby and then when I started looking at all the profiles I realised our chances were non-existent.'

Speaking of the sheer number of adopters expressing interest in children, another post stated:

'It does feel like a real competition. Some of the children we've been interested in have had at least 50 other families interested.'

Other factors referred to in the posts regarding the competition between adopters were being single adopters, being older adopters, and already having a birth child. In terms of matching, having a birth child can be an additional challenge for adopters as family finders have to consider whether a match is in the best interests of the entire family unit, including the birth children. Having birth children also makes it difficult for adopters to adopt young children, as family finders tend to require a large age gap between birth children and adopted children, with the adopted child being the youngest. The presence of existing children is not an insignificant factor. For example, in November 2015, of the 2,581 families waiting for a match on the national adoption matching agency, Link Maker, 36% of them already had children, either an existing birth child or through a previous adoption (Link Maker 2015).

The increased difficulties adopters with birth children experienced when being matched was often referred to as being 'unfair', and there was a sense of being misled during the recruitment and assessment process. Posts included, 'I wish workers would be more transparent and honest, why take us into a competitive link if you're only going to reject us later as we have a birth child?' Likewise, another post stated:

'We were approved a year ago and have a birth child age 5. We have had absolutely nothing. We also weren't told that a birth child would be such a disadvantage.'

Similarly, another post stated:

'We were not told having a birth child would put lots of social workers off, or that LAs prefer to match in-house and that our local authority was so small the possibility of an in-house match would be null.'

Referring to the matching process, research by Dance (2015) highlighted concerns adopters had over what they perceived to be a lack of 'transparency', specifically in relation to the practice of family finders considering multiple families at the same time, and in the difficulties associated with matching in general. Dance's research also included the suggestion from an approved adopter that there should be more transparency regarding the difficulties in the matching process and that, 'It should be made clear from the onset that the matching process is the most difficult stage and training should be done to help people with this...' (Dance 2015, p39).

The emotional effects of waiting on approved adopters

At March 2013, 37% of the total number of approved adoptive families who had been approved either through voluntary agencies or through the local authority had not been successfully matched with a child (Ofsted 2013). The emotional pressure associated with the waiting process was central to the majority of posts reviewed. Many posts referred to 'giving up', putting lives on hold, and using terms such as: 'alone'; 'no one understands'; 'heartbroken'; 'completely desperate'. A small sample is listed below:

'With each link that falls through we feel our hearts ripped out that little bit more. We are getting to the stage where we are wondering how much longer we can keep putting ourselves through all this emotional turmoil. It's getting harder to smile on the outside when we just feel like screaming on the inside.'

'We are ready to pack it all in and give up on our dreams as in total 15 years of our lives has been trying to be a mam and dad.'

'I'm so discouraged now I've got to the stage that I'm not even enquiring on profiles because I think, "What's the point? We won't be successful."

Another post made by an approved adopter who claimed to have been approved and waiting for over 2 years at the time of posting stated:

‘We’re going to give it another 6 or maybe 9 months and if nothing happens in that time then we’re going to call it a day. Life is just too short to be waiting around for so long for something that may never happen.’

Summary and Implications

The introduction of the two stage approval process has gone some way to removing the uncertainty previously facing families wishing to adopt, as their suitability for adoption is now assessed at a relatively early stage. However, waiting adopters still experience a great deal of uncertainty in terms of how long they may wait before being matched with a child. In the posts analysed, there was also a perceived lack of transparency in terms of what adopters’ *realistic* chances at adoption were, given their preferences and abilities. This lack of transparency was partly a result of the relatively flexible recruitment policies employed by local authorities and adoption agencies at the time, and there had clearly been an over-recruitment of adopters wanting a young child. However, this was also pertinent for single adopters and those with birth children, who found themselves competing with large numbers of heterosexual couples who were often more desirable to family finders as they could more easily devote their full attention to an adoptive child. The uncertainty facing adopters remains an issue and there is now an increased move towards encouraging adopters to consider ‘Foster to Adopt’. Whilst this approach is more likely to result in families adopting a much younger child, it also leaves adopters highly vulnerable. Under the ‘foster to adopt’ plan, children are placed with potential adopters before the permanence order is granted, which, depending on the circumstances of the birth family, means there is an increased chance the child will subsequently be removed from the adoptive family and returned to their birth family.

The mismatch between adopters and children has also had negative consequences for children, and the unfortunate reality is that the substantial increase in the numbers of approved adopters waiting for a match, ‘...did not eliminate long waiting times for all children’ (Dance, Neil and Rogers 2017, p20). The same groups of children continue to wait the longest for an adoptive home. These include children aged over four years, children with a disability, children needing to be placed with siblings, and children with a black or minority ethnic background. Since around 2016-17, the policy on recruiting and training adopters has been far more heavily focused on specifically recruiting families who are willing to consider more ‘harder to place’ children (ibid, p7). Despite this, the mismatch between the needs of children and preferences and abilities of parents remains a problem that has yet to be fully resolved.

The focus on adoption has to have the best interests of the child at its centre and the purpose of adoption is very much to find parents for children, rather than to find children for parents. Despite this, social workers have a duty of care to approved adopters and there remains very little research exploring how the needs of adopters can be supported following approval and during the waiting period. It is also important to acknowledge the vulnerability of approved adopters. A great many approved adopters would have previously experienced fertility issues as many adoptive families tend to pursue fertility treatment before they pursue adoption (Jennings et al 2014; Ward and Smeeton 2015). Infertility is closely associated with grief and loss and individuals exploring adoption have often had to manage the 'difficulty in making the transition from biological to social parenting' (Ward and Smeeton 2015, p4). Whilst adoption should continue to have the best interests of the child as its focus, there is a risk that approved adopters can become the 'forgotten stakeholders', and it is important to also fully acknowledge their needs, vulnerabilities and contribution.

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