



Centre for excellence  
for Children's Care and Protection

# Towards modernising adoption in Scotland: A focused mapping review

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# Introduction

CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection, was asked to compile a review of relevant literature for the Scottish Government as it considers Scotland’s approach to the adoption of children from care and the services needed to support those affected by adoption. The review was completed between January and October 2024. The work is underpinned by the aim of ensuring that children who are adopted from care in Scotland receive the love, care and support they need to reach their full potential; are supported to retain important relationships where it is safe to do so; that adoptive families feel equipped and well-supported by the practitioners who support them, and that services are ‘adoption competent’; that is, able to deliver the services that are needed in ways which recognise, understand and are responsive to the complexity, nuances and implications of adoption experience.

This focused mapping review is divided into the following sections:

- Building adoptive families for children, which includes a focus on the recruitment and preparation of adopters and the linking and matching of children to their adoptive families;
- Life journey, or life-story, work for children who are adopted;
- Supporting children with ongoing communication and spending time with their birth families after adoption;
- Adoption support, with a focus on supporting all children and adults affected by adoption.

Our review focuses on what is known about different aspects of the ‘adoption system’ in the UK and elsewhere in the context of children who are adopted from care, providing a snapshot overview of recent research and evidence to assist with understanding what is needed in Scotland to modernise adoption in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and better meet the needs of everyone involved.

## Legislative, policy and practice context in Scotland

The legislative, policy and practice landscape in Scotland regarding adoption is complex and needs to be understood in the context of previous reviews; the ongoing challenges in relation to delays in permanency planning, that is, the decision-making for how and where a child will be cared for on a permanent basis to meet their needs; the growing understanding about the number and needs of infants coming into care; the number of parents losing multiple children to adoption; Scotland's ambitions for children through the implementation of aspirations of The Promise of the Independent Care Review; and ongoing debates in the UK about the place of adoption in the 21st century.

The most common living situation for children in Scotland who cannot live with their birth parents is family-based care, either with foster carers or in kinship care with family and friends. Only a small number of children are adopted from care each year in Scotland, but they are among the children who need the most care and support due to their early adverse life experiences and the decision that they cannot safely live within their immediate or extended birth family. Of the 10,886 children 'looked after' in the community in Scotland in 2022-2023, only 1% (151 children) were cared for by prospective adopters on 31 July 2023 (Scottish Government, 2024).

In Scotland, the Care Inspectorate reports on a range of adoption statistics. In 2023-2024, a plan for adoption was approved for 198 children, which represents a 17.5% reduction from 2022-2023, and continues a downward trend seen since 2019. 174 children went to live with their new adoptive families, and 178 children were legally adopted following their move to their adoptive family. The finalising of the legal adoption takes place after children move to live with their adoptive family, with the process usually taking between a few months to a year to complete. Of the approved adoptions in 2023-2024, 43% were for children aged two to five years old and 50% were younger than two years old. In December 2023, there were 130 children and young people for whom a plan for adoption was approved and who were waiting to be matched with adopters. Of the children waiting for adoption, 32% were part of a family group that services were trying to keep together and 36% of the children had been waiting over one year, up from 21% in 2022-23. The Care Inspectorate noted that 22 adoptions broke down in 2023-24. Whilst this represents an increase from 2022-23, where 12 adoptions broke down, the Care Inspectorate noted that there is no clear trend in the number of adoption breakdowns over the past five years (Care Inspectorate, 2024). It should be noted, however, that recent research in Scotland has highlighted that there is no universal definition of 'adoption breakdown', which can make it difficult to know exactly how many adoptions break down each year. For instance, there is a lack of information about adoptions that break down before the court order is approved (Cowan, 2022).

As of December 2023, there were 38 registered adoption agencies in Scotland, which includes every local authority and six voluntary/not-for-profit agencies. The Care Inspectorate has noted a downward trend in new adopter approvals since 2018, with 199

new adopter households approved across 37 adoption agencies in 2023-2024 (Care Inspectorate, 2024).

The lifelong impact of adoption on all children and adults affected by it are considerable, and debates are ongoing within the UK, where questions have been raised about the ethics of adoption in the context of children's legal ties continuing to be permanently severed with their birth families. These will be discussed, where relevant, throughout this review.

The main legislation in relation to adoption and permanence are the Children (Scotland) Act (1995); the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act (2007); and the Looked-After Children (Scotland) Regulations (2009). Their key principles include requirements to:

- Give paramount consideration to the welfare of the child
- Consider the views of the child
- Avoid delay and make the minimum necessary intervention in a child's life.

Additional relevant legislation includes The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014), which introduced the Adoption Register in Scotland; a service which supports social workers to find adoptive families for children and supports prospective adopters and practitioners in this process. The Act also included provisions to ensure better permanence planning for children. The Children (Scotland) Act (2020) includes provisions for having regard to children's views within the adoption process, although provisions in this Act have yet to be implemented.

The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act (2007) was informed by the national Adoption Review Policy Group's report *Adoption: Better Choices for our Children* (Cox, 2005) and subsequent parliamentary scrutiny and calls for evidence. It was designed to "improve, modernise and extend the legal framework for providing security to children and young people who can no longer live with their families" (Cox, 2005 p.1).

The Review Group's report highlighted the changed context of adoption in Scotland where, alongside other UK nations, most children requiring adoption were adopted from care, having been removed from their families due to abuse and/or neglect. The review also acknowledged that adoption was not suitable for all children, highlighting that "older children might well have a need to maintain a relationship with their birth parents or other members of their birth family and adoption struggles to provide contact" (p.3). The Review argued that modernisation was required around extending the eligibility of people considered suitable to adopt children (Cox, 2005).

The Children's Hearings System is Scotland's care and justice system for children and young people. It is unique to Scotland and began 1971, taking over from the Courts the responsibility of decision making for children and young people who are in need of care or protection, or who have committed alleged offences. Children are usually referred to the Children's Reporter by police, social work or schools, but can be referred by anyone, such as a concerned relative. Once the Reporter receives a referral, they carry out an investigation which can involve requesting a variety of reports from all relevant agencies,

before deciding whether or not the child may require compulsory measures of supervision. When this is the case, a Children's Hearing is arranged, which is a legal tribunal consisting of three volunteer panel members who seek the views of the child or young person, parents, carers and other relevant persons to decide on the need for compulsory measures. This system differs from the rest of the UK, where all legal proceedings for children are held in court.

The Adoption Review Policy Group's report (Cox, 2005) expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the Children's Hearings System in the context of making permanence decisions about a child's care and protection and considered a number of options. Although it agreed that the Children's Hearings System should continue to be involved in permanence planning and decision making for children, it suggested this role be improved and that all their recommendations be considered, including the need for an expert voice for the child from an early stage in the permanence process; akin to the role of Children's Guardians in England, Wales and now in Northern Ireland. To date none of the recommendations around permanence procedures have been fully realised, and the recent Children's Hearings Re-design report (Hearings System Working Group, 2023) returns to some of these.

The introduction of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act (2007) was a recognition of the effect of prolonged uncertainty for children and their need for stability, security and permanence. In policy terms in this context, 'permanence' is defined by the Scottish Government as "providing children with a stable, secure, nurturing relationship and home, where possible within a family setting, which continues into adulthood" (Scottish Government, 2015 p.18).

The Act also introduced Permanence Orders, which replaced Parental Rights Orders and Freeing Orders. The intention of introducing these orders was to increase stability and permanence for children unable to live with their birth families. They also aimed to increase flexibility to allocate parental rights appropriately and build in flexibility to meet individual needs, particularly in relation to ongoing involvement of birth families in their child's life.

Recognising that not all children would be adopted, the legislation also attempted to safeguard the long-term welfare of children through a permanence order (PO). Every permanence order gives the local authority the mandatory provision of parental rights and responsibilities. However, every permanence order may also have 'extras' called ancillary provisions, enabling the sharing of some rights and responsibilities with parents. Under the 2007 Act, there are two routes to adoption; either through direct petition to the Court by adopters, or through a Permanence Order with Authority to Adopt (POA).

The accompanying official guidance to the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act (2007) sought to improve timescales for children through introducing the expectation that, where a child has been 'looked after away from home' for six months or more and significant progress towards returning to live with their birth parents has not been achieved, a plan for permanence should be in place. This is in contrast to legislation in England and Wales



which requires, through the Public Law Outline (Department for Education, 2014a), that care planning should be concluded within six months of a child coming into care.

In 2011, the Scottish Children's Reporter's Administration (SCRA) (Scotland's national body focussed on children most at risk of harm), carried out research to assess progress in delivering improvements in permanence processes. Their report, *Care and Permanence Planning for Looked-After Children in Scotland*, focused on reviewing permanence planning for 100 children. The study found that whilst the need for permanence was being identified at an early stage for most young children, significant delays were still occurring. On average, it took 2.4 years from a child becoming 'looked after' to an adoption order being granted (SCRA, 2011).

SCRA carried out a follow-up study, published in 2016, which reviewed the records of 200 children held by SCRA and the Sheriff Courts where permanence was secured through direct adoption, permanence orders and permanence orders with authority to adopt. The report from the study, *Permanence Planning and Decision Making for Looked After Children in Scotland*, highlighted that for over 90% of children, it was still taking over two years from becoming 'looked after' to an adoption order being granted. They also found geographical differences in the processes used, with local authorities in the west of Scotland favouring direct petitions, while those in the east pursued permanence orders with authority to adopt (SCRA, 2016). Following the publication of this research, the Scottish Government published its *Getting it Right for Looked-after Children and Young People* strategy in 2015, with the aim of ensuring early engagement, early permanence and improving the quality of care (Scottish Government, 2015).

Further research has also been conducted. The first phase of the longitudinal *Permanently Progressing?* study in Scotland began in 2014 following a group of 1,836 children aged 5 years and under who became 'looked after' in 2012-13. This longitudinal study is exploring children's progress to permanence over time, their experiences and outcomes at key stages throughout childhood and into adulthood. The 'pathways' strand of the study (Biehal et al., 2019) analysed anonymised child level data from the Children Looked-After Statistics (CLAS) dataset and found that from 2012-16, the median time between children first coming into care and being adopted was just over two years (25.5 months) by direct petition to the Court, and 31 months for those adopted via a permanency order with authority to adopt. The study also found that 56% of children in the adoption pathway were less than six weeks old when they first became 'looked after away from home' (Biehal et al., 2019).

The most common outcome for children within the study who were no longer being 'looked after away from home' was a return to live with their birth parents. Nearly one third of children 'looked after away from home' returned to live with their parents by the end of phase one of *Permanently Progressing?* 26% were no longer 'looked after' and 5% were living with their parents at home under a Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO) (Biehal et al., 2019). However, for nearly one third of the children 'looked after away from home', there was no evidence that they were being cared for in a permanent placement three to four years after they started to be 'looked after'.

In 2014, CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection, was commissioned to develop the national PACE (Permanence and Care Excellence) programme to support local authorities with their permanence planning processes. The programme team worked with 26 local authority areas between 2014-2020. PACE took a whole system quality improvement approach to improving permanence planning and procedures, with the aim of reducing the length of time it took between children coming into care and being cared for in a permanent home. The internal evaluation of the programme (CELCIS, 2020) highlighted the complexity of achieving whole system change and just how complex the legal system concerning permanence planning is to navigate. Achieving and maintaining buy-in from senior leadership within local authorities to support the PACE approach was essential, because this provided the motivation, time and resources to invest in the programme. Multi-agency Champions groups were introduced to help build buy-in and momentum for PACE, within which a range of innovations were tested or introduced such as having earlier ‘looked after reviews’ and permanence planning meetings, streamlining processes and achieving culture change in terms of a wider definition of what is recognised as a permanent placement beyond adoption and foster care.

Individual local authority areas in the PACE programme achieved improvements to permanence timescales, but there were concerns that improving some parts of the process to permanence for a child did not necessarily improve the timeliness of the process overall. However, SCRA data between 2014-2020, which was analysed by Cusworth et al. (2022), did indicate that for the 58 children in their study who had not returned to live with their birth parents two years after coming into care under a compulsory supervision order, a decision for permanence away from home had been made, with 78% of the children living with their permanent carers. The PACE programme also highlighted how complex permanence processes are in Scotland and the importance of having complete, accurate and consistent data nationally to measure progress.

The PACE programme highlighted the significant consequences of delay for children, which has also been recognised in court judgements within Scotland. As discussed by McGuinness (2012), The Supreme Court, in the case *S v L* 2012 SLT 961, recorded that delays in adoption proceedings can have damaging consequences. As Lord Reed observed, “it is imperative that unnecessary delay should be avoided and that it is ‘in the interests of the welfare of the child and common humanity towards all of the individuals involved’ to do so” (McGuinness, 2012, [no pagination]).

The Promise, the concluding report of the Independent Care Review (2020), made a promise to all care experienced children and young people that they will grow up loved, safe and respected so that they can realise their full potential. The review noted that adoption “has an important role in providing permanent, loving, nurturing homes. Adoption must continue to be supported in policy and planning” (p.75). It goes on to recommend that work must be done to reduce the rate of adoption breakdowns in Scotland, and that adoptive parents must not shoulder the burden of obtaining the support they need. The Promise stresses that adoptive parents “must have access to support at any point during the life of their child if they require it. That support must be available even if it was not

initially required and must mirror the principles of intensive family support” (p.76). The Independent Care Review also noted the importance of support for children in understanding their birth identity, and the maintenance of relationships that are important to adopted children, where it is safe to do so.

Recent research such as Cowan’s (2022) PhD, *Forever home? The complexity of adoption breakdown in Scotland*, echoes these sentiments, arguing that a lack of adoption support for families from the beginning of the process and throughout a child’s life into adulthood and beyond can contribute to the number of adoption breakdowns that occur in Scotland. Our review of the practices and experiences in relation to adoption support over the last five years suggests that while it should be provided because it is morally and ethically necessary to support everyone affected by adoption throughout their lives, there is also evidence that demonstrates the significant impact and risks of not providing adoption support.

The Promise Scotland’s Plan 24-30 (The Promise Scotland, 2024) noted the positive progress made in reducing adoption breakdowns. The plan continues to emphasise that adoptive families should be supported intensively if they need it, and that adoptive families should be able to have access to support at any point during the life of their child if they require it.

## Adoption in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

This section of our review briefly outlines recent developments in policy, practice and, where relevant, legislation regarding adoption in the remaining three UK nations. It sets a broader context for the consideration of our analysis of the research and evidence reviewed throughout the rest of this document, which primarily focuses on England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### England

Adoption policy in England emphasises that adoption should be considered as a positive opportunity for children (Department for Education, 2021a). It is recognised as one route to achieving permanence alongside long-term fostering, kinship care and special guardianship. 'Permanence' in England is conceptualised as comprising legal, physical and emotional permanence for children through childhood and beyond (Adoption England, 2024a). The Department for Education (2021b, pp. 19-20) notes that the objective of permanence planning is "to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging".

Recent developments driving change in adoption policy, practice and the organisation of services in England include (Department for Education, 2021a; Adoption England, 2024a):

- A decline in the number of children for whom there is a plan for adoption, and it taking too long for children to be placed with adopters.
- Recruitment challenges: insufficient adopters being recruited; the difficulties faced by prospective adopters in adopting children who have to wait longer for adoption due to the children's needs; attention needing to be paid to increasing the diversity of adopters; and matching processes taking too long.
- The need for modernisation: There is a growing recognition that greater openness is needed in the adoption system to respect children's identity and value their significant relationships. There is also recognition that support to all parties affected by adoption is needed to enable these relationships to be preserved in a safe and appropriate way.
- Recognition of the importance of lifelong support for adopted people given the early trauma and harm they may have experienced.
- Recognition that adoption support services need to improve for everyone affected by adoption.
- Increasing recognition that the voices of all those affected by adoption need to be heard in decisions which affect them and to shape and develop services.

England has adopted a regionalised approach to the delivery of adoption services since 2015, when Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) were introduced. There are now 32 RAAs,

with an additional final one in development. However, different approaches have been taken to the structure and organisation of the RAAs, which makes them difficult to compare (Ofsted, 2024).

A recent thematic inspection of six RAAs by Ofsted, the UK Government's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, published in March 2024, noted that recruitment, assessment, family finding and matching was consistently strong, but there remained a shortage of adopters, particularly for those children who had been waiting longer to be adopted. Some RAAs had struggled to recruit and retain skilled and experienced staff, and provision of adoption support services was variable. Regionalisation had strengthened provision in some areas, but not in others. The report also highlighted that short-term funding of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, which funds therapeutic support services for children who are adopted or have special guardians, meant that RAAs were not able to sustainably plan in the longer-term (Ofsted, 2024).

Adoption England was developed in 2017 and is a collaboration of regional adoption agencies, supported by a small central team working at a national level (Adoption England, 2024a). The UK Government's Department for Education, which has responsibility for adoption policy in England, has invested £160 million to implement its national adoption strategy *Achieving Excellence Everywhere* (Department for Education, 2021a). Funded by the Department for Education, Adoption England works to deliver the national strategy for regional adoption agencies, through their vision "to modernise adoption to better meet the needs of children and families" (Adoption England, 2024a, p.12).

Adoption England has outlined the following outcomes linked to the strategy, to be achieved by 2027 (Adoption England, 2024a, p.13):

- Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared and supported to meet children's needs.
- Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.
- Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.
- Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided nationally and regionally.
- Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.
- Professionals understand the profound impact that being in care and adoption has on children's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

In 2020, the President of the Family Division of the Judiciary in England and Wales, Sir Andrew McFarlane, asked for the creation of an adoption sub-group within the Public Law Working Group to review and consult on the legal process regarding the making of adoption orders in England and Wales. The aim was to consider whether any reforms were needed to the legal process to improve efficiency and make it fit for purpose in the current context where most children are adopted from care. The group's report, *Recommendations for Best Practice in Respect of Adoption*, was published in November 2024. It considered five areas in-depth: contact between children who are adopted and their birth families; access to adoption records; processes and procedures in court; international adoptions; and consensual adoption.

The report was clear that significant reform of the adoption system in England and Wales is needed, and a large number of detailed recommendations were made to support the proposed changes. The recommendations that are relevant to our review, and in the Scottish context, include supporting more adopted children to spend time with their birth families in-person where it is safe to do so; training for practitioners to support this policy and practice change; better support for birth families, and the development of a national protocol for access to adoption records applications (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024). The recommendations are discussed in more detail in the respective sections of our review. It is important to highlight that Scotland's legal system in relation to adoption is very different to England and Wales, particularly due to the existence of the Children's Hearings System in Scotland, and because there are no specialist family courts. Therefore, most recommendations in the *Recommendations for Best Practice in Respect of Adoption* report about the legal process do not easily transfer or have an equivalence in Scots Law.

## Wales

The Welsh Government launched a National Adoption Service in 2014 to improve services for all those affected by adoption in Wales. It takes a collaborative approach, with services operating at three levels:

- *National*: A small central team provides leadership, co-ordination and strategic support. There is also a national 'front door' for recruitment of prospective adopters.
- *Regional*: Five regional collaboratives deliver the adoption agency functions for children (recruitment/assessment of adopters; counselling services for birth parents; advice for adopted adults; deliver adoption support services), and work in conjunction with voluntary adoption agencies, and health and education services.
- *Local*: All local authorities provide services to 'looked after' children whilst identifying and working with children for whom an adoption plan is appropriate.

Key policy drivers in Wales include falling numbers of children available for adoption, which is partly a reflection of Wales's commitment that children should remain in their families

and communities where possible (National Adoption Service, 2023). There is a recognition that children are adopted when all alternatives to meet their care and protection needs have been exhausted, and with needs that are increasingly complex.

In 2020, the Welsh Government invested an additional £2.3 million to support adoption services in Wales, viewing adoption as a public investment to safeguard Wales's most vulnerable children and improve their outcomes (National Adoption Service, 2024). It has recognised the need to modernise adoption, making it relevant and adaptable to the needs of families now, and there is also recognition that adoption support services require further improvement (National Adoption Service 2023, 2024).

The National Adoption Service has a strategic plan, *Adopt Cymru 2025 and Beyond*, which focuses on four main areas: "the best families for our adopted children; great adoption support where and when it's needed; healthier contact through better birth family services; and better adoption records and access to information at any age" (National Adoption Service, 2023, p.3). Each strategic aim has a set of performance indicators to measure progress, and is reflective of the changing context of adoption in modern society.

The National Adoption Service has also made the commitment to being:

- more flexible, proactive, and responsive
- more supportive when children and families need help
- better at recognising and supporting the continuing importance of birth families in adopted children's lives
- better at providing information, support and services in adulthood as needed (National Adoption Service, 2024, p.3)

The National Adoption Service introduced a Framework for Adoption Support in 2016 (updated in 2019) which was part of the improvement strategy for adoption. It aimed to guarantee a 'core offer' of support for all adopted children and their parents in Wales (National Adoption Service, 2019, p.2), which:

- equips adoptive families at the start and supports their early days to encourage healthy and confident families
- provides effective information, advice or support as and when families need it and in a timely way so any issues that do arise are less likely to escalate into more serious issues
- provides ongoing support or easy re-entry to services where it is needed.

An evaluation of the framework, published in 2020 by the Institute of Public Care, highlighted that whilst good progress was being made, issues remained around consistency of access to support services; greater provision being needed for targeted and specialist support services, particularly for older children and children with complex needs; and the need for improved support in education settings (Institute of Public Care, 2020).



## Northern Ireland

Adoption legislation in Northern Ireland has recently undergone wide-ranging reform following the passing of the Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Act (2022). The legislation significantly reformed adoption law through the implementation of proposals in Northern Ireland's *Adopting the Future* strategy (2006) which required primary legislation, and by making amendments to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

The *Adopting the Future* strategy (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2006) was developed to modernise adoption legislation, policy and practice in Northern Ireland. There was recognition of the changes in the number and profile of children requiring adoption, including that most children are now adopted from care having experienced abuse and neglect; the need to expand who was eligible to adopt children reflecting modern family values; the wish to incorporate legislative and policy developments in the other UK nations, and most importantly, recognising the need to see the welfare, needs and rights of children as paramount in decision-making.

The strategy was developed following a review of adoption in Northern Ireland. However, a consultation on the proposed Bill to enact some of the changes proposed did not take place until 11 years later, in 2017. Furthermore, the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive and the COVID-19 pandemic have been cited as reasons for further delaying the Bill's passage. The Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Act (2022) has also taken account of more recent legislative and policy developments in the UK nations since the original consultation was published.

The principal changes outlined in the Act which are relevant for our review are as follows:

- The child's welfare as the paramount consideration for any court or adoption agency where adoption is being considered. (Note that the paramountcy principle was already included in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order (1995), but not specifically in relation to adoption).
- Adopted children and their families have a right to request an assessment of their support needs, and agencies must provide support if it is assessed as being required. An improved support offer is viewed as supporting recruitment efforts for prospective adopters in Northern Ireland, as well as recognising the long-term support needs of adopted children and their families.
- The establishment of a Northern Ireland Adoption and Children Act Register, a family-finding service which aims to tackle delays in children being adopted.
- The Act provides two routes to adoption: a) through parental consent or b) the adoption agency may secure a placement order from the court, authorising it to place a child with adopters whom they select. An adoption agency must apply for a placement order where it is satisfied that a child should be adopted but the child's parents do not consent to this or have withdrawn such consent. The Act's explanatory notes state that the aim here is to provide greater stability for



children, reduce uncertainty for adopters, but also that matters of parental consent should be dealt with earlier in the court process, so that birth parents are not presented with a fait accompli at the final adoption hearing.

The Act received Royal Assent in December 2022, but regulation and guidance to implement the Act are still in development.

## Methodology

We have chosen to undertake a focused mapping review of the relevant literature (Taylor et al., 2016). Utilising this approach allowed us to focus on (1) a specific subject, (2) a defined time period, and (3) targeted journal titles. This form of review is distinct because it focuses on the overall approach to knowledge production rather than the quality of the evidence, is concerned with the question 'what is happening in the field?' within a defined time period, and aims to provide a snapshot of available knowledge rather than explore the entirety of the research problem under study.

We were asked by Scottish Government to provide an overview of what is known currently about the availability, accessibility, quality and delivery of adoption services outside Scotland, including what works well, and what the challenges and issues are. We were asked to focus primarily on children who have been adopted from care, rather than other routes to adoption, such as international adoption or step-parent adoption.

The research questions developed for this review, in conjunction with the areas of interest identified by Scottish Government, were as follows:

1. How are prospective adoptive parents recruited and prepared for adopting a child/ren in countries outside Scotland? What works well, and what challenges and issues are there?
2. How do countries outside Scotland approach linking and matching children with adoptive families? What works well, and what challenges and issues are there?
3. What forms of life story/ life journey work are available in countries outside Scotland? Who delivers this work, with whom, and in what timeframe? What works well, and what challenges and issues are there?
4. In countries outside Scotland, what forms of contact after adoption take place between adopted children and their birth families or former foster families? Who supports those involved to prepare for and be in contact with each other? What works well, and what challenges and issues are there?
5. What post-adoption support services are available in countries outside Scotland? Who are the support services for, who delivers them, and how long are they available for? What do post-adoption support services cost? What works well and why, and what issues and challenges are there?
6. In countries outside Scotland, what support is offered to adults who were adopted as children in relation to their adoption? How is this support accessed? What works well, and what challenges and issues are there?

Whilst we were asked to focus on research and evidence outside Scotland, throughout the report we have included, where relevant and available, recent information about what is also known about current adoption legislation, policy, practice and research within Scotland. This helped us to identify key messages to contribute to the development of the adoption landscape in Scotland and what the current gaps in knowledge are.

It is important to note that each of the topics included in this review would merit a comprehensive literature review in their own right. Given the breadth of this review, and the time constraints, utilising a focused mapping approach was a pragmatic decision. It has allowed us to combine rigour with the flexibility to tailor our literature searches and analysis in such a way as to provide a broad understanding of the current adoption landscape in the UK and elsewhere, whilst not claiming that it is comprehensive. However, we hope that it will be a helpful contribution to inform the development of adoption policy and practice in Scotland.

Publications were identified through three routes. The first was a series of searches through the research databases PsycInfo and SCOPUS for peer-reviewed publications, utilising core search terms alongside specific terms for each topic. The structured database searches were restricted to the top 10 relevant journals for each search, to help narrow the field of study. The second route was sourcing grey literature, which are defined as publications that have not been peer-reviewed for academic journals. These included government reports, empirical research reports not published in academic journals, government statistics, policy documents, research briefings and practice guidance. These were sourced through the websites of public bodies, specialist practice and research organisations, research centre websites, government websites and through the reference lists of research included in this review. The third route was to include a small number of additional relevant peer-reviewed publications that were not identified in the structured database searches because they were either (1) not published in the top 10 relevant journals identified for each search, and/or (2) not published within the time period 2019 to 2024. We have chosen to include these either because they are seminal studies in the field, or because there was very limited literature available within the timeframe for a specific topic. To exclude them would have greatly limited our ability to contextualise some of the recent developments around adoption in the UK and internationally

We initially undertook searches of the peer-reviewed and grey literature over a 10-year period (2014-2024), but this yielded too many publications to manage within the timeframe of this review. As a result, we then narrowed the search criteria to the most recent five years (2019-2024). This also provided an opportunity to focus solely on contemporary policy and practice approaches in the context of adoption. A total of 81 peer-reviewed papers from the structured database searches were ultimately included in this review. An additional 117 publications were drawn on from the grey literature and additional relevant peer-reviewed publications.

A full account of the process of searching for and identifying the literature included in this review, and the data extraction and analysis process, is included in [Appendix 1](#).

## Building adoptive families for children: Recruitment, preparation, linking and matching

This section of the review considers how adoptive families are built for children. The focus is on how adoptive parents are recruited, the preparation of adoptive parents for adoption, the linking and matching of children with adoptive families, and the characteristics that underpin all of these processes to build adoptive families considerately.

The language used to describe 'family building' rather than 'family finding' is a reflection of recommendations made by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence's (APPGAP) in their *Strengthening Families* report (APPGAP, 2021), recognising that adoption is a lifelong commitment, and linking and matching children with adoptive families in the 'finding family' process is simply the start of the experience in which an adoptive new family is built.

Twenty-five of the peer-reviewed papers from the structured database search contributed to this section. Of these, 19 papers were based on primary research: 11 were focused on qualitative research, four were focused on quantitative research, and four were focused on mixed-methods research. Three papers were literature reviews: one of which was a scoping review, one was a foundational review, and one was a systematic review. An additional three papers were discursive in nature, introducing new services and adoption practice. Of all 25 papers, 13 were about North America (10 in the USA, two in Canada and one across the USA and Canada), 10 were about the UK (five about Wales, four about England and one about Northern Ireland), one was about Portugal, and the final paper was written in Australia but focused on a review of international literature (literature from the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Portugal, Italy, Ireland and China). An additional 23 pieces of grey literature and peer-reviewed papers were included throughout this section.

### Recruiting adoptive parents

Successfully recruiting adoptive parents is a vital step in the adoption process, whereby the right prospective adopters are recruited at the right time to meet the needs of the children waiting for adoption. Like many of the topics covered by our review, there has been a wealth of research seeking to understand how adoptive parents are, or should be, recruited, and the successes, or not, of different recruitment techniques. The limited time period (2019-24) of this review, however, means that in this section we have focused on the recent research papers relevant papers to our research questions. As such, our review found two peer-reviewed papers that directly sought to understand the motivations of prospective adopters to adopt children; one focused on the motivations of people to adopt sibling groups in the USA and one on the motivations of people in the USA to adopt a second time. We did not find any literature on adopter motivations published in the UK in the past five years.

Frost and Goldberg (2020a) researched adoptive parents in the USA who sought to adopt a group of siblings. The adoptive parents in their study noted a desire to adopt siblings as an altruistic endeavour, but cautioned that they were sometimes asked to consider single-child adoption initially, therefore needing to “hold out” for siblings. The authors also noted a “startling and overwhelming initial adjustment” (p.9) to multiple parenthood, and surprise from adoptive parents about the persistent impact of trauma on their children. In a further paper, Frost and Goldberg (2020b) highlighted that adoptive parents who chose to adopt a second child do so to achieve the family size that they had always imagined or to provide a sibling for their first adopted child. In some instances, where a biological sibling of their child also needed an adoptive home, this prompted them to make the decision to adopt again. Adoptive parents who sought to adopt a second child also noted challenges they needed to overcome, including navigating adoption-specific parenting tasks, such as managing ongoing communication with the child’s birth family. As with all families, some found the transition to caring for two children significantly increased their responsibilities and required an adjustment of their parenting capacity. Nonetheless, other parents found the transition to second parenthood easier than expected and attributed the success to having more experience addressing the adoption-specific needs of their children.

While it is helpful to consider the reasons why prospective adopters are interested in adoption, adoption agencies and local authorities also need to understand the characteristics of prospective adopters that are considered necessary to provide permanent, stable homes for children in need of care and protection. Vanderwill et al.’s (2021) study in the USA noted sixteen foster, kinship and adoptive caregiver-related factors that are associated with permanency and placement stability. The most significant of these factors was:

- Access to support systems, including family, friends, support groups, child welfare agencies, and mental and physical care resources.
- Sufficient economic resources, with agencies encouraged to provide financial support when necessary, rather than using insufficient economic resources as a specific measure to exclude some potential prospective adopters.
- Attentiveness to the caregiver-child relationship, such as creating a secure, nurturing and supportive environment.
- Birth family connections, including adopters building their own relationships with birth parents, and maintaining relationships between children and birth parents.

Vanderwill et al. (2021) argued that so-called “resource parents<sup>1</sup>” (foster carers, kinship carers or adoptive parents) who possess these characteristics, skills, knowledge and abilities may “have the capacity to be strong resource parents” (p.516). The authors suggest that developing procedures and trainings to help foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents build their capacity in these areas could help to create safe, stable and nurturing environments that can promote permanency, stability and wellbeing for children and young people.

## Approaches to recruitment

In 2024, Adoption England set out plans for a national recruitment strategy to increase the number of adoptive parents for children who need adoptive families. The strategy seeks to:

- Raise awareness about modern adoption and the lifelong benefits of adoption.
- Encourage people from diverse backgrounds and communities to consider adoption, maximising opportunities for children to be placed with families that reflect their history, heritage, needs and diverse communities.
- Improve the preparation, support and experience of prospective adopters and reduce delay for children.

The National Adoption Recruitment Programme Board is intended to drive collaborative working between Regional Adoption Agencies, Voluntary Adoption Agencies, local authorities, policy makers and other stakeholders to shape the adoption system (Adoption England, 2024a). This endeavour to recruit adoptive parents at a national level is also supported by the *You Can Adopt* campaign, which seeks to reach potential adoptive parents for children who are waiting too long to be adopted (Coram, 2023a). The campaign brings together a coalition of charities and includes the release of short films featuring real life stories from people who have adopted and fostered children, as well as people who have been adopted.

At a regional level, England’s Regional Adoption agencies reported that word-of-mouth remained a key source of recruitment for adoptive parents, and most carried out targeted recruitment initiatives (Ofsted, 2024). An example of a targeted recruitment initiative with

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<sup>1</sup> This term is often used in the North American literature to collectively describe residential carers, foster carers, kinship carers and/or adoptive parents. When the authors have used this terminology, we have repeated it in our review, to be clear about who the authors were referring to and how their findings and conclusions should be interpreted. Where the authors provide a descriptor, we will also state which groups specifically they are referring to, as some papers used “resource parents” to only mean foster carers and adoptive parents, and others including residential carers and/or kinship carers, or a combination of these groups. We acknowledge that when an author has written about “resource parents”, it is challenging to distinguish which of their findings or conclusions relate specifically to adoption, and which relate to foster care or kinship care.

positive results was One Adoption West Yorkshire (OAWY), whose recruitment of approved adopters from 'Black and ethnically diverse backgrounds' rose from 10% in 2021-2022 to 21% in 2022-2023.

A Department for Education report in England based on behavioural insights methodology outlined some key interventions that could generate more potential when seeking to recruit prospective foster carers and adopters (Kantar Public UK, 2022):

- Providing a 'safe space' to ask questions and easily access reliable information.
- Ensuring a more fluid approach to fostering and adoption enquiries, capitalising on the overlap between fostering and adoption.
- Embracing challenge in a supportive way, acknowledging that challenge is part of the experience of everyone.
- Enabling access to the everyday reality of fostering and adoption, whether through testimonials, online communities, or other forums to share stories and ask questions, countering misconceptions and normalising the experience.

The authors recommended that recruitment strategies are comprised of four pillars:

- **INSPIRE** – tapping into prospective applicants' vision for success to bring fostering and adoption top of mind and ignite their desire to pursue them.
- **UNLOCK** – supporting people to realise their potential and see themselves fostering or adopting.
- **ADVANCE** – instilling a sense of urgency and facilitating prospective applicants to explore options and choose the one most suited to them.
- **EQUIP** – providing ongoing support and guidance to prospective applicants to tackle anxieties and misconceptions about the care system and the application process.

## Preparing adoptive parents

Adoptive parents need to be well-prepared to undertake the task of permanently caring for and raising a child or children, and a child or children who may have experienced trauma, neglect and/or have complex additional support needs. A large part of being well-prepared is to undertake appropriate assessments and provide sufficient training for adoptive parents from the beginning of the process. The papers reviewed in this section provide a general overview of the research there has been in recent years about the need to prepare adoptive parents, and of approaches to preparing prospective adopters. There are of course many more peer-reviewed papers and information in grey literature which speaks to this area. The information provided for our review therefore provides a snapshot of contemporary research about preparing adoptive parents.

The *Assessment of Adopters* international literature review by CoramBAAF (Poore and Simmonds, 2024) highlights the different approaches to the preparation and assessment of

adopters, the length of preparation and assessment processes, and the quality of care that adopters can provide. The authors note that in the USA and The Netherlands agencies typically use more structured assessments with standardised questionnaires than the UK, and the UK is cited as unique in the use of panels to scrutinise and recommend adopters for approval (although there were examples of other countries in the review using panels during the matching process).

Poore and Simmonds (2024) also highlighted that the length of these processes varies internationally, with timelines of three to six months in the USA, three to five months in The Netherlands, and a minimum of three months in Australia. Overall, they suggest that determining the quality of care that prospective adopters can provide for children is an essential part of the assessment and preparation process that should go beyond simple descriptions of the applicant's history, characteristics, and circumstances. Instead, assessors should undertake an analytical assessment from the outset, including the prospective adopter or adopters' attachment history and their current attachment style.

During the preparation phase, LaBrenz et al. (2020) recommend that adoptive parents need more education from the outset about the behaviours that adopted children may exhibit, the complex trauma that children may have experienced, and the therapeutic parenting techniques that could help them to better support their adopted children. Furthermore, Poore and Simmonds (2024) provide a list of recommendations that pre-adoption training should contain, including information about:

- Mental health, medical and developmental issues that may arise as a result of risk factors (for example, genetic inheritance, prenatal substance exposure, maltreatment, trauma and experiences in foster care).
- Normative dynamics and issues in adoption, including loss and grief resulting from separation from significant adults and/or children in their lives.
- Identity issues that arise from children's history and heritage, including how children process their adoption story at different ages, the impact on other children in the adoptive family, and the influence of ethnic, cultural, religious and language differences.
- Parenting strategies that facilitate the care and development of children who have experience trauma and loss, and which promote attachment.
- Managing relationships with the birth family (and other people important to a child).
- Bias and stigma that can impact upon adoptive families (such as single parenthood, LGBTQ+ parents, parents from minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds).

Adoptive parents should also be provided with full disclosure of information about their child's development and characteristics, including biopsychosocial history and trauma, and supplemental information to assist adoptive parents in understanding the short and longer term implications of specific risk factors (Poore and Simmonds, 2024). This need for



information was also echoed by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence (APPGAP) (2021) in their *Strengthening Families* report, which highlighted that 55% of adoptive parents who participated in their consultation reported not having all of the information that they needed about their adopted child. To help address some of these challenges, Shelley et al. (2023) developed a small pilot programme with health colleagues in one area in England to improve the information given to adoption panels and adoptive parents by medical advisors. They note that medical advisors are required to provide a summary of a child's health, health history and any needs for health care which could arise in the future for inclusion in the Child Permanence Report, which is then shared by the medical advisor with adoptive parents (either during face-to-face or via virtual meetings). Shelley et al. (2023) noted that there is no standardised approach to these summary documents, and that their content varies not only between local authorities, but within local authorities. They developed a standardised version of the summary form for medical advisors to use, which they found was received positively by their initial focus group participants, comprising adopters, a person who was adopted, and professional stakeholders involved in adoption (medical advisors, social workers, and a local authority professional advisor for adoption). These focus group participants appreciated standardised information and thought the format would be beneficial for adoptive parents. The authors argue that it is possible to develop standardised processes for sharing information and communicating with adoptive parents about children's health, biopsychosocial history and trauma, which could help adoptive parents feel more prepared for adoption.

Alongside receiving only limited information about the child or children they are adopting, the APPGAP (2021) *Strengthening Families* report noted that many adopters said they received no preparation or training about what to expect from the matching process specifically, resulting in some feeling abandoned when there was little communication, or, alternatively, feeling overwhelmed by the number of children's profiles they were asked to review. The authors, therefore, recommended that training on matching in particular should include:

- What to expect in terms of the regularity of communication.
- How to conduct difficult conversations about whether or not a child is a good match.
- How to navigate the competitive element of matching.
- How to remain emotionally resilient.
- How to support any birth or other children in the prospective adoptive family during the matching process.

## Specific training available

Throughout our review we read about specific training programmes and projects that were available for potential adopters and adoptive parents, with some overlap for foster and kinship carers. While much of the training and preparation we read about is relevant throughout the child's adoption (including pre-adoption and post-adoption), this section

focuses on the literature which discussed training that may be especially helpful in the initial stages of the adoption process as part of preparing adoptive parents. The list of services identified here is not an exhaustive list of all services available internationally, and it is worth highlighting that across the UK a variety of training is available for prospective adopters. Much of this training is provided by adoption agencies and voluntary organisations, such as Adoption UK, with many of these training opportunities available regardless of the agency or local authority supporting the prospective adopters. Funding for these services varies and adopters may sometimes need to pay for training.

### LEAF – Learning and Empowerment for Adoptive Families

LEAF consists of a group education and support programme in the USA, created to provide adopted families with the language and skillset needed to effectively communicate about adoption, deepen their understanding of the impact of adoption, and help them to connect to other families with similar experiences (Murray et al., 2023). The evaluation of LEAF suggests that the project can benefit family functioning and relationships, through teaching adoptive parents the skills and open communication channels needed to develop connection, nurture and attachment with their children and to cope and be resilient as they navigate creating their new family.

### Encompass

The Encompass program is provided by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (MSPCC), a private, non-profit organisation. The training is a trauma-informed care (TIC) model of support to improve outcomes for children who are living with foster carers, kinship carers or adoptive parents. Encompass focuses on recognising trauma in children, attending to children's behavioural health needs, and easing the stress of caregiving. The training is provided through peer trauma coaching (where experienced foster carers trained in the 'Resource Parent Curriculum' and Encompass program goals provides weekly one-on-one peer trauma coaching), skills enhancement peer support programmes, and extended community supports (Campbell et al., 2023). An evaluation of the pilot project found that caregivers experienced an increase in confidence in trauma-informed caregiving and the use of external support systems. The caregivers reported that they "enjoyed the emotional and material support offered by the program" (p.7), although noted that it could offer more in terms of helping carers to navigate challenges related to working with social services. Overall, the authors suggest that Encompass can improve knowledge about the impact of trauma on children, encourage trauma-informed care for children, and enhance the use of community-based support throughout adoption, foster or kinship care (Campbell et al., 2023).

### Pathways to Permanence 2: Parenting children who have experienced trauma and loss

Pathways to Permanence 2 is a trauma-informed curriculum designed for 'resource parents' (adoptive, foster and kinship carers) in Canada (Filippelli et al., 2022), offered by The Adoption Council of Ontario and funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services in the state's child welfare system. The training is provided over eight

sessions and informed by the Seneca/Kinship Center's ACT: An Adoption and Permanency Curriculum for Child Welfare and Mental Health Professionals. The evaluation determined that 'resource parents' who participated experienced a significant increase in resilience, overcoming stressors associated with parenting a child who has experienced loss and trauma. Similar to LEAF (Murray et al., 2023) and Encompass (Campbell et al., 2023), Pathways to Permanence 2 is noted as an encouraging training and support programme for increasing knowledge of child development and parenting, improved family functioning, and caregiver resilience, which could be helpful during pre-adoption preparation of adoptive parents (Filippelli et al., 2022).

### NTDC – National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents

The National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents (NTDC) in the USA is a programme funded by the United States Children's Bureau, a federal agency within the government of the USA, to help equip 'resource parents' with the knowledge and skills needed to undertake trauma-informed parenting (Salazar et al., 2023). It was created with families with lived experience of fostering and adoption, and aims to develop an evidence-based, cost-free, comprehensive curriculum and training programme to improve stability for the arrangements put in place to care for a child, rates of permanency and child and family well-being. The evaluation found the training had a small, positive effect on participants' knowledge and skills in trauma-informed parenting and child development. The authors recommend that NTDC training may increase resource parents' skills more than 'training as normal', and suggest that the training can help 'resource parents' prepare for caring for children with experience of trauma, as well as the experience of separation and loss of their birth families.

## Linking and matching adoptive families with children

Linking and matching children placed for adoption with adoptive families is a key component of building adoptive families for children. It is the process through which adoptive parents are identified and considered for specific children, informed by their needs, and vice versa, including the notion of how the adoptive families will 'fit' with the children placed for adoption. Haysom et al. (2020) identified an evolving interest in this concept of 'fit' during linking and matching processes for children and foster carers or adoptive parents, from 'objective features', such as 'race' and 'IQ', to 'subjective concepts', such as culture, expectations and relationships. They noted that issues of identity and foster carer or adoptive parent expectations are prominent when considering matching between children and carers, emphasising that the matching process, alongside the formation of carer/child relationships, is highly pertinent to the success of any arrangement made for the care and protection of a child. Nonetheless, the APPGAP *Strengthening Families* report found that "...matching practices are all too often inconsistent, with adopters feeling ill-prepared for the process." (APPGAP, 2021, p.6). As such, there is a need to consider the principles that underline how children and adoptive parents are linked and matched, and the approaches to linking and matching that are available for children

and adoptive families, to highlight components that are helpful and conducive to building families. The scope of our review means that it is not an exhaustive examination of all the research about linking and matching for children and prospective adopters published to date. What we identified in the recently published information has been summarised throughout this section.

Cleary and Grant's (2022) Scotland-based research into cross-border adoptive placements highlighted different approaches in the use of 'family finding' resources such as Scotland's Adoption Register and Link Maker. The researchers noted, through interviews with practitioners in Scotland's local authorities, Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) and with adoptive parents, that family finding tended to be either adopter-led, practitioner-led, or a collaborative approach between prospective adoptive parents and practitioners. VAAs were more likely to encourage prospective adopters to register with family finding resources at an earlier stage, with local authority adoption agencies preferring to explore matches with local children initially. The authors highlighted that for some adoptive families, cross-border placements, where children from other UK nations were placed with adoptive families in Scotland, have enabled adoptive parents in Scotland to find the "best possible" match, both for their child and for their family (Cleary and Grant, 2022, p.58).

An emerging concern during the linking and matching process for adoptive parents and children is the use of genetic testing to help better inform prospective adopters about children's biological health history. Our review found two papers from Wales that explored the views of social workers and medical advisors who had been involved in pre-adoption genetic testing. Both papers acknowledge that genetic testing for the purposes of matching children and young people with suitable adoptive parents is still an emerging area of practice and remains very contentious, with debates centring on the ethics of widely testing children before they can make their own decisions and provide their own consent (Jackson and Burke, 2019; Arribas-Ayllon et al., 2022).

The complexities here are such that while Arribas-Ayllon et al. (2022) reported that medical practitioners felt general unwelcome pressure to perform genome-wide genetic testing on children prior to adoption, without specifying where this pressure was coming from, Jackson and Burke (2019) reported that medical advisers were uneasy that, without genetic testing, they were preparing assessments and sharing information without all of the relevant knowledge of the child's health and family history. Arribas-Ayllon et al. (2022) stated, "not testing children for known risks", such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), "'closes down the pool of potential people' [willing to adopt], which implies that testing reduces uncertainty and therefore improves the child's prospects of placement" (p.730). However, they repeatedly cautioned that some of these 'known risks', including FASD, can be diagnosed through clinical assessment without genome-wide testing, and that genome-wide testing in general plays a contributory role in clinical judgement and may not by itself explain a child's condition. Overall, the role of genetic testing in adoption is an extremely complex area of practice, which involves an ethical dilemma about a potential clash between the need to support children in need of care and protection who may be adopted and children's rights to autonomy and privacy. These two papers present

the start of a conversation that is likely occurring across the UK and internationally, as genetic testing in general becomes more affordable and accessible for all families.

Children's foster carers can be a valuable support in helping to prepare adoptive parents. Blackmore et al. (2020) utilised interview data with 40 adoptive parents in the Wales Adoption Cohort study nine months after their adoptive child or children began living with them. They analysed the experiences of 24 adopters who had specifically mentioned sharing materials (such as photographs and information about the adoptive family) with foster carers prior to their child moving to live with them, as well as their experiences of the introduction process. These materials were offered to support children to meet their adoptive parents and familiarise the children and parents with each other. The authors highlighted that linking with their child's foster carer was a positive experience for many of the adopters, and some had continued to be in touch with one another. However, several adoptive parents also reported that the transition was very difficult for foster carers caring for their child, who experienced a sense of grief and loss during the transition from their care. In these circumstances, several adopters commented that important information about their child had not been shared, and that the foster carers' own distress complicated this change for their child. Blackmore et al. (2020) recommended that foster carers as well as adopters should be sensitively supported during the introduction process, and should receive more training on this specific role as well as the benefits for children when foster carers work directly with adopters.

Collaboration between foster carers and adoptive parents was also discussed by Meakings et al. (2018) in another paper from the Wales Adoption Cohort study. The authors highlighted that adoptive parents were not always clear about whether or how ongoing communication with foster carers should be maintained, also noting that it could be emotionally charged for everyone. Blackmore et al. (2020) suggest that the early connections between adoptive parents and foster carers can facilitate the maintenance of these relationships post-adoption, arguing that these relationships should be encouraged, facilitated and supported. Ongoing communication between adopted children and their previous foster carers is discussed further in the [Keeping in touch and keeping in mind](#) section of this report.

## Approaches to linking and matching

The literature review provided helpful insights into what is needed when linking and matching children placed for adoption with adoptive families and some specific approaches were also highlighted. These included:

### Adoption exchange days

Adoption exchange days were described as an opportunity for prospective adopters, social workers and children's foster carers to meet and talk about children for whom it has been determined adoption is the type of care and family most suited to support their needs. Here more information can be shared about a child who prospective adopters may have already read about in the 'profile' that is prepared for prospective adopters (Scotland's

Adoption Register, 2020). The events are noted as opportunities for adopters to "put themselves forward as a potential family for a specific child or sibling group" (Scotland's Adoption Register, 2020, p.2) and for foster carers to speak openly and honestly with potential adopters to give a much fuller understanding of who the children they are caring for are. The only evaluation of adoption exchange days that we were able to find in the scope of this review, Scotland's Adoption Register's (2024) *Annual Report 2023-2024*, notes that two adoption exchange days were held in 2023, both face-to-face, in Dundee, resulting in three matches for children with their adoptive families. After an adoption exchange day takes place, social workers follow-up with foster carers and prospective adopters to explore any potential links, with foster carers actively involved in providing feedback about their thoughts and reflections having met the prospective adopters.

### Adoption activity days

Adoption activity days are described as informal events that provide an opportunity for approved prospective adopters and children for whom it has been determined adoption is the type of care and family most suited to support their needs to meet in a fun, playful environment (Yap, 2016; Coram, 2023b). Adoption activity days are intended to allow children and prospective adopters to explore whether they have a connection or "chemistry", which may not be facilitated or available in the same ways in other parts of the linking and matching process (Yap, 2016). In the report *Transforming the Lives of Children Who Wait: 10 Years of Adoption Activity Days* (Coram, 2023b), Coram reflect on a decade of adoption activity days, highlighting that 160 events had taken place, with 4,500 adopters attending events, and 1,400 children being matched with a family they met there. Scotland's Adoption Register (2024) notes that one adoption activity day was held in the year 2023-2024, resulting in two matches for children with their adoptive families. The 2016 evaluation of Coram's adoption activity days (Yap, 2016) indicates that most children who were involved in the activity days had been identified as waiting longer to be adopted, possibly due to their age, because they are waiting to be adopted with their brothers and/or sisters, or because they have additional emotional, behavioural or physical support needs, and were likely to benefit from "more creative family finding initiatives" (p.9).

### Adopting Together, Wales

Shelton and Paine (2021) reflect on the development of Adopting Together in Wales, the first national adoption services for 'harder to place' children. It is a collaboration between voluntary adoption agencies and regional adoption teams in Wales to secure permanence for children for whom it is taking too long to be cared for by an adoptive family (Shelton et al., 2020). Shelton and Paine (2021) highlighted that the Wales Adoption Cohort study helped to identify individual, family-based and structural factors associated with early adoption success, as well as the challenges and barriers that were present. Adopting Together was developed following the longitudinal findings from the study. It focuses on finding adoptive families for older children, sibling groups and children with complex psychological and physical support needs who have not been matched with a family in 12 months (Shelton et al., 2020). Shelton and Paine (2021) note that, within two years, the



service successfully matched 18 children, including six groups of siblings and five individual children who had all been waiting for over a year for an adoptive family.

## Step Up Programme

The Step Up Programme was developed by Coram as an intensive family finding service that works to help match prospective adoptive families with children who often wait the longest for loving, supportive adoptive homes (Johnson Hall, 2024). The author defines the characteristics of children who often wait the longest as including children from minority racial and ethnic groups, children who are being adopted with their brothers and/or sisters, children aged 5-years-old or older, and children who need additional emotional, behavioural or physical health support. Step Up was designed to be flexible and personalised for each child, providing family finding support for a minimum of two months and a maximum of six months. The family finding support included funding for children to attend adoption activity days, professional videos and photographs of the child or children for their online profiles, and/or therapeutic support (note, the report does not specify if this therapeutic support is for the child or for the prospective adopters). In total, 24 children were referred to Step Up during year one of the programme, and the evaluation found that the programme has the potential to “speed up the placement” of many children who often wait the longest for loving and supportive adoptive families, especially children who have two or more of the characteristics listed by the author (Johnson Hall, 2024). Overall, the author recommends that the Step Up programme could be expanded to offer 12 months of support, rather than the current maximum of six months, highlighting that the ‘family finders’ involved in the evaluation felt the programme was incredibly valuable for this group of children.

## Adoption England: Development of National Matching Practice Standards

National Matching Practice Standards were developed by Adoption England (2024b, p.6) to: achieve child-centred practice in matching; enable every child who has a plan for adoption to have every possible opportunity for matching; help standardise practice guidance and outcomes in delivery across agencies; promote confidence and best practice; and be used as a dynamic tool to organise and strengthen local arrangements for matching. The standards are a framework to guide good practice and promote standardisation across all agencies. Seven standards are identified, with Standard 4 focused on linking and matching:

*Standard 4: Making a good match between a child and prospective adopter is a highly skilled task and it is vital for both the child and the prospective adopter that informed and careful consideration is given to the matching activity.*

*(Adoption England, 2024b, p.13)*

Underpinning the matching considerations in Standard 4 is an emphasis on the need to consider the child’s race, culture, religion and language when matching with a prospective adoptive family, and for all digital and non-digital matching resources both locally and nationally to be used proactively and creatively to avoid delay in identifying suitable matches.

When considering effective practice during linking and matching, some clear principles could be extrapolated within the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence's (APPGAP) *Strengthening Families* report. These principles include:

- Finding a good balance between children becoming part of an adoptive family in a 'timely way' and going at the child's pace during their transition.
- Undertaking child-focused matching, with clear and frequent communication between everyone involved.
- Effective preparation and training for prospective adopters about the matching process.
- Linking and matching practices should develop from 'finding family' to 'family building', including robust, future-facing support plans, fully involving the family being matched, with a recognition that 'finding' a family is not the final goal, but rather a step in an ongoing journey.
- The capabilities of digital tools, including Link Maker, should continue to be developed to enhance the efficiency and quality of matching between children and prospective adopters.

## Building families considerately

While considering building adoptive families for children, there were a number of papers that discussed issues about characteristics that need to be held in mind throughout the recruitment, preparation, linking and matching phases in order for children to be adopted. We believe that there will also be many more research papers about this that did not come into the scope of our review, either because these were published outwith the 2019 to 2024 timescale that we used, or because these were published in journals that did not fit with the methodology used for this particular review. Nonetheless, this section explores the additional considerations that we did read about in the literature, while demonstrating the impact of these additional issues.

### Ethnicity and culture

In our review, where we read about ethnicity and culture, challenges were noted with recruiting adoptive parents from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the UK and in other countries in the Global North.

One study (Chowdhury, 2021) highlighted the views women in the UK from Somali heritage had about foster care and adoption, where many felt it was inappropriate for children from Somali heritage to be adopted by white and/or Christian families. The women reported desires to adopt and/or foster children, rooted in moral and ethical beliefs that Somali children in England should be able to grow up in families similar to their own, but noted feeling unsure about whether adoption specifically was permitted under Islamic law. While they spoke of these cultural and religious factors that can be a motivator for adoption or fostering, they also acknowledged that there can be a discrepancy between UK-based



expectations of adoptive parents and foster carers and traditional household features. For example, the cultural norm for many Somali families is for children to share their bedroom with their siblings, which would be unacceptable in UK-based adoption and foster care.

As a result of the long-standing under-representation of adopters from a range of cultures and ethnicities, there has been a relaxation of previous legislative and policy decisions which discouraged transracial adoptive families. Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. (2022) explored the impact of these changes to adoption law in England, and suggested that prospective adopters and social work professionals still prioritise adoptions between people who look visually similar, even if from different religious, cultural or ethnic backgrounds, which can create more delay in matching children with adoptive families.

When transracial adoption – where a child of one racial or ethnic group is adopted with adoptive parents of another racial or ethnic group – does occur in the UK, the process usually involves matching children within minority racial and ethnic groups into homes with parents who would identify as 'White British' as defined in the Census (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

In an attempt to help support decision-makers and decision-making processes for transracial adoption, Cane et al. (2024) developed AFDiT, the anti-racist framework for decision-making and transitioning children from minoritised racial and ethnic groups into transracial adoptive families. The framework aims to equip social workers with the tools, knowledge and resources needed to facilitate positive identity development for children as they grow.

While there are hopes to recruit more prospective adopters from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds, there is a need to address barriers and biases in the adoption process. The BRAC2eD model developed by Cane (2023) provides resources and guidance to help de-bias decision-making in the assessment of prospective adopters from minoritised ethnic groups. The model contains seven steps, summarised as:

- Become aware of bias (B);
- engage and Review internal conversations (R);
- consider the need to deal with Ambiguity in decision-making (A);
- have an appreciation of Cognitive resources as helpful aids to evidence-based decision-making (C);
- Change perspectives (C);
- education (e); and
- Deliberate and disconfirm bias and automatic responses (D).

In the *Strengthening Families* report, APPGAP (2021) also made recommendations to help reduce bias in the adoption process and recruit more adoptive parents from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds. They suggested ensuring that there should be racial diversity and representation in the social work workforce and on adoption and matching panels; that

social workers should be supported and trained to take a culturally literate approach to their work, and; every local authority should have a strategy for identifying, at the earliest stages, for which children it might take longer to match with a suitable adoptive family, and a clear process for seeking matches for these children in a timely way.

## Adopters' gender identity and sexuality

The research we reviewed has also reported specific considerations regarding prospective adopters' gender identities and sexualities. The research indicates that people who identify as belonging to LGBTQ+ communities are likely to experience the adoption process differently to heterosexual, cisgender prospective adopters. For instance, Kelsall-Knight and Bradbury-Jones (2024) noted significant challenges with heterosexism in the adoption process, noting that heterosexism is "discrimination or prejudice against gay people on the assumption that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation" (p.4), which leads to the lack of representation of LGBTQ+ relationships in the recruitment and assessment process. The authors suggest that adoption services assume heteronormative adoption experiences, without recognising the nuances within sexuality and gender identities. This makes it challenging to recruit LGBTQ+ adoptive parents and does not acknowledge the strengths that LGBTQ+ people can bring to the adoption process. Additionally, research by Goldberg et al. (2019) highlights that when LGBTQ+ prospective adopters are progressing through the recruitment and preparation process, they may be more likely to stop their efforts to foster or adopt children due to additional challenges of discrimination related to their sexual orientation and gender identity, which may increase the delay they experience in trying to care for a child and to build a family. Additionally, Goldberg et al.'s (2020) research noted that transgender prospective adopters in the USA reported that they were more likely to experience greater barriers and discrimination than cisgender lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer people, including greater concerns raised about their mental health-related and finance-related discrimination.

Some of these challenges to sexuality and gender identity are suggested to be due to conflicting messages from professionals involved in the adoption process (Gato et al., 2021). For instance, in Portugal, prospective adopters discuss practitioners expecting them to be comfortable with their own sexual identity, but these practitioners could show discomfort if the prospective adopters publicly expressed their identity, such as attendance at Pride events. Gato et al. (2021) suggest that practitioners need sufficient training and experience with the social context of lesbian and gay communities to better prepare assessments for prospective adopters. Furthermore, to overcome the barriers and biases highlighted here, Kelsall-Knight and Bradbury-Jones (2024) suggest that social workers and social care departments need to incorporate LGBTQ+ identities, particularly the intersectionality of these identities, into their workforce recruitment and assessment procedures.

## Difference in timescales for adoption

The research reviewed suggests there are also specific considerations needed when exploring the adoption of children for whom a match takes longer than for other children.

Reference is often made to 'hard to place' and 'harder to place' children, although this language does not feel child centred. Instead, this section uses the phrase 'children who find themselves waiting longer for an adoptive family'.

For some children, matching with their adopted family can take longer than for other children. Matching must meet the specific and individual needs of each and every child. It can take longer for a match to be found for children who are four years of age and older, are part of a group of siblings, and/or who have additional support needs, which can be related to behaviour, mental health and/or physical health.

Where older children are concerned, Palmer et al. (2023) report that adopters in Wales who choose to adopt children aged 4 years and older do so for a variety of reasons. The authors note that some adoptive parents do not want to parent babies and go through the 'steep learning curve' of raising infants, whereas others "felt that they were giving a child a chance to have a home that they may not otherwise have had" (p.218). Additionally, some felt their own age made them more suitable to adopt older children, and others suggested that it may be "less risky" (p.218) to adopt older children as any developmental or behavioural challenges may already be known. Ultimately, the authors suggest that "the decision to adopt an older child was framed as a positive, proactive choice, albeit sometimes after a process of learning about the needs and availability of the children awaiting placement" (p.219).

Frost and Goldberg (2020a) reported on the experiences in the USA of adopters transitioning to multiple parenthood when adopting a sibling group from foster care, with recognition that it often takes longer for groups of siblings to be matched with a suitable adoptive family. The adoptive parents in this study explained that they felt adopting a sibling group would be good for their families, for the children, and for the child welfare system. This was framed as a largely altruistic decision, particularly when the adoptive parents in this research were often offered a 'singleton' placement first, despite an expressed desire for a sibling group. Palmer et al.'s (2023) findings build on this discussion, and note that prospective adopters who ultimately match with and adopt a group of siblings can do so because of their own moral stance to not separate sisters and/or brothers from each other. Frost and Goldberg (2020) acknowledge that understanding the experiences of parents who adopt groups of siblings is important for expanding practitioners' ability to support and expand these types of adoptions, with the hope that this would reduce the time it takes to match families for these children.

## Early permanence

In 2012, the UK Government's Department for Education, which has policy responsibility for adoption in England, produced *Proposals for Placing Children with their Potential Adopters Earlier*, where they highlighted plans to introduce a new legal duty on local authorities to consider placing children with carers who are likely to become their permanent carers if the evidence available indicates that it is unlikely that the child or children will return to live with their birth parents. As a result, they opted to fund children's

charity Coram to broaden its reach as a National Centre of Excellence in Adoption and Early Permanence (Department for Education, 2012).

The AAPGAP (2021) *Strengthening Families* report suggests two forms of early permanence, 'concurrent planning'<sup>2</sup> and 'fostering for adoption'<sup>3</sup>. In both cases, children are fostered by carers who are already approved as adopters. This means that, depending on the outcome of any care proceedings, children can be adopted by the foster carer or return to live with their birth family. This approach provides a single consistent placement and limits the number of attachments and relationships children develop prior to adoption that can be 'broken' through the adoption process. In 2018, Coram produced a report that suggested the use of early permanence was set to rise in all but one Regional Adoption Agency in England, although the report noted a need for a shift in thinking for early permanence to be embedded culturally (Ludvigsen, 2018). Brown and Mason (2021) reported that fostering for adoption was more rapidly implemented in Regional Adoption Agencies than concurrent planning after the legislative changes noted by Department for Education (2012). However, there remained confusion and variation regarding the use of the term early permanence.

The APPGAP *Strengthening Families* report (2021) highlighted that early permanence carers were often able to form stronger relationships with birth families than through traditional adoption routes due to the fostering role that they play from the beginning. This includes having regular contact with the birth family from the outset, which can result in early permanence carers feeling empathy for the birth parents, which could facilitate positive relationships. Similar findings were echoed by Nadeem et al. (2023) who suggested that 'resource parents' in the USA may know more about birth parents through concurrent planning than in other types of care. Mannion et al. (2023) also found that most concurrent carers in their study in Northern Ireland perceived the opportunity to get to know the birth family as beneficial to their duty of support for the child, especially when understanding and integrating their child's birth family story into adoptive family life. Additionally, routes to early permanence enabled adoptive parents to find out more about the child's history and background in a more holistic way, by speaking with the people most involved in their life, providing valuable information for life story work. Nonetheless, there can be a significant emotional cost to the adults involved in early permanence. These included ongoing legal activity and birth family visits more than one year after a child is being cared for by the prospective adopters (Nadeem et al., 2023), the uncertainty for the prospective adopters that the child may never be adopted and may return to live with their

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<sup>2</sup> A model where family reunification and a permanence plan through adoption are pursued in parallel. Carers are dually approved as foster carers and adopters.

<sup>3</sup> A model where there is no active plan for family reunification, and a permanence plan through adoption is the only option being pursued for a child. The child is placed with adopters who are temporarily approved as foster carers, and who will ultimately adopt the child.

birth parent/s (Mannion et al., 2023; Nadeem et al., 2023), and the toll on birth families who live with hope that their child will be able to be cared for by them that may never be fulfilled (Mannion et al., 2023). There is, however, evidence that early permanence can advance the process of finding consistent, loving, permanent homes for children that meet their needs (APPGAP, 2021).

Despite the well-intentioned introduction of early permanence, take up has been low in England and Wales. The reasons for this include a lack of knowledge and understanding from practitioners about what early permanence is and what the associated processes are, a lack of training for adopters and practitioners, and the attitudes of the courts, which have been slow to utilise early permanence arrangements (Adoption UK, 2022a; Ecorys UK and the REES Centre, 2022).

Research by Ludvigsen (2024) highlights that, in the year 2021-2022, only 18% of adoptions in England were via the early permanence route. Rates of early permanence adoption were lowest in the East Midlands (8%) and highest in Inner London (29%). While Ludvigsen's (2024) report largely focused on the experience of early permanence in London, the following recommendations for Regional Adoption Agencies across England were made to increase adoptions from early permanence routes:

- Ongoing and regular training for local authority staff.
- Initiating and developing a closer relationship with Cafcass regional teams.
- Building awareness and understanding about early permanence among legal representatives.
- Working in partnership with local and national organisations.
- Making local authorities, children's guardians and other parties aware that placements are available in the majority of cases where early permanence is requested.
- Developing partnerships with Voluntary Adoption Agencies that do not currently train and approve early permanence carers, to identify ways to support an increase in early permanence carers.
- Increasing the likelihood of prospective adopters choosing early permanence as a route to adoption.
- Initiating and developing better communication with the judiciary to improve awareness of and support for early permanence practices.

## Summary: Recruitment, preparation, linking and matching

Recruiting adoptive parents is not an easy task. Most people who seek to adopt a child or children do so to achieve the family that they always imagined, or from an altruistic place of wanting to help children who cannot live with their birth families (Frost and Goldberg, 2020a and 2020b). Adopting a child can come with many challenges, in part as a result of their adverse life experiences, and adoption agencies should seek adopters who possess the characteristics to provide a permanent, loving, stable home (Vanderwill et al., 2021). National and regional approaches to recruitment have both shown some success for increasing the number of adoptive parents available, while research by Kantar Public UK (2022) has provided some helpful suggestions for further building the pool of available adopters.

Once recruited, adoptive parents need to be well-prepared before welcoming a child into their family. LaBrenz et al. (2020) demonstrate the need for adopters to receive more education at the outset to prepare them for building their family. Similarly, Poore and Simmonds (2024) recommend that adoptive parents should also be provided with full disclosure of information about the child's development and characteristics. Specific training highlighted in the literature reviewed here included LEAF, Encompass, Pathways to Permanence 2, and NTDC, although these are largely North American models.

When linking and matching prospective adopters to children, practitioners need to consider the 'fit' between children and potential adoptive parents. In the UK Government's All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence's (APPGAP) Strengthening Families report, it was possible to identify some key principles for undertaking linking and matching, which could help to ensure this can progress more smoothly. Specific approaches to linking and matching that were highlighted included inviting social workers, prospective adopters and foster carers to adoption information exchange days and adoption activity days. There is also positive progress being made in Wales via the Adopting Together scheme, and in England through Adoption England's National Matching Practice Standards.

Finally, throughout the potential adoption process for a child, agencies should be mindful to build these families considerately. For instance, research indicates specific challenges around ethnicity and culture, adoptive parents' gender identities and sexuality, adoptive parents' health and wellbeing, children who find themselves having to wait longer for adoption, and approaches to early permanence. The challenges associated with these span the recruitment, preparation, linking and matching processes, and should be held in mind at all stages.



## Life journey work

This section focuses on life journey work, or life story work. It explores what life journey work is and why it is important; how and when life journey work is delivered elsewhere in the UK and internationally, including some innovative practice that is developing; the challenges of undertaking this work, and recommendations for good practice. We acknowledge that the term life story work has more commonly been utilised in Scotland to date. However, we have chosen to use the term life journey work in this review, in line with Adoption UK and the National Adoption Service in Wales. The term has been adopted in Wales to reflect the continuing nature of this work over time, given what is known about the lifelong impact of adoption. Where studies have made specific reference to life story work, rather than life journey work, we have retained the authors' term used.

Three of the peer-reviewed papers from the structured database search contributed to this section. Of these, two papers were based on primary research, both of which used qualitative methods and one used quantitative methods. One additional paper was a systematic literature review. Of all three papers, one was focused on the UK (Wales), one on Europe (Denmark) and one on Oceania (Australia). Some studies focused solely on life journey work in the context of adoption, and others also had a focus on life journey work with children in care more generally. Within the parameters of our review, we did not find any large-scale quantitative studies or evaluations of different approaches. Caution should therefore be applied to the findings, with an understanding that there may be limited application of the findings into different settings and contexts. An additional 19 pieces of grey literature and peer-reviewed papers were included throughout this section.

### What is life journey work and why is it important?

There is no singular agreed definition of life journey work, nor agreement on how it should be delivered (Watson et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2020). There is, however, agreement that it is a biographical and narrative approach, underpinned by theories of attachment, identity and loss, which supports adopted children to understand who they are and why they were adopted (Watson et al., 2020; Kontomichalos-Eyre, 2020). Life journey work can take a range of forms, including practitioners gathering information and materials such as photographs and important physical objects, the production of a life journey book which utilises the information and materials collected, and therapeutic work with adopted children and young people to support them in developing a coherent narrative of who they are and why they were adopted. It aims to fill in gaps in memory and understanding for adopted children of their birth families and life before being adopted, so that a coherent life narrative can be developed which integrates adopted children's past into the present and goes forward into the future.

Life journey work is vital for children whose life story has been disrupted through moving into care or being adopted. Developing a coherent narrative, particularly when children have experienced adverse life experiences such as abuse or neglect, has been associated with recovery from trauma and contributing to the development of a more secure sense of

identity (Watson et al., 2020; Staines and Selwyn, 2020; Hammond et al., 2020; Staples et al., 2024). In their study of adoption disruption, Selwyn et al. (2014) noted that adopters felt excellent life journey work contributed to placement stability. Conversely, gaps in biographical memory were also associated with poorer mental health outcomes in adolescence, and adoptive parents felt that the life journey work their child had received earlier in childhood did not assist them with their questions as they got older (Selwyn et al., 2014). When gaps in memory or biographical knowledge are allowed to persist, it can result in feelings of anxiety, with adult adoptees in Denmark describing this anxiety as an “inner void” (p.143) or “missing piece” (p.142), resulting from a “fractured” (p.144) life story (Henze-Pedersen, 2019). For children who are adopted, developing a coherent narrative, which includes children having sufficient information on which to base their understanding of their birth family, is therefore seen as important.

Whilst there is little evidence at present of a causal relationship between life journey work and improving children’s outcomes, this is due, in part, to the lack of robust longitudinal studies, and the complexity of isolating one aspect of adoption practice in the context of the lifelong impact of adoption. However, what is accepted is the need to support adopted people to develop an understanding of a coherent life narrative in the context of trauma, loss and the importance of developing a secure sense of identity.

It is important to distinguish between the *process* of life journey work, where children are supported therapeutically by practitioners and adoptive parents on an ongoing basis to understand and integrate their history in the context of their present and future, and the *products* of life journey work. In the UK these products are usually in the form of life journey books and later life letters.

## Legislative, policy and practice context

Scotland currently has no requirement in statute or guidance for undertaking life journey work with adopted children (or children in care), nor the production of life journey materials. There are also no national standards at present regarding the delivery and quality of life journey materials which could be utilised to track progress. However, Adoption UK’s Adoption Barometer report (Adoption UK, 2024c) noted that for adopters in Scotland who obtained their adoption order in 2023, only 57% had received their child’s life journey materials by the end of the first year. In the Scottish Adoption Barometer report, 63% described the life journey materials that they received as either ‘good’ or ‘adequate’, which Adoption UK noted was fewer than any previous Adoption Barometer report (Adoption UK, 2024c).

In England, statutory guidance requires all children for whom there is a plan for adoption to have a ‘life story book’ (Department for Education, 2014b). The Adoption and Children Act (2002), updated in the Children and Families Act (2014), requires that all adopted children have their life story book within 10 days of their adoption order. The recently published Adoption England strategy 2024-27 (Adoption England, 2024a) has changed this to all



adopted children having their life story book available to them by the granting of the adoption order.

In England, adoption agencies are not required at present to collect data on the number of children for whom life journey materials have been provided, when they were given to the adoptive family nor their quality. We have therefore looked at Adoption UK's Adoption Barometer report (Adoption UK, 2024a) to gain an understanding of current practice in England. Of the adopters who had received the adoption order in 2023, 60% reported that they had received their child's life journey materials by the end of the year, up from 56% in 2018. Two-thirds of these adopters also said the materials were either 'good' or 'adequate'. These figures, while improving, are concerning in terms of the large number of adopted children who do not receive their life journey materials in a timely way. Little information is provided in the report about the quality of the materials, and further work would be beneficial here to understand this more.

The approach to life journey work in Wales developed significantly following the first publication from the Wales Adoption study in 2018. The longitudinal study of newly formed adoptive families in Wales highlighted that adoptive parents struggled to get their child's life journey books. When families did receive them, these were often of poor quality, with some having information that was either missing or inaccurate. Whilst there were examples of excellent quality materials, these were rare, and some families had waited, or were still waiting, over a year to receive their books (Meakings et al., 2018). Follow-up research by Meakings et al. (2021, p.2495) indicates that 13% of the 96 families included in their research said they still had not received their child's life story book 4 years after adoption. The authors suggest that "a redoubling of effort is needed to ensure that support for life story work continues to be prioritised and undertaken in a timely manner".

The National Adoption Service (NAS) in Wales accepted these findings and committed to addressing the issues, firstly issuing new guidance in 2019. It has also developed the following performance indicators within the performance management framework which measures the number of children who have:

- a. Draft life journey material provided at the matching panel, which is defined as a draft later life letter and draft life story book.
- b. Final life journey material provided by the second review.

In 2018/19 only 30% of children had their life journey materials available by the time of the matching panel, and this had risen to 82% in the first half of 2023/24. In 2018/19 only 56% of adoptive families had received their child's final life journey materials by the time of the second review, rising to 84% in the first half of 2023/24 (National Adoption Service, 2024). This represents significant progress, but practice remains variable across the regions, which the National Adoption Service acknowledges is challenging to address (National Adoption Service, 2024).

The National Adoption Service in Wales has invested in life journey co-ordinators to support the production of materials, and they have recently published a Life Journey Work Good

Practice Guide (National Adoption Service, 2023), which is currently being implemented by supporting practitioners through a range of training and events, which seeks to address ongoing inconsistencies in practice. The most recent Adoption Barometer report for Wales (Adoption UK, 2024d) highlighted that 85% of respondents who had obtained an adoption order in 2023 felt that the life journey materials they received were either 'good' or 'adequate', which suggests that the investment made in life journey work in Wales is reaping benefits.

Less information was available about the timeliness and quality of life journey materials in Northern Ireland. However, the most recent Adoption Barometer report for Northern Ireland (Adoption UK, 2024b) noted that no respondents who had obtained an adoption order in 2023 have received their child's life journey materials.

## Approaches to life journey work

Life journey work is complex and requires skilled practitioners who have a relationship with the child and time to undertake it (Watson et al., 2018; Hammond et al., 2020; National Adoption Service, 2023; Staples et al., 2024). Recent research has also emphasised that life journey work should be viewed as an ongoing process, with adoptive parents being supported to have an open approach to integrating children's histories and their questions into everyday life (Watson et al., 2020; Staples et al., 2024). Life journey work is therefore not something that should be considered a one-off piece of work, but an ongoing process when children are ready to undertake it.

The evidence reviewed for this section did not always clearly distinguish between the process of life journey work, and its products. Where we can, we have reported on the evidence that exists for specific approaches to life journey work, but it was also common for this to be explored without the distinction being made between process and product.

The most frequently explored aspect of life journey work within the literature was the production of life journey books. These can be physical books, which contain information and photographs about the child's life history and the reasons they came to be adopted. More recently, there have been innovations in terms of the use of digital life story work, including the development of trove in the UK, which was developed through a collaboration between researchers at the University of Bristol and creative designers in industry. It is a child-friendly physical bag to store precious objects with multi-media story-telling ability, cloud storage and digital security, which was carefully co-designed with children and young people (Watson et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2020).

There are a range of approaches to the production of life journey books in terms of the order in which material is presented. The more traditional approach is chronological, starting with the child's birth and moving forwards. In contrast, the Joy Rees Model (Rees, 2018) takes an approach to presenting information which starts in the present, focusing on life within the adoptive family, then moving back to the past to include information about the child's birth family, followed by the present again, and moving into the future, which includes the option to add to the life journey book over time. Rees argues that taking this

approach is more balanced, where a child learns about their past history in the context and safety of their current life in the adoptive family. In England, this approach is advocated by First4Adoption, the national information service for adoption, and by Coram BAAF. However, we could not find evaluations of either approach within the literature reviewed, and the studies included did not usually describe which approach was taken in the production of life story books.

Hammond et al.'s (2020) scoping review of life story work for children with care experience in the UK included six (of 17) papers specifically focused on life story work with adopted children. Kontomichalos-Eyre et al.'s (2023) systematic review of life story work for children and youth in out of home care in the UK and USA included six papers (of 19) which specifically focused on life story work with adopted children. Both reviews included some of the same studies, and the messages about good practice for life story work with adopted children and children in other forms of out of home care are shared across different forms of care. High-quality life story work should take place over time, and be completed in a sensitive way, with complete and accurate biographical information, and clear reasons for the child being adopted. Both reviews highlighted that this information needs to go beyond the 'facts', so that adopted children and young people can develop a coherent and meaningful narrative about what happened and why. Any photographs used should be clearly labelled and placed in the context of a narrative about life within the birth family. Consistent support to both access and process biographical information is important, and suggestive of the important role of adoptive parents in ongoing life journey work.

Kontomichalos-Eyre et al.'s (2023) review included some additional messages for practice. This review included small-scale research with children and young people, who were clear that life journey work was beneficial for them. They highlighted that they particularly valued their biographical information, and for those who also had physical objects, it provided a connection to their relationships with birth family. Children and young people felt that life journey work helped their sense of identity, and for some it acted as a comfort. However, as Hammond et al. (2020) and Watson et al. (2018) highlight, therapeutic life journey work needs to be delivered at the right time for the child, and if this is not the case, then it may act to increase difficulties. Furthermore, Kontomichalos-Eyre et al.'s (2023) review highlighted the important role of adoptive parents and carers in providing ongoing support to children with their life journey work. In the studies reviewed, adoptive parents and carers want to be involved to emotionally support the children, but also need support and training themselves to do this well. Carers and adoptive parents also highlighted that supporting children with their life journey work acted to build and strengthen their relationship with the child, and aided communication.

There are debates within the literature about the extent to which life journey work should be child-led. There was agreement within the literature reviewed that life journey work should be undertaken at the child's pace, and that children, when they are of an age to and are emotionally ready, should be involved in the ongoing creation of their life journey work materials if they wish to. Watson et al. (2020) caution however that child-led life journey work can risk children's own memories of events being inaccurate and unchallenged, which

in turn could lead to children being less able or willing to consider other perspectives. Similarly, concerns were raised in the literature reviewed about the narratives contained in life journey work materials, and the importance of ensuring that these should be drawn from multiple perspectives, rather than foregrounding the social worker's views (Watson et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2020).

The challenges present for practitioners in undertaking this highly-skilled work, and the importance of being given training, support and time to do it well, were consistently highlighted in the literature reviewed (Hammond et al., 2020; Kontomichalos-Eyre et al., 2023). Hammond et al. (2020) also highlighted that in the UK at that time there were no standards for the delivery of life journey work, nor the production of life journey books. The authors strongly advocated for this, given the ongoing challenges around quality. The National Adoption Service in Wales has published their good practice guide on life journey work (National Adoption Service, n.d) which encompasses the messages contained within this review. It includes the following principles, which represent a trauma-informed and adoption competent foundation for Scotland to consider (National Adoption Service, n.d, p.4):

## Good practice principles for life journey work

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life journey conversations should be part of everyday life for children, with information provided incrementally as appropriate.</li> <li>• It is essential that all those involved in Life Journey Work (LJW) (for example adopters, foster carers, social workers) are trained in it.</li> <li>• Preparation and planning is vital, and should involve collaboration with people who know the child well.</li> <li>• Adults who undertake LJW should be known to and trusted by the child and be reliable.</li> <li>• LJW should be done at the child's pace, tailored to their age and developmental needs, in a safe space and with choices about the ways in which they can explore and engage in it, and the choice to opt in and out of each discussion.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a minimum, life journey work materials should include a life journey book and a later life letter.</li> <li>• Life journey books should provide the child with a coherent narrative. The story of the child's journey should be clear, with no use of jargon and abbreviations. Care should be taken when referring to social work documents. Photographs should be chosen with care, to assist in helping the child make sense of their life journey. Information should be carefully checked, and the sources of information referenced.</li> <li>• LJW should be sensitive to and address the individual needs of the child and their family, in respect to language, gender, culture, religion, sexual orientation and disability.</li> <li>• LJW should be recorded and securely stored in a centralised system. This will ensure that duplicates of the child's life</li> </ul> |
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- LJW should be honest, but never brutally so. Care must be taken to tell even the most difficult information in kind and age-appropriate ways.

journey materials can be available to them if lost or destroyed, and to enable another worker with a trusted relationship with the child to pick up the LJW if necessary.

## Summary: Life journey work

Life journey work aims to fill in gaps in memory and understanding for adopted children, helping them to build a picture of their birth families and their life before they were adopted. It is a vital aspect of the support required for adopted children and young people, as gaps in memory or biographical knowledge can leave adopted children with questions that can be difficult to answer without the information provided through life journey work (Selwyn et al., 2014). When gaps persist, it can result in feelings of anxiety and an “inner void” (Henze-Pedersen, 2019, p.143). By helping to fill in gaps in biographical memory and provide a coherent life narrative, life journey work can support recovery from trauma and loss and facilitate the development of a more secure identity (Watson et al., 2020; Staines and Selwyn, 2020; Hammond et al., 2020; Staples et al., 2024).

At present, the use of life journey work is inconsistent throughout the UK and internationally. In Scotland, the most recent Adoption Barometer report indicated that only 57% of respondents in 2023 had received their child’s life journey materials by the end of the first year of their adoption (Adoption UK, 2024c). In England, statutory guidance requires that a ‘life story book’ be provided for all children when there is a plan for adoption (Department for Education, 2014b), and the English Adoption Barometer for 2023 indicated that 60% of respondents had received their child’s life journey materials by the end of the year (Adoption UK, 2024a). The Wales Adoption Study in 2018 demonstrated that adoptive parents could struggle to get access to children’s life journey books (Meakings et al., 2018), with the approach to life journey work in Wales developing significantly since the publication of this study. In 2018/19 only 30% of children had their life journey materials available by the time of the matching panel, and this had risen to 82% in the first half of 2023/24 (National Adoption Service, 2024).

It is acknowledged that life journey work is complex and requires skilled practitioners who have a relationship with the child and time to undertake it (Watson et al., 2018; Hammond et al., 2020; National Adoption Service, 2023; Staples et al., 2024). Life journey work can take the form of physical books, containing information and photographs about the child’s life history and the reasons they came to be adopted, or more recently, there has been an increase in the use of digital life story tools, including the development of ‘trove’ in the UK, a physical and digital tool that enables children to keep a digital archive of their life (Watson et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2020). Additionally, there are a range of approaches to life journey work, with traditional life journey work

focusing on traditional chronological approaches beginning with the child's birth and moving forwards, and more recent models that begin with the present and move between the past and the future (Rees, 2018). There is also mixed evidence about the benefits of life journey work being child-led, with authors highlighting the potential pitfalls of the child's own memories being inaccurate (Watson et al., 2020). Nonetheless, many were agreed that life journey work should draw on multiple perspectives and not foreground the social worker's views (Watson et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2020).

Overall, it is important to distinguish between the process of life journey work, and its products, and this section has emphasised the need for ongoing life journey work throughout an adopted person's lifetime, particularly given the lifelong impact of adoption for adopted people.

## Keeping in touch and keeping in mind: 'Contact' after adoption

This section synthesises the literature we reviewed in relation to how links can be maintained between adopted children, their birth families and other people in their lives who are important to them, including previous foster carers. This includes the types of arrangements which are made, how and by whom, experiences of these, and the opportunities and challenges there are to keeping connected. The role of practitioners' conceptualisations of risk and the importance of adoptive families' 'communicative openness' are also highlighted.

Whilst the term 'contact' remains in adoption policy and practice, it has more recently been recognised as systems-driven language which does not reflect the experiences of those involved. Following the Independent Care Review's (2020) findings regarding language, particularly the potentially stigmatising use of 'professionalised' terms, we use the phrase 'keeping in touch and keeping in mind' as an umbrella term for this section, acknowledging the variety of arrangements which exist and their purposes. We also use the phrase 'ongoing communication and spending time together' as a shorthand for these, recognising that the type and frequency of such communication is subject to wide variation. We accept that these phrases have not come directly from children and young people, and that there is likely to be a range of different words or phrases that children and young people may choose to use. However, we hope that it represents a more everyday language and a less stigmatising approach. The literature included in this section used a range of terminology, including 'contact', 'maintaining' or 'cultivating' relationships, 'keeping in touch' and 'open adoption'.

Eleven papers from our peer-reviewed structured database search were identified as relevant to this section. Seven papers; four from within the UK, two from the USA, and one from Australia, reported on primary research. One was a non-systematic review of international literature, conducted by researchers in Spain. The remaining three papers were descriptive; two from North America (USA), while the other was not geographically specific. Three further peer-reviewed papers were not explicitly focused on keeping in touch and keeping in mind, but included relevant information. Furthermore, a seminal paper by Neil et al. (2013) was included for its importance despite being outside our main date range, and recent Scottish research by Critchley et al. (2023) is included to highlight relevance in the Scottish context. An additional 17 pieces of grey literature and peer-reviewed papers contributed to our analysis, which was primarily focused on the UK context, but included some existing international non-peer-reviewed literature reviews.

There is some overlap in the literature reported here. For example, one paper (Jones et al., 2020) reports on secondary analysis of information from previous years' Adoption UK Barometer reports, while MacDonald (2017) and MacDonald (2021) report on different elements of the same study. Furthermore, in much of the literature looking specifically at arrangements for keeping in touch, maintaining family relationships for children in foster



care – where the overall purpose may be supporting children to be able to return to live with their birth parents – is discussed alongside the different context of adoption.

## Approaches to keeping in touch and keeping in mind

The literature reviewed highlighted two main dimensions of variation in arrangements for ongoing communication and spending time together between adoptive families and the child's birth relatives:

- The continuum of 'indirect contact' (typically in the form of writing letters shared between birth and adoptive parents) through to different direct forms of communication such as video calls and the use of social media, as well as spending time together in person.
- Practice and expectations relating to different groups or individuals with whom an adopted child or their adoptive parent(s) might maintain a relationship (for example, birth parents; other members of birth family including siblings; former foster carers).

Neil et al. (2013) reported on an important longitudinal study of post-adoption communication and spending time together in England, beginning in 1996 and following a cohort of children who were adopted in 1996-97 at aged 4 years or younger at the time of their adoption. An initial group of 168 children were included in the study, which collected data at three timepoints, initially from practitioner' reports, and from birth and adoptive parents, later including the views of the adopted young people (n=65). A range of findings from that research are paralleled in more recent studies.

Neil et al. (2013) found that planned communication with adult birth relatives at the time of the child's adoption was most commonly indirect 'letterbox contact' (81% of children), typically yearly or twice a year. More recently, the Adoption Barometer for England reports that 97% of new adoptive families who responded to the survey had at least one agreement for indirect communication with a member of their child's birth family, while in Wales, 89% had an agreement for indirect communication with their child's birth mother (Adoption UK, 2024a). Typically, such communication is mediated by an adoption agency, through whom letters are exchanged (Neil et al., 2013; Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2021). This practice is intended to protect the adoptive family's anonymity, and in some instances, letters are read by agency staff to ensure appropriateness, before the letter is sent on to the intended recipient(s).

Less common overall in the UK is spending time together in person ('direct contact'), although this varies between UK nations, and is consistently reported to be more common in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK (MacDonald, 2017; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024).

Collings and Wright (2022) highlight that in Australia, adoption is much less common than in the UK, and where it does take place, ongoing in-person meetings between the adopted

child and their birth relatives is an expectation<sup>4</sup>. Neil et al. (2013, p.15) describe variations in the ways that spending time together takes place in the UK, from "very frequent, friendly and informal [...] at the home of the adoptive parents or the birth relatives" to infrequent and supervised by a social worker in a neutral setting. Mixed views on the supervision of in-person meetings are reported, however. Some young people valued the support of practitioners who "helped keep the conversation going" when they met with their birth family members (Neil et al., 2013, p.257). Similarly, some adoptive parents preferred the presence of a practitioner, although others felt that this could hamper the natural development of relationships (Collings and Wright, 2022).

The type and frequency of communication may also be related to the nature of the existing relationships. Neil et al. (2013) described that for the majority of the adopted children in the study, ongoing communication of any type was typically with the birth mother or maternal family, and less commonly with birth fathers and paternal family. MacDonald (2017) found that in Northern Ireland, ongoing communication, both directly and indirectly, were most common with the child's birth mother, while indirect 'letterbox contact' was the most common mode with birth fathers. Variations were also reported in relation to birth siblings. Jones et al. (2020) found that spending time together in person was more frequently reported with birth siblings than with other members of birth family. However, the type and frequency of keeping in touch with birth siblings could be influenced by their living arrangements, such as whether they are also adopted or living with a foster family (Meakings et al., 2021). The reasons for these variations were not always explicit in the literature reviewed, but may be related to elements such as practitioners' and adoptive parents' perceptions of the risks associated with different individuals (Neil et al., 2013; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020; Critchley et al., 2023), the adoptive parents' relative openness, or not, to maintaining communication with different birth relatives, and the geographical distance between the adoptive and birth families (Cleary and Grant, 2022).

The importance of children having ongoing communication with former foster carers is also highlighted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Adoption and Permanence (APPGAP, 2021), who note the importance of the foster family's role in the child's life and their relationship with the child. Reams (2023) describes that in a US-based study, 70% of adopted children had ongoing communication with former foster carers, and highlights the need for attention to careful transitions, taking account of the bonds children may have formed with their foster family before adoption.

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<sup>4</sup> Collings and Wright (2022) explicitly relate the development of contemporary adoption practice in Australia to the legacy of historical 'Stolen Generation' colonisation policies. While nothing in the literature considered in this report explores the reasons for greater use of in-person contact in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK, it is likely that this is also influenced by historical forced adoption practices.

## Planning and Practice

Plans for ongoing communication between children and their birth and adoptive families which are made in the early stages of adoption are often subject to variation, sometimes within a very short time frame. Neil et al. (2013) found that within two-and-a-half years of a child living with their adoptive parents, 42% of originally planned arrangements had changed. Initial arrangements are typically made at a time of high emotion and anxiety for birth and adoptive parents (Neil et al., 2013; Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2021), and at a time when the child is very young. It is therefore unsurprising that arrangements change over time. This can be a positive change to better suit those involved or better support a developing relationship, and can be responsive to a child's needs. Nevertheless, much of the evidence points to a decrease in ongoing communication over time. Neil et al. (2013) found that by the time of the adopted child's late adolescence and early adulthood, more than half of the originally planned keeping in touch arrangements had reduced, while more recent research found that after four years, half of participants had no contact with their birth siblings, despite initial plans for spending time together in person for almost a quarter (Meakings et al., 2021). Plans for spending time together in person appear to be the most vulnerable to variation and reduction, but indirect ongoing communication can also be challenging to maintain for many birth and adoptive families. Whilst changes to ongoing communication arrangements may be a shared and planned decision, they can also mean an abrupt and unexplained end to keeping in touch, which can be distressing for those who expected it to continue (Neil et al., 2013).

Evidence from Wales, Northern Ireland and England shows that initial planning for ongoing communication and spending time together is typically undertaken by social workers, often with limited opportunities for birth or adoptive parents to influence decisions. Often the plans are made by social workers before an adoptive family is identified for the child. Arrangements are usually voluntary; only rarely are they mandated as part of a court order (Jones et al., 2020), and a court order for contact is almost never imposed if an adoptive parent disagrees that ongoing communication with birth families should continue (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024). Describing the situation in England, however, McFarlane (2024, p.2) notes that ongoing communication is "one element of the adoption equation [...] that is, at least to a degree, in the control of the Family Court", while the Adoption England (2024a) strategy highlights the need for improved collaborative working with the legal profession to support their understanding of the needs of adopted children.

In their work in Northern Ireland, MacDonald (2017) suggests that negotiating ongoing communication using legal mechanisms can make it seem adversarial and distanced from a focus on the welfare of the child or children. They also highlight that the legal arrangements in place for the child might influence plans for ongoing communication and spending time together in person. They found that slightly more children spent time in-person with birth family members when their original move to their adoptive family was through a 'foster to adopt' or 'concurrent care' arrangement.

The literature reviewed highlighted a range of purposes for keeping in touch, including maintaining relationships and reducing anxiety (Reams, 2023), and supporting the child's understanding of their history and identity (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2021). There are mixed views on whether ongoing communication is intended primarily as an information exchange, or whether it can support the development of a meaningful relationship. MacDonald et al. (2023, p.219) are explicit that the "purpose of contact is to facilitate sustained meaningful relationships between children and young people and their birth families", but the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2021, p.4) highlight that "it is hard to achieve any meaningful sense of relationship from the infrequent mediated exchange of letters". In their study, in the distinctive Australian context, Collings and Wright (2022) described how birth families and a child's permanent carers (including adoptive parents and permanent foster carers) spending time together in person can enable a meaningful 'blended' or 'extended' family-type relationship to develop, if the time they spend together is well supported and the permanent carers are comfortable with this. Nonetheless, the Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group (2024) report highlights that ongoing communication between adopted children and their birth families relies on birth families being able to adjust to their new role in the child's life, which may be emotionally and practically challenging for birth families to engage in. They recommend that ongoing and independent support and counselling for birth families should be available before, during and after the adoption process, to help birth families "understand how they can continue to be involved in their child's life through different types of contact as soon as adoption is identified as a possible outcome" (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024, p.37).

The evidence reviewed suggests that arrangements are more likely to be maintained when the needs and capabilities of the birth and adoptive parents are accounted for, such as by preventing disappointment when one party feels unable to respond to letters. Communication between birth and adoptive families should be flexible and responsive to need, rather than prescriptive (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020; Adoption England, 2024a). While flexibility in planning is important to ensure that the unique circumstances of each child, their birth and adoptive families can be recognised (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024), Jones et al. (2020) highlight the possibility of inequity in how decisions are made and how these are experienced by those involved. There may be value in the use of standardised planning frameworks to improve consistency and support around keeping in touch (Jones, 2020; MacDonald, 2021; Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024). Guidance produced by the National Adoption Service for Wales (n.d.) delineates how keeping in touch should be considered at each stage, from the start of care proceedings through to the granting of an adoption order and beyond. The Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group (2024) report echoes these recommendations, and highlights that identifying people who are important to children should occur at the 'pre-proceedings' stage in England and Wales, enabling the practitioners to have an "early understanding of the child's network and of who may be able to offer a positive perspective should direct post adoption contact be considered appropriate" (p.39).

Once the adoption is finalised, arrangements for keeping in touch are usually managed by the adoptive parent(s), although there were found to be variations in the extent to which adoptive families felt that they could make changes. Neil et al. (2013) described that adoptive parents in England were able to vary arrangements in response to the benefits or risks they identified, although this could sometimes be challenging. MacDonald (2017; 2021) found that some adoptive parents in Northern Ireland had felt under pressure from practitioners to maintain face-to-face meetings with birth family members, even where children found this distressing or expressed a preference not to attend.

While the experiences of keeping in touch with birth families and other people who are important to children can sometimes be challenging for adoptive parents, and may not always be appropriate for adopted children, the Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group report (2024) is clear that decisions about whether, who and how children should remain in touch with the people who are important to them should be tailor-made for each adopted child. The report highlights that spending time with people who are important to adopted children should be promoted when it is safe to do so and is in the child's best interests. Keeping in touch should be considered throughout childhood and over the course of the adopted person's lifetime, "not only before the adoption order is made" (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024, p.24). Decisions about keeping in touch with birth families and other people who are important to children should be for the benefit of the child and based on what is right for them. The Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group report draws attention to the House of Lords Children and Families Act 2014 Committee (2022, p.27), who stress that "failure to modernise contact threatens to undermine the adoption system", leading to the following recommendations:

- "There needs to be a sea change in the approach to the question of face-to-face contact between the adopted child and the birth family or other significant individuals" (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024, p.36), and;
- "The full range of contact options (including digital options) should be actively considered by professionals and the court during care and placement proceedings rather than an assumption that contact will be via letterbox only" (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024, p.41).

## Risks, opportunities and the 'best interests' of adopted children and young people

### Rights

Neil et al. (2013, p.5) highlight that the "United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 21) emphasises that adoption practices must be guided by the best interests of the child". It is clear in the literature we reviewed however that there is no consistent agreement on what these 'best interests' might be in the short term and lifelong. Collings and Wright (2022, p.718) describe "a lack of consensus on [the] relative merits and risks for children" of spending time with their birth family in-person, while MacDonald (2017, p.33) report that some adoptive parents experienced "a difference of opinion with social

workers over what was in their child's best interests and felt that the opinion of social workers held more sway than their own assessment of their child's needs". The UK's All Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence (APPGAP, 2021, p.48) suggest that "it will not always be appropriate or safe for children to maintain a relationship with birth family members [and] safeguarding must be the highest priority". Although many of the adult respondents in the PAC-UK (2023) study had no experience, or negative experience, of ongoing communication with their birth family during childhood, most agreed that it should be standard post-adoption practice. Furthermore, Neil et al. (2013) report that many young people value the opportunity for ongoing communication with members of their birth family, including as a means of understanding their own stories and identity, and feeling more connected to their heritage.

Smith et al. (2020) conducted an international literature review on the risks and benefits of 'open adoption', following legislative change in Spain in 2015 which enabled ongoing communication between adopted children and their birth relatives. They identified a range of benefits for adopted young people who had ongoing communication with their birth family members. These included a more coherent and integrated sense of identity, fewer externalising or 'problem' behaviours and better adjustment and self-esteem. They also highlighted that ongoing communication between birth and adoptive parents provided opportunities to support the development of positive relationships, including where previous interactions had been in hostile environments such as courts. The authors suggested that experiences of ongoing communication resulted in a more positive and harmonious experience of family life for the adopted child. Similar benefits were identified by MacDonald (2017, p.19), who also noted that while keeping in touch with birth relatives could help children "make sense of their complex family networks", in-person meetings on special occasions or involving fun days out might present an unrealistic picture to children of their birth family. Keeping in touch with birth relatives could also bring risks, however, including emotional and psychological challenges.

The literature reviewed highlights the importance of understanding and addressing risk when making decisions about keeping in touch. In circumstances of adoption from care, when children have usually been deemed at risk of harm while living with their birth family, consideration of the balance of risk and benefit is especially pertinent. MacDonald (2017, p.9) found that almost a third of adoptive parents in one study in Northern Ireland reported that "their child was having face-to-face contact with a birth relative in whose care they had previously experienced neglect or abuse", and around 65% worried that keeping in touch with the child's birth family was more harmful to the child than beneficial. Other risks, such as unsettling or upsetting a child, for example when letters receive no response (Meakings et al., 2021) are also recognised. MacDonald (2017), for example, highlights the ambiguity of the purpose and individual roles when spending time together in-person, particularly in adoption as compared to foster care where birth relatives can struggle to accept the adopters' role as a parent or parents, or behave in ways which confuse the child. Furthermore, even where spending time together in person is considered to be working well, the emotional strain on all involved is also highlighted as an important factor to consider. Iyer et al. (2020) nevertheless highlight a distinction between 'difficult' and



'harmful' contact, and Smith et al. (2020) conclude that while poorly-managed and inappropriate contact can constitute risk for a child, in general, ongoing communication does not seem to present a risk to children's ability to settle into their adoptive family.

## **Digital Communication**

In some instances, discussions of risk are related to the use of social media and digital communication modes. These were thought to present a risk of unplanned and unsupported communication, concerns about privacy and anonymity, authenticity, and lack of control over wider and unauthorised sharing of information (e.g. Neil et al., 2013; MacDonald, 2017; Reamer and Siegel, 2021; MacDonald et al., 2023; Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024). In addition, for some families or individuals without access to digital devices or the internet, or lacking digital literacy skills to navigate and understand this type of communication, this approach could be less inclusive (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2021; Reamer and Siegel, 2021).

Pilcher et al.'s (2020) study, while not explicitly about keeping in touch post-adoption, reports on a literature review of naming practices in adoption. They raise the issue of navigating ongoing communication when the child's name has been changed from their birth name. A number of issues are raised, and this includes the potential risk of where an unusual name given at birth can make it easier to identify or trace a child after adoption, and adoptive parents' anxieties around the use of birth family names in life story books. Concerns around unofficial communication through social media searches (by birth family or by the adopted child) are central to these concerns.

The benefits of social media as a more casual and typical means of maintaining a connection with young people who are comfortable with these modes of communication was also highlighted as a means of maintaining more regular forms of keeping in touch (MacDonald, 2017). Reams (2023) reports that for the 66% of adopted children in a US study who had some form of written communication with their former foster carers, this included email, text messages, and other social media posts. McFarlane (2024) describes that the writing of paper letters is considered by some to be an outdated practice which should no longer be the default approach, while the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2021) suggest that it may lack inclusivity for those with literacy difficulties. They suggest a move to digital letterbox platforms as an alternative.

An evaluation of one such platform, Letter Swap, was commissioned by Adoption England, and found that while the platform showed promise, "contribution of digital platforms such as Letter Swap to modernising contact in adoption will be limited unless accompanied by broader changes to contact planning and support, including better preparation and support for adoptive parents and birth parents" (Neil et al., 2023b, p.6). Cashen et al. (2021) identified wide variations in modes of communication between adults who were adopted as children and their birth parents, in a US-based study of adults who as children had been part of domestic private adoption. They highlighted the increasing use of 'tech-mediated' communication such as through social media, email, and online chat. They found variations in 'psychological closeness' and satisfaction with keeping in touch, related to tech-mediated



and traditional communication modes, and the birth relative parent with whom this took place.

MacDonald et al. (2023) highlight that the use of digital communication is common in many families, particularly since the increased use of such communication modes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital communication can feel less pressured as it can be asynchronous, and young people may feel they have more control over how and when they reply. This approach to ongoing communication was considered to work well when there was openness and support from the adoptive parent(s) to help the young person navigate this. Similarly, Clearly and Grant (2022) highlighted the potential role of digital communication in situations where geographical distance limits opportunities for children to spend time with their birth families in person. Nonetheless, difficulties with the use of digital communications were also noted by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2021), including the loss of tangible letters and cards which may be kept, and the possibility that more frequent communication may feel more intrusive or time-pressured. The recent Adoption England (2024a) strategy promotes the use of digital approaches to maintaining relationships after adoption, as does the Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group (2024) report, which makes reference to both Letter Swap and ARCBOX<sup>5</sup> as potentially helpful digital platforms for modernising 'letterbox contact' specifically.

## Communicative openness

The concept of 'communicative openness' was the subject of two of the peer-reviewed papers (Macleod et al., 2021; Kim and Tucker, 2020). It has two main aspects relating mainly to the adoptive parent/s: their openness to talking about adoption with their child, and their openness to including the child's birth family within their conceptualisation of 'family' more broadly. This reflects the type of blended or extended family model highlighted in the Australian context by Collings and Wright (2022).

Research in England and South Africa has highlighted reflections that adults who were adopted as children had about the importance of communicative openness for strengthening trust and relationships within the adoptive family, as well as contributing to positive feelings about being adopted (Langenhoven and Greeff, 2022; Neil et al., 2023a). McFarlane (2024) highlights the influence of historical 'closed' adoption practices on contemporary approaches to keeping in touch and communicative openness more generally, while PAC-UK's (2023) survey of adults who were adopted as children suggests that openness in adoption has increased over time, with almost 40% of respondents who

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<sup>5</sup> ARCBOX is a "life story digital platform for looked-after children, where the child can access the app, which has funding to research an expansion of the app to support post adoption contact" (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-group, 2024, p.35).

were adopted in the 1990s having had ongoing communication with their birth family, as compared to 2% of those adopted in the 1960s.

Practitioners who support families post-adoption can influence communicative openness and play a key role in setting the tone for adoptive parents' interactions with birth family members (Macleod et al., 2021). Kim and Tucker (2020) describe a programme to support adoptive families in navigating 'post-adoption openness', designed following feedback from adoptive families in the USA who highlighted that support with ongoing communication was needed. The authors noted that at present, the model is untested, but outline its theoretical underpinnings (family systems theory, ambiguous loss, and the transtheoretical model of change) and describe a six-step process. Broadly, this involves introducing the programme to the adoptive family, offering individual and group supports in the early stages, and identifying ongoing support needs. Within these steps are agency-led tasks to encourage adoptive parents to consider their 'openness' and support them towards related behaviours, following as assessment of their current state of openness. The recognition of traits associated with 'communicative openness' in the recruitment and training of adoptive parents is also suggested by Collings and Wright (2022), and the Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group (2024) report recommends that social work practitioners and lawyers should receive ongoing training about the benefits of open adoption.

## Experiences and satisfaction with keeping in touch

Young children have rarely been asked about their views on planning for keeping in touch with their birth family. Some evidence is available, however, from the longitudinal study by Neil et al. (2013), which found that while adopted children in England typically valued any form of communication they had with birth family members, they tended to accept whatever arrangements were in place. Where they reported any dissatisfaction with arrangements, this was usually in the context of not being able to keep in touch with each other, or where changes had taken place against their wishes. The stability or consistency of the arrangements for keeping in touch and the young person's satisfaction with these – including where the arrangements were that there should be no communication between the birth family and the child – were reported to be more important for young people's wellbeing and adjustment than the type or frequency of how and when they kept in touch. MacDonald (2017) highlights however that even in Northern Ireland, where for children and their birth families meeting in-person is more common than elsewhere in the UK, almost half of the adoptive parents were found to be dissatisfied with their experience of this. Iyer et al. (2020) further suggest that the quality of how they keep in touch and connected is more important than quantity, while Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2020) identify a number of features of good quality ongoing communication between children and their birth families, including physical and psychological safety, good collaboration and respect between the adults involved, alignment with the needs and wishes of the child, and a feeling that keeping in touch is rewarding.

Amongst birth family members, experiences of keeping in touch were mixed in the literature reviewed. In the PAC-UK (2023) 'Big Consult' with birth parents, only 12% of the

151 respondents said that they had received letterbox letters for a period of time longer than six years. In other studies, birth parents' views about keeping in touch were sometimes related to individuals' feelings of acceptance or otherwise around the adoption (Neil et al., 2013; Critchley et al., 2023). While some birth family members felt unable to keep in touch with the child for emotional or practical reasons, opportunities to see the child grow and be reassured around their wellbeing were welcomed. For some, ways to keep in touch directly helped birth parents process their own emotions around adoption, while ways that were not direct, such as letter writing, were sometimes felt to be superficial. Birth family members as well as adoptive parents were reported to experience "awkwardness" and "fears" around their relationships with each other and how these might change in the future (Collings and Wright, 2022, p.721).

For the birth mothers interviewed in Critchley et al.'s (2023) study in Scotland, their experiences of letterbox contact were mixed. They spoke about the time it took to learn how to write in a new way to their children, with one mother saying:

*"There was a major learning curve because there's no set formula, there's no set advice as to what you need to put in the letters and you just have to kind of guess at the end of the day, and hope that you're doing the right thing." (Extract from research interview with Clary, mother of three children; Critchley et al., 2023, p.34)*

The mothers also had to manage their own expectations, particularly if adoptive parents did not maintain the types of updates they had agreed to initially, and appreciated any support that was available, especially at the outset. The mothers in the study who spent time with their children in person were overwhelmingly positive about this, even though they said it was challenging for them to manage their emotions over time.

The findings from Critchley et al.'s (2023) study resonate with those of Neil et al.'s (2013) longitudinal study in England, with both emphasising the importance of keeping in touch arrangements being flexible and responsive to the changes in people's lives, including birth parents, and how practice should support this. As Critchley et al. (2023, p.35) note, we need to consider "how agencies and carers can support and nourish the lifelong relationship to birth family that children have in different ways, as children grow up and as birth parents potentially make significant changes in their own lives that make time together safer and potentially more positive".

Adoptive parents also reported feelings of anxiety around the child or children keeping in touch with their birth family and its potential impact on the child/ren and the life of the adoptive family. This related especially, but not exclusively, to spending time together in-person. Nevertheless, Neil et al. (2013) found that spending time with birth relatives did not hamper the development of the child's relationship with their adoptive family.

As well as the emotional challenges of preparing for and supporting different forms of communication and spending time together, the practical challenges of adhering to different arrangements with different family members was also a concern. Studies in

Northern Ireland identified mixed views about the level of support from social workers in making and carrying out arrangements to spend time together in person. MacDonald's (2017) study noted high levels of support, whilst Gupta and Featherstone's (2020) analysis of participants from Northern Ireland suggested inadequacies in the level of support offered. Jones et al. (2020, p.1) further highlighted that a "significant minority of adopters across all four nations are receptive to considering additional direct contact with birth relatives than is currently experienced, particularly, with birth siblings". This raises the possibility that there are missed opportunities to spend time together in person with birth family members for some adopted children.

Adoptive parents also reported frustration and concern around indirect communication (Neil, 2013; MacDonald, 2017). As well as concerns relating to privacy and anonymity, adoptive parents worried about the potential of communication from birth family members unsettling or retraumatising the child or children, such as when no replies were received from birth family members, or replies included content they considered inappropriate. Gupta and Featherstone (2020) highlight the practice of some adoption agencies who may redact words and phrases they consider not appropriate. They suggest that in some instances such practice can be "unhelpful if not inhumane" (p.168). Furthermore, an evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) in England highlighted variable quality in practice to support letterbox communication, and the frustrations of some RAA staff that this vital service was not being sufficiently prioritised or resourced (Ecorys UK and REES Centre, 2022).

Some adoptive parents described the role of ongoing communication, through in-person meetings between the child and their birth family, on the relationships within the adoptive family. Such 'direct contact' had "created a good feeling of honesty and closeness in the adoptive family [...] a sense of trust which had grown from young people's realisation that nothing had been withheld from them" (Neil et al., 2013, p.90). Furthermore, engaging in planned communication could sometimes alleviate anxieties for adoptive parents about the prospect of future unexpected communication. MacDonald (2017) found that, despite the practical and emotional challenges involved, adoptive parents in Northern Ireland were motivated to maintain ongoing communication directly and in-directly with the child's birth family, and could see a range of benefits to doing so.

## Supporting keeping in touch and keeping in mind

The evaluation of regional adoption agencies in England (Ecorys UK and the Rees Centre, 2022) highlighted that there were increasing requests for adopted children to spend time in person with birth family members, but many RAAs struggled to resource this. Similarly, Gupta and Featherstone (2020) report that some participants in the British Association of Social Work's (BASW) Adoption Enquiry felt that adoption agency support for 'contact' generally was under-resourced. In the context of responding to the complex ethical and human rights issues present within adoption, and the need for modernisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, policy in England and Wales has recognised that greater flexibility is required in supporting adopted children to maintain relationships with members of their birth families,

where safe to do so. A substantial change of approach and additional resourcing is required in order to meet these ambitions. Both countries are at an early stage of implementing these changes, and there continue to be ongoing challenges.

MacDonald (2017) suggests that support for post-adoption communication should include social workers' involvement in planning that meets the needs of all involved but takes particular account of a child's experiences and their welfare; setting and holding boundaries; preparation and emotional support for all involved; and supporting practical arrangements such as travel options and venues for meeting in person. Collings and Wright (2022) highlight the absence of 'societal norms' to help participants navigate communication with one another, implying a role for practitioners to provide support for such interactions. In relation to indirect forms of keeping in touch, such as letterbox contact, this may include advising on the tone and content of letters; something which birth family members and adopters have reported that they found difficult to 'get right' (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2021). The National Adoption Service in Wales (National Adoption Service, 2023) has introduced periodic check-ins with adoptive parents at key transition stages for their children, which could also provide an opportunity to review arrangements for keeping in touch. The availability of professional support from practitioners – both practical and emotional – for all the parents, children and family members involved in keeping in touch post-adoption can influence the continuity of such arrangements and satisfaction with these arrangements.

### Summary: Keeping in touch and keeping in mind

McFarlane (2024) suggests that enabling adopted children and young people to keep in touch with their family of origin, while often seen as risking unsettling the child, can instead be a support to the child and their adoptive family. There was a great deal of emphasis in the literature reviewed on the need for timely, skilled, professional support for adopted children, adoptive and birth families around ongoing communication and spending time together.

Within the literature we reviewed, a number of ways of keeping in touch are described, ranging from yearly written letters to children and their birth families meeting in person, and all points in between, which include the use of digital platforms and social media. Decisions around type and frequency of keeping in touch are often made by practitioners in the early stages of adoption planning, and are only rarely legally mandated. At later stages, the empowerment of those involved to make changes to arrangements is experienced variably, with some adoptive parents feeling able to make or suggest changes and others feeling pressure to maintain existing arrangements, even when they feel that these are not in the child's best interests. There are mixed views within the literature about what constitutes a child's 'best interests' within this complex landscape, both in the short- term and into their adulthood. While there is a broad sense that some form of keeping in touch is welcome and beneficial for many of those involved, adopted

children, birth families and adoptive parents have individual and mixed experiences of doing so.

Relatedly, the perceptions of risk and benefit can influence the arrangements that are made for keeping in touch, including who is involved and the ways in which they will keep in touch. The benefits to children of keeping in touch with their birth family members include opportunities to develop meaningful ongoing relationships, particularly with their sisters and/or brothers; to support the forming of their identity and an understanding of their personal history; and to support their wellbeing more generally. Benefits to birth and adoptive parents are also discussed in the literature, including the opportunity to develop a relationship with people in the child's life, network and history.

Risks are typically considered to be psychological, for example, when a child is meeting in person with a birth family member from whom they have been removed due to abuse, or when no reply is received to a letter, potentially causing feelings of distress and rejection to the sender. Nevertheless, children and young people are reported to be generally content with the ways they can keep in touch; their discontent is typically when arrangements are changed without their involvement. The use of social media is also frequently assumed to be a risk in terms of privacy and safety, for example, where unexpected communication takes place or personal information is shared. It can also present a barrier to those with less access to digital devices or minimal digital literacy. Nevertheless, there are also areas in which the use of technology can be a benefit; for example, it may be considered a natural mode of communication for younger people especially.

The reviewed literature highlighted the changes in arrangements to keep in touch which can take place as time goes on, either in planned or unplanned ways, and the distress that can result from any unplanned changes. The fluctuations that commonly occur throughout childhood and adolescence were emphasised, especially the need to be flexible and understand and accommodate to children and young people's changing views and wishes around whether and how they want to keep in touch with their birth family as they grow up. Furthermore, the 'communicative openness' of adoptive parents can influence their approach to building a relationship with their child's birth family. Relatedly, the importance of planning which takes account of the wishes, needs and capabilities of all involved was highlighted as a means of supporting ongoing adherence to plans and arrangements. A consistent message from the reviewed literature was that while instances of good practice exist, in relation to practical as well as emotional support for keeping in touch, birth and adoptive parents often feel there is an absence of appropriate support once initial plans are made and the adoption order is granted. Neil et al. (2013, p.16) note that "The most helpful approach by agencies seemed to be one that supported and empowered participants to find an arrangement that worked for them, rather than dictating a standard approach".



## Supporting adoption

The research reviewed for this section of the report focuses on what is known about adoption support services in the UK and elsewhere for adoptive families, adopted children, birth families and adults who were adopted as children. We were asked to consider who delivers these services and to whom, and for how long are these services available. We also discuss what the evidence indicates about the availability, accessibility and quality of services, what is working well, and what the issues and challenges are.

It is important to note that the costs of adoption support services are complex to calculate, and any costings also need to consider potential future savings. It was beyond the scope of our expertise to analyse costings meaningfully, particularly given the different approaches taken and the debates that are present within the literature. We have therefore not considered costings in this review, but we recommend that future work by economic experts explores this important element of adoption support.

Adoption support is multi-faceted, and includes a range of multi-disciplinary universal, targeted and specialist services for adopted children and adults, adoptive families and birth families across childhood and adulthood. A mapping exercise of adoption support provision was undertaken in Scotland in 2019 (AFKA/Scottish Adoption, 2019). This found significant inconsistencies in provision of adoption support across Scotland, with a greater range of services available to families in the 'Central Belt' area of Scotland, that is the area that stretches across from the Forth of Firth to the Firth of Clyde, where the highest density of Scotland's population is. The report also included a survey of 74 adoptive parents, all of whom said they would welcome more support for them across a range of areas, including understanding their child's emotional needs, life journey work and specialist therapeutic support. Most adoption agencies said they would like to offer more support, and suggested a shared approach and training across Scotland would be helpful.

The *Adoption Barometer* completed by Adoption UK is an annual stocktake of the impact of policy and practice in adoption across the UK. In the 2024 series of publications, Adoption UK noted that the proportion of adoptive families in crisis increased in 2023, and that their optimism about the future has fallen to the lowest level ever recorded in the *Adoption Barometer*. In Scotland, 40% of adoptive families who responded said they were facing severe challenges or reaching crisis point (Adoption UK, 2024c). While two-thirds were satisfied with the quality of adoption support offered by their agency, fewer were accessing it than in previous years. Respondents in 2023 reported being more likely to have sought "enhanced support" than in any previous year, and the majority were experiencing high levels of need. This enhanced support refers to tailored support for "the specific needs of a child and their family, such as therapeutic services, short breaks, counselling and specialised training" (Adoption UK, 2024c, p.15). In Northern Ireland, around half of respondents had requested specific support for an adoption-related need, but only 29% had been offered specialist, enhanced support (Adoption UK, 2024b). In England, only 52% of respondents were satisfied with the quality of enhanced support offered by their agency (Adoption UK, 2024a). However, in Wales, satisfaction with enhanced adoption support had



improved in all measures, and 73% noted receiving support within three months of requesting it (Adoption UK, 2024d). Overall then, the *Adoption Barometer* highlights a mixed picture of adoption support for adoptive families across the UK, with some worrying reports of limited support and increases in family crises.

There was wide agreement across the literature we reviewed for this section that ongoing support needs to be available across the lifespan of the child who is adopted, given the lifelong impact on all who are affected by adoption. As Penner (2023) highlights:

*"Because adoption is lifelong, a range of services is needed to be available throughout the life cycle ... different supports are valued and necessary and depending on the challenges present in the family at the time, different needs and support to meet those needs can change or be present."* (p.22)

## Supporting adoptive families

The purpose of this section of the review is to consider adoption support for adoptive families across the peer-reviewed and grey literature. We outline the support needs of adoptive parents, adopted children and their adopted siblings, highlighting positive practice when it occurs, the challenges that adoptive families face, and the specific support services that are available for adoptive families (both inside the UK and internationally). Four of the peer-reviewed papers from the structured database search were included in this section of the report. All four were based on primary research, three of which employed qualitative methodology and one was mixed methods. Of the four included peer-reviewed papers, two were written in the North American context, both of which were from the USA. Two of the included papers were from the UK, one focused on Wales and one included Scotland and the wider UK. An additional six pieces of grey literature and peer-reviewed papers were included throughout this section.

As we have acknowledged elsewhere, our review was not able to analyse and summarise all available literature about the topics under study. There is a large body of research that exists about what is needed to provide helpful, effective, lifelong support for adoptive families, that focuses on supporting the whole family in holistic, therapeutic ways. In this section, we highlight the key issues identified in the time period of our review (2019-2024) and provide a snapshot of some of the evidence that is available internationally.

In their study about adoption support in Scotland, Grant and Critchley (2019) highlight that all agencies, including local authorities and voluntary agencies, reported offering support for adoptive parents, adopted children and adults who were adopted as children, either directly or via external organisations. This support included Barnardo's Scottish Adoption Support Service, Adoption UK Scotland, ADAPT Scotland, New Family Social, Post Adoption Central Support Scotland (PACS) and Gap Scotland (Group for Adopted People – Central Scotland). Grant and Critchley (2019) found that:

*"The most comprehensive support provision for adopted children and their adoptive families was offered by agencies who saw the case for support as*

*automatic. These agencies 'normalise' support from an early stage and engage families on an on-going basis, so that families remain connected to the agency throughout and not only at the point of seeking specific support" (p.5).*

Keeping in contact with adoptive families, through newsletters and emails to inform them about services, was noted as an opportunity to encourage them to keep in touch with the agency and raise any concerns families have at an early stage. Additionally, agencies were working to build a lifelong relationship with adopted children and their families, highlighting that factors such as low staff turnover can help to retain consistency in relationships with families. However, as Cleary and Grant (2022) highlight from their study of cross-border adoptions, the availability and consistency of support for all adoptive families across Scotland is variable and requires urgent attention.

In Wales, the *Good Practice Guide: Adoption Support* (AFA Cymru, n.d., p.4) sets out part of the 'core offer' of the National Framework for Adoption Support. This provides a model of three-tiered provision from universal support, targeted support and specialist support, working under the guiding principles that:

1. Adoptive families, both before and after the Adoption Order is made, have easy access to advice and information on adoption support services. This advice is provided by practitioners who have knowledge and experience of adoption and work from a 'trauma-informed' basis.
2. A child's needs for adoption support are identified at a very early stage, beginning with a full and robust CAR/B<sup>6</sup> and followed by an 'Understanding the Child' meeting as part of the matching process.
3. A new and dynamic Adoption Support Plan is used, which is not tethered to the adoption placement plan but moves on with the family, from matching, through to and beyond the Adoption Order.
4. A system for reviewing the Adoption Support Plan and 'keeping in touch' that takes into account the growing child's needs and the possibility of the need for support at times of transition and challenge. This system does not preclude the regulatory right of the adoptive family to request an assessment for adoption support needs at any time.

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<sup>6</sup> A CAR/B is the Child's Adoption Report, Annex B. This is a document used in adoption proceedings in England and Wales. It contains information about the child or children, their birth family and the adoption agency's recommendations, and it is used to help determine if a child or children should be adopted, to match them with potential adopters and to provide information to the prospective adopters.

5. Effective collaborative working between professionals is essential. There needs to be a common goal and understanding of the work being done and emotionally intelligent skills to build and maintain relationships, and understand the perspective of others.

In England, the introduction of the latest set of Adoption Support Regulations by the Department for Education (enacted in 2013) required adoption agencies to provide information to adoptive parents on the support available to them. However, in an evaluation of the development of four Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) in England, Selwyn and Lewis (2021) noted limited evidence that adoption support services had improved, even though adoptive parents felt better informed about the availability of services available to their family and children. The parents involved in the evaluation noted that long-standing issues with the support services included feeling discouraged from using the services, lengthy delays in assessments for support, waiting lists for services, and examples of poor practice and administration. In a later review of the RAAs in England, Smith et al. (2022) reported improvements in the offer of support to adoptive families, included a broader offer of universal support without first requiring an assessment of the family's needs. Nonetheless, challenges persisted, including the reliance on external funding sources to provide targeted and specialist support, with the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund often the primary source. The reliance on the fund has the potential to be problematic, given Adoption England's (2023) finding that the way it is set up is leading to disjointed commissioning activity across Regional Adoption Agencies. Many RAAs are purchasing the same types of interventions with limited strategic oversight and coordination. Additionally, gaps in service provision have led to a 'postcode lottery' and families are experiencing delays in accessing support. As such, there is work being undertaken by the RAAs and the National Adoption Team to develop a National Adoption Commissioning Programme in England.

During the initial linking and matching processes, adoptive parents noted benefits in receiving and sharing photographs, 'talking albums' and other materials with their adoptive children, and collaborating with foster carers to share information (Blackmore et al., 2020). In doing so, this helped to familiarise the adopted children with their adoptive family, and promoted connection between the adoptive parents and their adopted children at the time of creating their new family. Nonetheless, during this initial period, adoptive parents can have an unrealistic sense of family life due to over-planning fun events and trips, whereby they demonstrate compliance and/or appeasement through extreme patience and leniency towards children's behaviours (Goodwin et al., 2020). This 'honeymoon period' can be an adjustment for families, and when the everyday life of family sets in, adoptive families are more likely to need support to adjust to their new normal. Adoptive parents also reported feeling forgotten about by their agencies once the adoption order was granted, and where support is available, it could be 'bewildering' in complexity and very fragmented in availability (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020). This further increases the need for support throughout the process of building adoptive families for children, rather than only in the initial stages of the completion of the official adoption process. In their study of adoption and guardianship families in the USA, Rolock et al. (2021) argue that periodically checking

in with adoptive families and asking this question could help to prevent adoption breakdowns and provide timely support when it is needed. Checking in periodically could also help prevent adoptive parents from feeling forgotten by their agencies.

## Supporting adoptive parents

In this section, we focus on the support needs of adoptive parents specifically. There is notable overlap between the content in this section and that in the preceding section, given that the needs of all members of the adoptive family will also overlap. This section includes 23 peer-reviewed papers from our structured database search: five papers that used qualitative methods, eight drew on quantitative methods, six were mixed methods, three used review methodology and one was discursive in nature. Of these 23 peer-reviewed papers, 13 were about North America (12 were about the USA and one was about both the USA and Canada), seven were about the UK (four were about England, one was about England and Wales, one was about Northern Ireland and one was not specific about which parts of the UK were under study), and three were about Europe (one about Portugal, one about Germany and one about Ireland). Additionally, one piece of grey literature was included in this section. Given the scope of our review, this is just a selection of the wider literature about supporting adoptive parents that is available. This section should be considered a snapshot of the available research about supporting adoptive parents, rather than an exhaustive account of all issues and support needs for adoptive parents.

All parents face challenges in caring for their children and a number of papers highlighted that adoptive parents can face many challenges which require additional support. This can include 'caregiver strain' (Leake et al., 2019), 'parenting stress' (Barrett et al., 2021; Bovenschen et al., 2023) and negative mental health (Kohn et al., 2023). Many of these challenges were noted to compound each other. For example, adoptive parents experiencing negative mental health were more likely to report caregiver strain (Leake et al., 2019). While adoptive parents' love for their children can help to offset some of these challenges, the responsibility of providing a therapeutic approach to parenting a child who has experienced trauma can cause high levels of exhaustion and isolation, further contributing to caregiver strain, parental stress and negative mental health. Kohn et al. (2023) highlighted that it was not necessarily the behaviour of adopted children that cause the greatest challenge, for adoptive mothers specifically. It was the need to understand and use therapeutic parenting and the emotional energy that it can take to process their child's behaviour in the absence of support from wider family members. Further, in a study of adoptive families who had reported being in crisis or at least one adoption disruption, Selwyn (2019) noted that challenging relationships between siblings can contribute to parenting stress, with adoptive parents sometimes describing their families as 'toxic' or 'dysfunctional'. Attention to the need to provide parental support to the needs of their child in the manner described will continue even with the involvement of support services, but support services can provide an avenue to share the emotional impact felt by parents. Additionally, while adoptive parents and foster carers have reported needing time to themselves to 'recharge' (Barrett et al., 2021), Miller et al. (2019b) found that adoptive

parents only sometimes engage in self-care activities, and may not do so in a planned and consistent way, given the constant demands they face as parents.

Where adoptive parents had been engaged in early permanence processes, such as concurrent planning and fostering for adoption, the challenges and/or protective factors that they experience in the transition to finalising the adoption of their child can be different to other adoptive parents. While Goodwin et al. (2020) note that some challenges may not be as prominent for adoptive parents whose children had already been living with them in early permanence processes, there are additional challenges not faced by other adoptive parents. Mannion et al. (2023) examined concurrent planning in Northern Ireland, noting that these adoptive parents have engaged in the same legal process as other adoptive parents, but that they have had to manage the 'battle of concurrency' too. They experienced the concurrent planning process as uncertain and unpredictable, using the metaphor of a 'roller-coaster', and noted the support of their immediate family, extended family, and friends was particularly crucial to them. However, the availability of this support appeared to be tempered by others' ability to understand the process. Nadeem et al. (2023) suggest that some of these concerns may ease a little over time, with participants in their study feeling more negatively about concurrent planning two months after their child first began living with them in a foster care placement than they did one year after placement, although the initial concerns were still present at a lower level. Nonetheless, any reduction in the level of these concerns did not detract from the negative emotional toll of uncertainty that adoptive parents engaged in early permanence can experience.

Some papers discussed the types of support that adoptive parents would appreciate, with Kohn et al. (2023) highlighting that adoptive mothers would appreciate formal support, such as parenting groups, parent-child therapy, or training. They acknowledged that this is frequently provided for adoptive parents in the initial period after their child or children come to live with them, but often not available later in the adoption. The authors also noted that access to direct therapeutic support for parents independent of their adopted child was often reported as being a 'lottery'. Miller et al. (2019a) suggest there is support for virtual support groups, particularly among adoptive parents with similar backgrounds and adoptive experiences, and these can create meaningful connections and empathetic support for participants. Where adoptive mothers had reported turbulence in their transition to adoptive motherhood, Kohn-Willbridge et al. (2021) suggest four ways that changes to practice could support new adoptive mothers:

- Slowing down or extending the introduction phase could provide adoptive parents with time to replenish emotional and physical reserves, build the building blocks for the relationship with their child, and provide space for them to discuss and manage unexpected challenges.
- Providing psychological support for adoptive parents specifically, to support them with their transition to parenting their child.
- Developing a general service focusing on both child and adult wellbeing, encouraging adoptive parents to feel their own emotional health concerns are

legitimate and permitting and enabling them to feel able to seek support for their own emotional health when necessary.

- Reviewing the traditional advice given to new adoptive mothers that they should keep friends and family at a distance immediately after their child or children come/s to live with them, so that instead, they can receive face-to-face support from their close family and friends.

Research in Portugal notes that adoptive parents need to be well-prepared for the challenges their adopted children might face, including what their children are likely to understand and being able to establish and maintain open communication within their adoptive family (Soares et al., 2019). In the USA, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008) made available initiatives to encourage the adoption of children from care, with Goodwin and Madden (2020) highlighting that the early support available often includes financial assistance in the form of subsidies and tax breaks. While this early financial support may be beneficial, Shelton and Bridges (2022) suggested that adoptive parents in the USA value support that is personal and relational, drawing on community and societal level factors.

The literature reviewed in this section highlighted that adoptive parents should have access to support that is trauma-informed and available from “adoption competent” services to address the challenges they face (Leake et al., 2019; Goodwin and Madden, 2020). These are described as services that understand adoption and the specific support needs of adoptive parents, adopted children, and adults who were adopted as children. However, providers do not always understand complex trauma or adoption issues (LaBrenz et al., 2020). Child welfare agencies, mental health providers and other support personnel should receive training to increase their knowledge of how childhood trauma related to adoption can manifest itself in adoptive families. LaBrenz et al. (2020) recommend increasing the accessibility and availability of therapists that understand adoption, and standardising this therapy to ensure that providers meet minimum standards and have a strong understanding of adoption and issues that can be common for adoptive families. They also highlight that agencies and state child welfare systems should have policies that encourage adoptive families to access support early, to prevent any escalation of challenges the family might face.

## Specific services for adoptive parents

Some specific support services were identified for adoptive parents which show some promise for helping to overcome some the challenges identified.

### AdOpt Parenting programme

Adapted and further developed from KEEP, a US-based programme, AdOpt was designed for adoptive parents in the UK to help facilitate parenting techniques that support and address specific difficulties adopted children may experience. The programme was developed in 2011 as part of the Department for Education’s Evidence Based Interventions Programme and implemented by the National Implementation Service (NIS) in nine local



authorities in England (although only seven local authorities were still participating by the end of the evaluation). The programme is suitable for adoptive parents of children aged three to eight years old and is designed to help adoptive parents understand and respond to the complex needs of their children might have. The evaluation of this programme found that this increased a parent's capacity for reflection and self-regulation, with 65% of parents reporting an increase in confidence in their parenting ability. It recommended that the AdOpt parenting programme offers substantial opportunities to support adoptive families and should receive continued investment (Harold et al., 2017).

### PATHways – Adoption UK

Formerly known as TESSA (Therapeutic Education Support Services in Adoption), the charity organisation Adoption UK has developed the Psychology and Therapy Hub (PATH) as a UK-wide service, providing support and promoting therapeutic parenting for adoptive parents, kinship carers, long-term foster carers, and children and young people aged 13-years-old and older<sup>7</sup>. The model is based on an understanding of the impact that trauma can have on children's development, and provides psychological consultations, training and coaching, peer support, advice on school issues and access to services that focus on family wellbeing. While funding for PATH may be available, this is inconsistent throughout the UK, with adoptive parents able to self-fund the support they require. To be considered for a referral a child must have been with their adoptive family for a least a year and be experiencing difficulties that require a low-to-medium level of support. An evaluation of the TESSA model found that 85% of adoptive parents who participated reported they had a better understanding of their child's needs and felt more able to explain these needs to practitioners (Jones et al., 2021). Additionally, 90% of adoptive parents either agreed or strongly agreed that the report received from the clinical consultation was a helpful resource.

### Critical On-going Resource family Education (CORE) Teen

The CORE Teen training programme is provided by Spaulding for Children, a private, non-profit child welfare agencies in the USA. CORE Teen has three components: 1) Self-Assessment; 2) Classroom Training, and 3) Right-Time Training. Each of these three components work together to provide a multi-faceted approach to supporting 'resource parents' (named as adoptive parents, foster carers, 'guardian parents' and kinship carers) with training to support them with parenting teenagers. The authors used a self-assessment evaluation tool to evaluate whether the participants in the training reported any improvements in the 10 competencies (such as behaviour management, parental resilience or relationship development) or 17 characteristics (such as attunement, compassion or trustworthiness) that the training aims to support 'resource parents' with.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, visit <https://www.adoptionuk.org/psychology-and-therapy-hub>



Results from self-assessment scores indicate that participants had significant improvements in all but one of the competencies taught in the training, as well as a majority of the characteristics (Feltner et al., 2021).

### National Training and Development Curriculum for foster and adoptive parents (NTDC)

The NTDC is an online training curriculum developed through a cooperative agreement between the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, and Children's Bureau in the USA. It aims to prepare foster and adoptive parents to effectively provide care to children who have been exposed to trauma by providing foster and adoptive parents with ongoing skill development needed to understand and promote healthy child development. NTDC includes three components: self-assessment, classroom-based training, and a series of 15 Right-Time trainings. Participants' feedback on this indicated significant improvements in their knowledge across most modules, and high satisfaction with the usefulness, relevance, ability to understand and applicability of the training to their families (Fowler et al., 2023).

### Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) psychoeducation group-based interventions

In a narrative review of TIC psychoeducation group-based interventions for foster and adoptive parents in Ireland, Lotty et al. (2021) found that these types of interventions have been shown to improve foster carer and adoptive parent trauma-informed knowledge, reflective functioning, parenting efficacy, and confidence in managing difficult child behaviour. Some of the TIC psychoeducational group-based interventions included in this study included 'Helping Children to Form Good Attachments', 'AdOpt', and 'Incredible Years-Trauma version'. TIC has been described as an approach that supports foster carers' and adoptive parents' responsive and sensitive caregiving responses to their children and the development of their parent-child relationships (Lotty et al., 2021). The studies included in Lotty et al.'s narrative review demonstrated a reduction in emotional and behavioural difficulties and trauma symptoms in children, suggesting that children's behaviours can be improved through carers providing them with trauma-informed care.

### 'Understanding noncompliance for resource parents'

In the USA, there are online training workshops called *Understanding Noncompliance* developed by Foster Parent College, a "purpose over profit" company recognised by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare<sup>8</sup>. Noncompliance is a subjective term that can be applied to behaviour, and noncompliant behaviour in this context is defined as "interactions in which a child either actively or passively, but wilfully, fails to cooperate with an action requested by a caregiver or other adult authority figure" (White et

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.fosterparentcollege.com/info/about-us.jsp> for further information.

al., 2019, p.246). The workshops are designed to give 'resource parents' (foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents) a better understanding of the causes of noncompliant behaviour and enable them to help children choose alternatives to noncompliant behaviour, with the potential to help reduce 'parental stress'. While the findings from the USA seem positive, the three-month follow-up did not significantly show that these improvements had been maintained, so the overall effectiveness of this training is unclear.

### [Video-Feedback Intervention to promote Positive Parenting and Sensitive Discipline \(VIPP-SD\), adapted to VIPP-Family Placement \(VIPP-FP\) in the UK context](#)

VIPP-SD is offered to all adoptive families in The Netherlands and an adapted version, VIPP-FP was piloted in England by The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and The Adolescent and Child Trust (TACT), with funding from the Department for Education, for use specifically with adopted children and children who are subject to Special Guardianship Orders. The focus is on supporting adoptive parents and carers to recognise and react to their child's "signals" in a sensitive and timely way. Through the training, adoptive parents are encouraged to notice cues that may be subtle, difficult to interpret or misleading as a result of children's earlier life experiences. Findings demonstrate that parents who participated in VIPP-FP used the skills and knowledge they had learned from the intervention, including the importance and benefits of dedicated play time with their children and being able to observe their child's communications and subtle signs communicated through their behaviour (Dugmore et al., 2022).

### [Inclusive Family Support Model \(IFSM\)](#)

Kim and Tucker (2020) describe the development of the IFSM for adoptive parents by a child welfare agency in the USA, although the authors noted that this model had yet to be implemented. They highlighted that this IFSM for adoptive parents is intended to provide a blueprint for practitioners working to help adoptive families maintain healthy relationships with their children's birth parents. The authors describe the practice model as focusing on helping adoptive parents to navigate post-adoption 'openness' – that is, open communication with their child about adoption and keeping in touch with their birth family through various ways. The paper is descriptive and does not provide evidence of effectiveness, and it made no differentiation between infants adopted privately and children adopted from foster care.

### [Nurturing Attachments and Foundations for Attachment](#)

Nurturing Attachments and Foundations for Attachment are two groupwork programmes developed by an independent clinical psychologist, trainer, author and storyteller in the UK to provide support for adoptive parents and foster carers parenting children living in or adopted from care (Golding, 2019). Both programmes are informed by Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), a model developed by Dan Hughes in the USA (Hughes, 2011 and Hughes et al., 2019, both referenced in Golding, 2019). Between both programmes, group members can receive 25 three-hour sessions focusing on education, support and immersive experience in the DDP model, including the attitude of PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy). This can help parents to tailor their

parenting to the individual needs of their children. Golding (2019) argues that parents who have taken part in Nurturing Attachments and Foundations for Attachment have reported 'high satisfaction' with the groups, alongside 'positive and statistically significant changes' to their self-efficacy, competence and reflective function. The programmes can also help parents develop and increase their use of the PACE attitude.

### The Cornerstone Partnership's Restorative Parenting Programme

The Restorative Parenting Programme was developed for adoptive parents and carers of 'looked after' children in the UK by the Cornerstone Partnership, a UK social enterprise. As a parenting training programme, the Restorative Parenting Programme introduced the use of immersive video technology in 2017 to accelerate the understanding of children's early life trauma experiences by adoptive parents and carers, and to improve the relationship between children and their adoptive parents or carers. The immersive video technology is part of a two-day programme educating attendees about parenting methods and introduces them to theories of attachment. An evaluation of this training and support programme by Lucas et al. (2022) found that participants highly rated their satisfaction with the training, reported increased understanding and greater empathy for their children's early life trauma and neglect, and felt enhanced competence and confidence in addressing behavioural challenges that may be associated with their child's trauma and neglect. For the immersive videos specifically, the authors noted that participants valued the different points of view, with the authors suggesting that immersive video technology could be considered a useful educational tool in parenting support and training programmes.

## Supporting adopted children

In this section, we focus on the support needs of adopted children, highlighting some of their experiences and the role that adoption support can play in helping them to overcome adversities and thrive in their adoptive families. In total, 19 pieces of peer-reviewed literature from the structured database search are included in this section: eight used mixed methods, five used qualitative methods, three were quantitative, two were reviews (one systematic review and one scoping review), and one was discursive in nature. Of these 19 papers, eight were about the UK (five were about England, one was about Wales, one was about Northern Ireland, and one was about Scotland and the wider UK), six were about North America (all of them were about the USA), and five were from Europe (three were about Portugal, one was about Spain, and one was about the Republic of Ireland). Additionally, 31 pieces of grey literature and peer-reviewed papers have been analysed in this section of our review. While this is a significant amount of literature, we suspect that there are many more papers about supporting adopted children that did not appear in our review. Readers should be mindful that this is an overview of the literature about supporting adopted children that has been written over the last five years (2019-2024) when progressing through the section and should read the content accordingly.

Alongside specific support for adoptive parents, there is a need to provide ongoing, lifelong support to adopted children, especially as adopted children can feel 'bewildered' by their

adoption (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020). The research we reviewed overwhelmingly highlights that early life experiences prior to adoption continue to have significant impacts on children long after they are adopted (Paniagua et al., 2019; Soares et al., 2019; McSherry and McAnee, 2022). Paniagua et al. (2019) are clear that challenges from the beginning of a child's life should not be underestimated or misinterpreted, as these can be exacerbated during adolescence and, in some instances, lead to a breakdown in the adoption. Alongside the trauma and/or neglect that adopted children may have experienced prior to their adoption, Soares et al. (2019) also indicate that adoption can lead to adoption-related losses for children, such as loss of birth family, a severing or loss of social relationships and feeling cut off from significant relationships after their adoption. The positives that can be felt such as belonging to a new family, new experiences, care and love of their adoptive family, and establishing new relationships does not mean that losses won't also be felt. Age-appropriate preparation should be undertaken with children to explain their separation from previous relationships and places, and emotional connections between children and adults and peers who were important to them should be preserved through their adoption (Soares et al., 2019).

The early life experiences of children who are adopted, as well as any losses they feel and experiences as a result of adoption, can increase their need for mental health support. Coulter et al. (2022) note that the mental health support for all children in the UK provided via CAMHS is increasingly challenging to access, and there is a need for whole-family support, as well as ongoing trauma and attachment training for parents, to better help adopted children navigate everyday life. Like adoption support for adoptive parents, services should be 'adoption competent' and trauma-informed, ensuring that practitioners understand and are responsive to the complexity and nuances of adoption, with specific training and personal sensitivity noted as key to working effectively with adopted children (Soares et al., 2019). McSherry and McAnee (2022) make a number of recommendations for more support for adopted children and their adoptive families:

- Greater efforts should be made to expedite the time it takes for children to begin living with their adoptive families, ensuring it is as early as possible, and, where this expediency is not possible, support should be provided to maintain well-established relationships with foster carers and/or birth parents.
- More support with regards to children's health and educational needs should be provided.
- The establishment of a formal link worker for every child adopted from care, whose singular responsibility would be to support the adoptive parents in any way that they can, particularly with meeting the health and education needs of their child. This link worker should be available for as long as is deemed necessary by the adoptive parent and/or their child.

Finally, adoption support for children could continue to make use of some of the temporary measures that were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health restrictions, where these have proved useful for children and their adoptive families. For instance, Alves et al. (2023) drew on experiences of adoptive families during the

pandemic in Portugal: they highlighted that maintaining the use of WhatsApp groups and video calls (alongside face-to-face conversations) during follow-ups with the adoption team practitioners<sup>9</sup> can allow access to other elements of the child or adopters' lives which can be helpful to build relationships and rapport. Additionally, positive feedback was gathered from adoptive parents about recording videos of themselves to share with their children prior to adoption, helping them to gradually get to know each other. There were also suggestions from some of the practitioners involved in this study that in the case of post-adoption, time spent at home during the pandemic, when adoptive parents could not go to their workplaces and children could not attend school, could have a positive impact on children settling into their adoptive families. However, other work, such as Meakings et al.'s (2018) study in Wales, highlighted that advice from adoption agencies to 'batten down the hatches' in the early weeks after children begin living with their adoptive parents led to many adopters feeling isolated and unsupported by their own networks during this initial post-adoption period.

## Support for adopted children within education

There is an increasing body of literature which looks at educational experiences and outcomes for 'looked after' children (e.g. Jay and McGrath-Lone, 2019; Townsend et al., 2020), and at the use of attachment or trauma-informed practice in schools (e.g. Dingwall and Sebba, 2019). However, only three peer-reviewed papers identified in our systematic search had a focus explicitly on adopted children (Stoother et al., 2019; Best et al., 2021; Goldberg and Grotevant, 2023). This may be a result of the limited scope of our search, however this lack of focus on the education of adopted children is also highlighted within the articles themselves, with Stoother et al. (2019) finding only 11 relevant articles published between 1997 and 2017 in their systematic review. These authors further caution that while many educational supports for 'looked after' children will be equally beneficial to adopted learners, "an assumed equivalence of needs between them could be misleading" (p.430).

Amongst the grey literature on education, a focus on adoption specifically was more prominent, primarily through research and reporting by the charity Adoption UK, who have recently given much attention to the educational needs of adopted children. Their most recent publications describe a majority of adoptive parents reporting that their child needs more support with education than others of the same age (67% in NI, 73% in Wales, 83%

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<sup>9</sup> The authors note that, in Portugal, the adoption team will follow-up with the adoptive family during the six-month period after the child begins living with the adoptive parents, to review the "quality of the relationship established between the child and parents, the children's integration and the parents' adjustment" (Alves et al., 2023, p.3). This period ends with the legalisations of the adoption by the court.

in England), while only around half of adoptive parents feel that teachers have a good understanding of the needs of adopted children (Adoption UK, 2024b; 2024c; 2024d).

### *Meeting support needs in education*

Adoption UK (2018) identified what they described as four 'gaps' in the education of adopted children:

- in understanding specific needs of adopted children, particularly as a result of the trauma and loss children experience;
- the need for greater empathy towards the challenges facing adopted children and their families,
- the provision of appropriate resources to meet needs, and;
- understanding the links between attainment and life experiences.

Relatedly, Stother et al. (2019) report an overarching need for a shared understanding between adoptive parents and educators of the needs of individual children and how these could be best met. Similarly, in their US-based study, Goldberg and Grotevant (2023) noted that teachers often found out about a child's being adopted from the child themselves; adoptive parents could be reluctant to share this information for a range of reasons. Teachers often felt underprepared to work with adoptive families, although this was less the case for respondents with adopted children in their own extended family networks. Teachers could feel unsure about asking for further information in case this was considered to be 'prying'.

Adopted young people in the UK study reported by Best et al. (2021) described social and emotional difficulties in school, misperceptions and prejudice and unsupportive school contexts. Adoptive parents described "an ongoing battle to gain appropriate support in school" (p.369) and that a lack of appropriate support in school could subsequently impact on family life at home.

### *Examples of support for adopted learners*

Many of the policy initiatives and interventions around education that we identified are intended for the population of all 'care experienced' children, including children who are 'looked after' by foster carers or kinship carers, or living in residential care, as well as children who are in special guardianship arrangements or have been adopted.

It's important to note too that there is considerable overlap between care experienced learners and learners with 'special educational needs and disabilities' (SEND; Department for Education, 2018a). In Scotland, children who are currently 'looked after' are presumed to have 'additional support needs' (ASN) unless assessed otherwise, and although at present the legislation underpinning this provision (the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009) does not extend to 'previously looked after' and adopted children, it should be recognised that adopted learners may access education support



through ASN legislation and provisions, which are not explicitly 'adoption supports' (Parkinson and Fursland, 2021).

In England, the Virtual School Head (VSH) is a senior role at a local authority level with a remit for improving the educational experience and attainment of care experienced learners within a local authority area. This provides oversight and support for the children and young people, who continue to access their usual education provision. The role of the VSH was originally focused on 'looked after' children only, but was then expanded to include 'previously looked after' (including adopted) children (Department for Education, 2018a), and later, non-statutorily to all children with a social worker (Department for Education, 2024). The support available varies with the legal status of the child, however. As a senior employee at a local authority level, the VSH is expected to work and advocate for 'looked after' children reflecting their position as a 'corporate parent', while for adopted children, only advice and support to the adoptive parents is required (DCSF, 2010; Department for Education, 2018a). In Scotland, the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher was first introduced in 2015, and has expanded as a number of local authorities have chosen to utilise Care Experienced Children and Young People's funding for this role. As at September 2023, the Virtual School Head Teachers' Network currently has 18 local authority representatives with responsibility for care experienced learners (CELCIS, n.d.). As the role is not statutory in Scotland, practice and focus varies between local authorities, although adopted children are generally included within individual remits. Despite the different contexts, the challenges and facilitators to undertaking this role are broadly similar in Scotland and England (McIver and Bettencourt, 2024).

While the role of the VSH for 'looked after' children showed early signs of effectiveness in, improving educational outcomes (Berridge et al., 2009; Ofsted, 2012), as yet there is little evidence of the mechanisms underpinning this (Sebba and Berridge, 2019). More recently, Harrison et al. (2023) have reported on improving Virtual School effectiveness in England, but again looking at the role in its broad sense. There is no research or evaluation on this concerning adopted children specifically.

The VSH literature gives some detail about the types of support and intervention that may be mediated through that role for the benefit of care experienced learners. As well as planning and monitoring, these can include interventions and support for individual children and young people such as tutoring or mentoring (e.g. Ofsted, 2011; Sebba and Berridge, 2019), some of which may in themselves have a strong evidence base. The VSH is also responsible for the allocation of Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) funding in England, which at present is a sum of £2570 per pupil per year for those who are previously 'looked after'. This is paid directly to individual schools but is not an individualised budget (UK Government, 2024). Read et al. (2020) reported the use of PP+ budgets for a wide range of support, including academic (such as free book deliveries or tutoring), mental health and attachment support, extra-curricular activities, and transition support for 'looked after' children, but again note a lack of clearly demonstrated impact. They further highlight that although support at transition points tends to focus on transition out of Key Stage 4 (that is, following GCSE exams), that there is no PP+ allocation for learners in post-16 provision.



Furthermore, while there is an allocation of a smaller amount for children in early years settings (UK Government, 2024), there is little evidence regarding how this is used, or on what support is available at earlier transition points during a child's education, including between early years and primary school, and between school years. Adoption UK (2022b) found that the use of PP+ and the role of the VSH in relation to adopted children were unclear to adoptive parents and to educators, which could limit the effectiveness of these forms of support.

Within individual maintained schools<sup>10</sup> in England, the role of Designated Teacher for 'looked after and previously looked after' children has been in place since 2009. Their remit is to act as a first point of contact for care experienced learners within each school, and to ensure the development of appropriate policy and staff practice to meet the needs of these learners (Department for Education, 2018b). In Scotland, the broadly similar but non-statutory role of Designated Manager was introduced at around the same time, although a report by O'Neill et al. (2017) suggested the role was not being fully recognised or utilised by schools.

Best et al. (2021) explored the educational experiences of adopted young people in England through interviews and focus groups with young people and adoptive parents. Their findings emphasised the importance of attention to emotional needs as well as academic needs, and the value of at least one good relationship with an adult in school, to help the child feel safe and supported. In general however, such relationships were considered to be more a matter of luck than a consistent experience.

### *Support for education practitioners*

The need for improved or additional training for educators was frequently identified in the literature we reviewed as a means of supporting their work with adopted children and their families. This included the provision of information on adoption generally, as well as attachment, trauma, and the needs of care experienced learners. Such training could take place as part of initial teacher training as well as ongoing professional learning, and could also include training for support staff in schools (Stother et al., 2019; Goldberg and Grotevant, 2023). In England, it could be facilitated or delivered by the Virtual School Headteacher (VSH) directly, or through the use of PP+ funding (Ofsted, 2011; Read et al., 2020). As well as improving knowledge, Stother et al. (2019) suggest that training, especially when conducted with educators and adoptive parents together, can improve mutual understanding and support better communication and relationships between

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<sup>10</sup> Broadly, schools within the remit of a local authority. Further information on school governance arrangements in England: Long, R. (2022). Constituency Casework: Schools in England. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05396/>

schools and adoptive families. Recent research suggests that there has been some improvement in teachers' understanding of adopted children's needs in all four UK nations. Nevertheless, in the recent Adoption Barometer report published by Adoption UK, only around half of adoptive parents agreed with the statement 'My child's teachers have a good understanding of the needs of care experienced and adopted children', the highest proportion from Northern Ireland (54% of NI respondents) and the lowest in Scotland (49% of respondents in Scotland) (Adoption UK, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d). Furthermore, training alone is only a first step, and is unlikely to drive sustained change in classroom practice without support for reflective practice (SAIA, 2022).

The role of systems-level and universal elements to support educators, and thereby adopted learners, is also highlighted in the literature we reviewed. Ofsted (2012), for example, noted that the role of VSHs in promoting multi-agency working and in building capacity amongst the education workforce such as through training on trauma informed practice. Adoption UK (2018) suggest that an increased focus and priority in policy and legislation, improved use of existing resource and increased funding to meet needs, and an increased focus on wellbeing in schools are also key routes to bridging the identified 'gaps' in education for adopted children.

## Specific services for adopted children and young people

In our review, some specific support services were identified for adopted children which showed promise in helping to support them and their adoptive families. A scoping review of post-adoption support services (undertaken in the USA, but includes international literature, with London in the UK and Canada specifically named) highlights the following services which can help adopted children and their families (Penner, 2023):

- The Australian service Turning into Teens (TINT) was effective in lessening the extent in which adoptive and guardianship families were struggling with behaviour management.
- Multisystemic Therapy with adopted adolescents displaying antisocial behaviours can help reduce antisocial behaviour within families.
- Whole Family Systems Therapy, a modification of Theraplay and Whole Systems Therapy, showed promise as an effective practice model with adoptive families, showing some level of efficacy in improving family communication, enhancing adult parents' interpersonal relationship skills, and assisting adopted children to have better overall outcomes, all encouraging future research to determine greater clinical efficacy.
- Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI), a trauma-informed intervention, demonstrated positive outcomes as well. When incorporated alongside post-adoption services, TBRI can help parents effect change in a child's life. Knowledge gained from the programme can also help families persevere and improve placement outcomes, reducing behavioural problems and trauma symptoms.

Additional support services for adopted children were:

### *Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund*

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund was established in England by the Department for Education in 2015 to provide therapeutic support for adopted children and their families. It was developed in recognition of the complex and long-term support needs which children adopted from care have as a result of their adverse experiences in their life prior to adoption, including abuse and/or neglect, and the impact of loss and separation from their birth families. Funding is capped at a maximum of £5,000 per child and is highly utilised and valued by the adoptive families who access it (Gieve et al., 2019; Burch et al., 2022). The therapeutic supports that families could use this funding for are extensive and may include any of the following: therapeutic parenting training, Dyadic Developmental Psychology (DDP), Theraplay, creative therapies, filial therapy, sensory therapies, mentalisation based therapy, psychotherapy, therapeutic life journey work and short breaks. In Scotland, the University of Glasgow is currently leading on a UK-wide trial of DDP to strengthen the evidence base for this intervention (University of Glasgow, n.d.).

Successive evaluations of the fund (King et al., 2017; Gieve et al., 2019; Burch et al., 2022) have highlighted that where therapeutic support is accessed, adopted children have substantially higher emotional, behavioural and developmental needs than their peers both in the wider general population of children and in care. Furthermore, at the point of accessing the fund, the mental health and wellbeing of the adoptive parents was considerably worse than the wider adult population, and there were significant issues around family functioning and parent-child relationships.

Longitudinal follow-up with the families who accessed the fund between 2015-2021 (Gieve et al., 2019; Burch et al., 2022) demonstrated that adopted children sustained small, but significant, improvements in their mental health and behaviour, and that adoptive parents experience modest, but meaningful, improvements in their wellbeing. The biggest improvements were seen in parents' understanding of their children's needs, and their confidence in parenting, which positively impacted on how the family functioned. The evaluation teams in all the reports highlighted the high levels of need that the adopted children had, and that what might appear as small improvements were often felt to bring meaningful and positive change to their family life. However, the researchers also emphasised that the fund was not a panacea which would fully address all the children's difficulties, given the long-term, complex and changing nature of adopted children's needs over time. Instead, it should be viewed as one aspect of a holistic and wide-ranging approach to supporting children and their families across their lifetimes.

### *Neuro-Physiological Psychotherapy (NPP)*

NPP was developed by Family Futures, a voluntary adoption agency, and is based on understanding developmental trauma, and other interventions such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP). It differs from other psychotherapeutic models in its neuro-physiological focus, and is a model which acknowledges and addresses the impact of

ongoing trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on children's developing nervous systems. McCullough and Mathura's (2019) research in the UK with 54 children and young people (31 who had received support from NPP and 23 who did not) offers some evidence for the potential effectiveness of NPP as an intervention for children adopted from care, suggesting improvements for them in a range of measures compared to a non-matched control group.

### *Program for Preparing Children for Adoption (PPCA)*

PPCA in Portugal was developed by Henriques et al. (2021) as a structured programme to help ease the transition of children when they move to live with their adoptive family. Clarification, actualisation, and integration are at the core of the intervention, with programme activities and techniques including lifebooks, timelines, and collages to provide a frame of reference to prepare children for adoption. Henriques et al. (2021, p.146) argue that PPCA's major contributions comprise the focus on "(1) the narrative inspiring the many tasks at several stages of the programme aiming to involve the child in the co-construction of meaning of preparation and transition to a new adoptive family; (2) the materials available, specifically the child workbook, highlighting once more the active role of the child in the construction of their preparation using a metaphor of adventure travel; and (3) the expected involvement and collaborative work of the child, professionals, and new adoptive parents in the completion of the established PPCA activities".

### *Hope Connection 2.0: A therapeutic family camp*

Based on Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI), *Hope Connection 2.0* aimed to focus on the needs of each member of the adoptive family, attachment and sensory processing, and was delivered over two weekend-long camps rather than two to three weeks during the summer in the original Hope Connection. It was developed and piloted by the authors as part of the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development at Texas Christian University in the USA. Adopted children, their adoptive or birth siblings living with them, and their adoptive parents participated in Hope Connection 2.0. The findings demonstrated a reduction in some trauma-related emotional and behavioural problems, improvements in the adoptive parent-adopted child relationship and overall family functioning (Hunsley et al., 2022).

### *Building Your Self-Confidence*

Based on a model of Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT), *Building Your Self-Confidence* is provided over eight sessions with young people living with foster carers, kinship carers or adoptive parents. It was developed in the UK and funded by the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust. Eight girls aged 12 to 16-years-old were involved in this pilot of the service, all of whom were referred to a specialist psychology team within social services in southern England. The evaluation of this suggests that this service shows promise, with all young people reporting that their self-confidence had improved to some extent, and six of the eight young people noting the group was enjoyable. Additionally, half of the caregivers involved highlighted improvements in their child's mental health (Lau-Zhu and Vella, 2023).

## Lifelong Links

Lifelong Links is an approach developed by Family Rights Group, a third sector organisation in the UK, to help children and young people remain connected with their family members and other people important to them. Originally developed specifically for children and young people 'in care', the model has since been adapted to help children, young people and young adults remain connected with the people that are important to them through a variety of situations that can lead to feelings of separation and loss. For instance, a project called *Always Hope* is seeking to determine whether Lifelong Links can help young men with care experience who are in prison<sup>11</sup>. A three-year evaluation of the initial pilot of Lifelong Links in England, conducted by the Rees Centre, found that Lifelong Links can positively impact the lives of children 'in care' (Holmes et al., 2020). A further five-year evaluation of the initial pilot of Lifelong Links in Scotland, conducted by CELCIS, echoed these findings (Porter and Fowler, 2024). Both reports noted that Lifelong Links can improve children and young people's sense of identity and agency, while supporting them to build their own narratives and reconnect with the people that are important to them. The evaluations identified that Lifelong Links could reconnect children and young people 'in care' with their sisters and/or brothers who had been adopted, and that many of the young people who took part in interviews and focus groups highlighted that this reconnection with their siblings was very important to them (Holmes et al., 2020; Porter and Fowler, 2024). Family Rights Group are now working with Adoption England to redevelop the Lifelong Links programme for adopted children<sup>12</sup>, and it is hoped that Lifelong Links could be a helpful support resource for adopted children in the UK.

## Support for sibling relationships

In this section, the word siblings is used to mean the brothers and/or sisters that adopted children live with. This can include the unrelated birth children of the adopted child's adoptive parents, the unrelated adopted children of the same adoptive parents, or the related birth siblings of adopted children. Adoption support in this section means the support that adopted children need *and* the support that adopted siblings need within their sibling relationships. The support needs of the brothers and/or sisters of adopted children who are related by birth and continue to live with their birth parents or in other households, but do not live in the same household as the adopted child, are not discussed in this section, and are instead discussed in the section [Keeping in touch and keeping in mind](#).

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, visit <https://frg.org.uk/lifelong-links/what-is-lifelong-links/>

<sup>12</sup> For more information, visit <https://adoptionengland.co.uk/maintaining-relationships-adopted-people#:~:text=Lifelong%20Links%20aims%20to%20ensure,Links%20programme%20for%20adopted%20children>

The topic of sibling relationships with regard to adoption is vast, and we expect that there is an array of existing research about how children feel about their sisters and/or brothers throughout the adoption process, whether they are adopted with birth siblings or not, or whether they find themselves living with any adoptive siblings or not. Our review only highlighted a limited number of papers about support for sibling relationships, as relevant to this section of the document, and we acknowledge that the information here does not cover all of the experiences children may have with or about siblings during adoption. Our analysis of the papers identified here should be considered an overview of some issues that have been raised, rather than a comprehensive discussion of sibling relationships in adoption in their totality.

Where children have been adopted together with their birth sibling, Hillman et al.'s (2023) UK study found that this could have a positive influence on the adopted children's emotional development, helping to reduce emotional and behavioural difficulties when the children reach adolescence. Being placed with a sibling might be more beneficial and partly contribute to better and healthier ways of both making sense of and dealing with challenging situations and emotions. In the USA, where adoptive parents choose to adopt siblings from care, Frost and Goldberg (2020a) noted that these parents reported a 'startling and overwhelming initial adjustment' to their multiple parenting that needs additional support and preparation. Additionally, adoptive parents often reported that their children who are siblings were adapting to the adoption differently, with patterns whereby one child had markedly less difficulty than the other(s).

Where adopted children go on to live with adoptive siblings who are the birth children of their adoptive parents, these adoptive siblings can describe adoption as 'one of the best' experiences of their lives, or 'one of the worst' experiences of their lives (Hunsley et al., 2021). Adoptive siblings in this USA study who were able to remember the time when their parents adopted their sister or brother described 'parentification' and taking on the role of a parent to help with the needs of the family, feeling invisible or rejected and 'pushed aside' in favour of the adopted sibling, sometimes leading to feelings of resentment towards their adopted sibling for taking all of their parents' time. Others noted becoming a 'peacemaker' or people-pleaser to reduce the burden of stress that adoptive parents were experiencing. These challenging experiences of adoption led to adoptive siblings experiencing mental health issues, broken relationships, an inability to trust others and a jaded worldview (Hunsley et al., 2021). On the other hand, some adopted siblings talked about great personal growth, including increased empathy, compassion, maturity and a wider worldview. At times, their experiences of adoption led adoptive siblings to foster or adopt their own children, or to enter the child welfare field and related professions where they could positively impact the lives of children. Barrett et al. (2021) indicate that most foster carers or adoptive parents reported that their birth children growing and learning from the experience of the family adopting a child/children, whereas others could feel 'left out'. Overall, adoptive siblings highlighted a need both for support for their new sibling, and for the adoptive family as a whole (Hunsley et al., 2021).



## Support for adults who were adopted as children

The focus of this section is on the support needs, opportunities and experiences of adults who were adopted as children. Adoption is a lifelong experience, and adopted people may seek support in adulthood for a range of reasons, including a wish to know more about their personal or medical history and the circumstances of their adoption, and in relation to the social and psychological impacts of their experiences in childhood and beyond. Adoption support for adults who were adopted as children is an important task for adoption professionals.

Nine papers from the peer-reviewed structured database search contributed to this section, seven of which reported on primary research. One paper reported on a systematic literature review, while the remaining paper offered a descriptive and discursive account of genetic testing in the context of adoption. Four of the papers reported from a North American context, including the discursive paper. One was based on research conducted in South Africa, one in Ireland, and one in the UK. The literature review had an international scope and was conducted by researchers in Spain. A further nine pieces of grey literature and peer-reviewed papers informed our analysis of support for adults who were adopted as children, all reporting on the wider UK context.

It was not always clear in the literature we reviewed whether the adults who were adopted as children who took part in the research had been adopted from care, or through other routes such as private adoption. Only the paper by Neil et al. (2023a) was explicit that research participants were purposely recruited who had been adopted in 1989 or later, in order to include a sizeable proportion who had been adopted from care. As this section discusses the experiences and support needs of adults who were adopted as children, we did not strictly limit papers to those explicitly reporting on adoption from care. The Adoption UK (2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d) and PAC-UK (2023) reports each include adult adoptees of any age, meaning that many will have been adopted at a time when most adoption was not the result of child protection services' involvement. Furthermore, the paper reporting on the perspectives of adult adoptees in South Africa (Langenhoven and Greeff, 2022) describes the participants as having been adopted as a result of parental absence (e.g. death of parent(s), or what was described as 'abandonment'). Nevertheless, many of the issues raised around the challenges facing adults who were adopted as children and their access to support are common to adults who were adopted as children of all ages. Broadly, the availability and suitability of support for adults who were adopted as children was often in doubt across the literature we reviewed. In the assessment of national policy reported in the Adoption Barometer (Adoption UK, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d), all four nations of the UK are considered 'poor' on most measures. Similarly, respondents' reporting of their lived experiences largely demonstrate low levels of confidence in the availability of appropriate support in a range of domains, including access to their records, support with finding birth relatives, and access to therapeutic support. PAC-UK (2023), for example, note a general lack of professional support services to help with transition to adulthood. Furthermore, 76% of respondents felt that therapeutic counselling services should be free to access for all adults who were adopted as children



and 61% were not aware of any adoption support services in their own area. The response from Regional Adoption Agencies in England to adults who were adopted as children seeking support to access birth records was reported to be variable, while resource constraints meant that not all agencies were offering this type of support (Ofsted, 2024; Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024).

## Support to access adoption records

Historically, accessing adoption records in Scotland has been more straightforward than in England and Wales. The Adoption of Children (Scotland) Act (1930) included the provision that adopted people born in Scotland could access their original birth record. This right was not available in England and Wales until 1975, and there are different legal processes for adults who were adopted as children depending on when their adoption took place. In Scotland, any adopted person can make a request to the court, the local authority or the independent adoption agency that granted their adoption, to view their adoption record, with no fees or formal application required. If it is established that the person's adoption records have been transferred to the National Records of Scotland, adults adopted as children can apply to view their records there.

In England and Wales, people adopted before 12 November 1975, when the law changed, can apply to the General Register Office for a copy of their original birth entry/birth certificate. A counselling session is required prior to accessing birth records because anonymity to birth parents had been assured until this point. People who were adopted between 12 November 1975 and 29 December 2005 (inclusive) can also apply to the General Register Office for their original birth entry/birth certificate, but counselling is not required before accessing it. For adoptions which took place on or after 30 December 2005 (when the Adoption and Children Act, 2002 came into force), an adult who was adopted as a child has the right to apply to "the appropriate adoption agency for information required to enable them to obtain a copy of their birth certificate" (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024, p.60). The adopted person or the adoption agency would then apply to the General Register Office for a copy of the original birth entry/birth certificate. An additional provision within this Act was a right for adults adopted as children to obtain the information given to their adoptive parents during the adoption process, including the Child Permanence Report and any other relevant information. The Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group report included some flowcharts to understand the processes in obtaining birth and adoption records. These can be found [here](#).

In 2021, the Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group undertook a survey of RAA's in England, Regional Adoption Collaboratives in Wales, and local authorities, independent adoption agencies and intermediary services in both countries to understand people's experiences of requesting access to records and interfacing with the Courts. Designated Family Judges were also consulted. The findings from this work highlighted that the process of obtaining adoption records in England and Wales was "confusing, inconsistent and time-consuming for all concerned" (Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group, 2024, p.66). Availability of services was inconsistent across England and Wales, and many agencies reported having insufficient resources to meet demand, with long waiting times.

There is also an expectation that demand will increase as adults adopted as children after 2005 begin to request access to their records.

In all four UK nations, the majority of Adoption Barometer survey respondents had at some time accessed, or attempted to access, their records relating to their birth or social care. These records can include information about their background, their care, and the decisions that were made, and can be held by adoption agencies or local authorities. There were mixed reports across these four nations on whether these adults who were adopted as children had felt well supported in doing so. In England and Scotland, more than half of respondents had not felt well supported, while in Northern Ireland this was around 2/3<sup>13</sup> (Adoption UK, 2024a; 2024c). In Wales, 58% agreed they were well supported by practitioners, but respondents emphasised the systemic barriers to accessing records, which Adoption UK described as “a culture and system which creates enormous barriers to accessing even simple information about a person’s own life story” (Adoption UK, 2024d, p.29). There was some suggestion that the length of time since adoption could influence the experience of accessing records (Adoption UK, 2024c; 2024d). In England and Wales, this may reflect changes in legislation as well as “a greater understanding about the needs of adopted people to access information about their background, and how important and helpful this can be” (PAC-UK, n.d.). Legislation in England permits access to records from the age of 18 (PAC-UK, n.d.), while for adoptions finalised in Scotland, records can be requested by the adopted person once they are 16 years old (Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, n.d). Relatedly, one Adoption Barometer respondent in England highlighted that they were not able to access their records until the age of 18, but that they felt they would have benefitted from this information during adolescence (Adoption UK, 2024a), a key stage of identity development.

A range of challenges for adults who were adopted as children seeking to access their records were described in the literature reviewed. Practical issues included closures and mergers of agencies, making it difficult to know who to approach for information. Other challenges included long wait times; unavailability of records due to loss, destruction, or poor historical recording practice; incomplete or inaccurate records, or those so substantially redacted as to make them meaningless (Murphy et al., 2022; PAC-UK, 2023; Adoption UK, 2024a; 2024c; 2024d).

Alongside these practical issues were the emotional and psychological complexities of seeking access to records. For many adults who were adopted as children, making the decision to access their records was in itself a highly emotive experience, which delays, disappointments, and dissatisfaction with the information received only served to exacerbate. Some respondents in the Adoption Barometer reports (Adoption UK 2024a;

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<sup>13</sup> Note that the report highlights the small number of respondents from Wales and Northern Ireland especially.

2024b; 2024c; 2024d) described a feeling of power imbalance when they sought information about their records. They felt that some of the practitioners involved infantilised adults who were adopted as children or behaved disrespectfully towards them. The process was described as not being adoptee-centred or trauma-informed, while adults who were adopted as children described a lack of preparation for what their records might include, and a lack of support to manage the emotional impact of reading the information written about themselves and their birth families during their childhood. While some individual practitioners were described as being helpful and supportive, perceived as being largely due to their understanding nature, the Barometer report for England (Adoption UK, 2024a) suggests that there has been little improvement over time in adoptees' feelings of being unsupported through this process.

In Wales, the National Adoption Service (NAS) recognises that support to access records has been under-resourced, and acknowledges that this type of support is a specialised role. Actions to improve the experience of adults who were adopted as children in Wales who are seeking information or support with contacting birth family have included consultations, and the development of a sub-group with a focus on creating a work plan as part of wider service planning (National Adoption Service, 2023).

The Public Law Working Group: Adoption Sub-Group report (2024) has recommended that there should be one central and maintained database in England and Wales regarding the location of adoption records, given the confusion that is present, especially when adoption agencies close, and the delays that can occur as a result. Furthermore, the group would like all adoption agencies to provide clear, comprehensive information about how to apply for a birth certificate, how to apply for adoption records, and how to engage intermediary services. The report highlighted the importance of training for practitioners and adoptive parents to support access to records, not only in terms of legislation and process, but also on the lifelong impact of adoption. The report also recommended that there should be a national protocol for a standard procedure for disclosure of court documents, with clear timescales and a consistent, template application for everyone.

## Support to trace and contact birth relatives

A similar lack of practical and emotional preparation and support was described in relation to adults who had been adopted as children being able to trace and contact their birth relatives, alongside similar systemic barriers. Amongst Adoption Barometer survey respondents in England who did have the opportunity of some preparatory work (Adoption UK, 2024a), around half felt that this aligned with their needs, but in some instances the support offered was felt to be inappropriate or inadequate. Furthermore, adults who were adopted as children included in the literature we reviewed described a lack of follow-up support to help respondents manage the emotional aspects of searching for relatives and reuniting with them, even in the very difficult circumstances of birth parents declining to meet with the adopted person. Relatedly, there was a reported lack of support for birth family members, once traced, to help them engage with and maintain keeping in touch with the adopted person.

Murphy et al. (2022) used Freedom of Information requests to explore the response of adoption agencies in England to requests from adults who were adopted as children for support with tracing and contacting birth family members. The study was initiated by an intermediary agency involved in this work, which had noted increasing time scales for access to support. The research found wide variations in practice amongst Regional Adoption Agencies and local authorities, including the resources allocated to this area of work, and the timescales in which adults who were adopted as children might receive support. Around half of the agencies who responded explained that they were using generic national guidance to support their practice, with a small number using more specific local guidance, and around a third reporting that they had no guidance for this work. The authors recommended that intermediary agencies should each develop their own guidance, and should record and publish data on response times. They also recommended at a national level that greater attention should be paid to the needs of adults who were adopted as children, including the development of national standards around timescales.

A similar recommendation by Wrobel and Grotevant (2019) followed their research with young adults who were adopted as children in the USA. They explored the information gap between what people know about their birth family, and what they would like to know. The authors acknowledge that the specific context of their research means that the findings are not necessarily transferrable, but suggest that practitioners involved in supporting adults who were adopted as children should be aware of the complexity of addressing this information gap for different individuals at different times in their lives, which may also include no desire to obtain further information.

## Emotional and psychological support

The UK Adoption Barometer reports (Adoption UK, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d) also highlight that while support with accessing records and tracing birth relatives is hugely important for adults who were adopted as children, the practical elements of these supports are insufficient on their own. Many adopted people have emotional and psychological support needs which may not only be related to records and reunion but to wider and lifelong experiences of adoption, including identity and adult relationships. In their systematic review of international adoption support literature, Sánchez-Sandoval et al. (2020) noted that there was a higher prevalence of psychological difficulties amongst adults who were adopted as children than the general population, and that alongside medical and identity reasons, support around mental health is a common reason for adults who were adopted as children to seek support.

The need for lifelong emotional support was highlighted in two of the peer-reviewed papers in particular. Participants in South African research (Langenhoven and Greeff, 2022) highlighted a number of areas in which they felt their lives had been influenced by their adoption as a child. These were largely positive, in terms of feeling loved and having opportunities they would not otherwise have had. Nevertheless, other elements such as the forming of their identity, poor self-esteem, difficulties with intimate relationships and experiences of adoption stigma were also mentioned. Similarly, research in the US comparing adults who were adopted as children and adults who had not been adopted in

domains such as 'identity distress' and 'rejection sensitivity' concluded that adopted people struggle with these issues disproportionately into adulthood (McLamb et al., 2022). While neither paper had a specific focus on support for adults who were adopted as children, both illustrate some of the challenges facing adults who were adopted as children, underscoring the importance of appropriate support being available across the life-span.

Adoptees who responded to the Adoption Barometer survey England (Adoption UK, 2024a) highlighted the absence of support available to them in childhood, and the continuing long-term impact of being adopted. In Wales, respondents did not feel confident in the availability of adoption-competent services for adults through the NHS or elsewhere. Within the grey literature broadly, few adults who were adopted as children were able to identify or access appropriate local support, and those who did access such services had often done so through third sector/charity services. For example, 77% of adopted adult respondents to the PAC-UK consultation had accessed psychological or therapeutic support in adulthood, around half of whom had done so privately, with the other half accessing this support through NHS or third sector agencies. Sánchez-Sandoval et al. (2020) highlight the importance of 'adoption competence' amongst professionals supporting adults who were adopted as children.

Relatedly, in England, the requirement that adoption counselling specialists should be registered with Ofsted was also considered to represent a barrier to adults who were adopted as children accessing services in the UK (Adoption UK, 2023). Although this requirement has recently been removed in relation to services for adults, via a legislative Statutory Instrument (The Adoption Support Agencies (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2023), the change was not yet showing a significant impact amongst a sample of six Regional Adoption Agencies in England (Ofsted, 2024). The international literature review conducted by Sánchez-Sandoval et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of access to peer support for adults who were adopted as children, who valued the opportunity to meet with others who had similar experiences. The Adoption Barometer reports noted that while adopted adult respondents in all UK nations found peer support helpful, it was not always easily available (Adoption UK, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d).

Consequently, Adoption UK recommends that the development of such approaches should be prioritised to ensure access to peer support for all adults who were adopted as children. There was broad agreement within the literature we reviewed that counselling should be available to adults who were adopted as children, free of charge at the point of need, at any time in their lives.

A further area in which emotional and psychological, as well as clinical, support may be needed for adults who were adopted as children is around the increasingly use of genetic/DNA testing. One paper from the peer-reviewed literature (May and Fullerton, 2021) highlighted the increasing use of 'direct-to-consumer' genetic testing, in which testing kits may be bought online without any professional support to consider the practical or emotional implications of the results. The paper highlights the risks of genetic testing results being available to the general public without support to understand and interpret the results. In the context of adults who were adopted as children, who may have no

information on birth family health history, there are additional complexities as clinicians are generally trained to interpret results within a family history context. The paper raises concerns around the significant actions that individuals may take - for example, if a genetic predisposition to a particular health condition is identified - which information about birth family health history might indicate is unnecessary, but which requires this information to be available, and its complexities to be analysed by trained geneticists. The paper concludes that adults who were adopted as children and are considering genetic testing should be encouraged to access proper support around the interpretation of results and any actions they consider as a consequence, from clinicians who understand the sensitivities of the adoption context and possible lack of information about the medical history of the birth family.

## Parenting

The issue of parenting as an adopted adult is the focus of three papers from the peer-reviewed literature we looked at (Egan et al., 2022; Neil et al., 2023a; Bork et al., 2023), while in one further study (Langenhoven and Greeff, 2022), parenting emerged as a theme from interviews with a wider focus. None of these papers specifically explored the support needs of adults who were adopted as children around parenting, but the implications of this were clearly articulated in the context of the lifelong impact of adoption, which may necessitate support of some form at any life stage, including the transition to parenthood.

Broadly, becoming a parent was considered a particularly significant event for adults who were adopted as children, with the potential to trigger memories, feelings, and questions about their own early life. Amongst some adults who were adopted as children, becoming a parent prompted a desire to know more about their birth family's medical history, as well as more generally about their birth relatives, for the benefit of their own children. Some were motivated by parenthood to attempt contact with their birth family, or to reflect on existing relationships including with their own adoptive parents. Not all of the adults who were adopted as children in the studies had ongoing relationships with their adoptive parents, which as well as having an emotional impact, could mean less practical support with parenting compared to what might typically be available from some new grandparents.

Neil et al. (2023a) highlight that amongst care experienced adults generally, parenthood at an early age is more common than in the population overall. Furthermore, care experienced (including adopted) parents more frequently have child protection services involved with their families, children in need of care and protection through statutory measures in comparison with the general population. Nevertheless, the literature reviewed also describes parenthood as a positive experience for adults who were adopted as children, which as for many parents can provide a sense of purpose and connection, and help them to resolve some of their feelings about their own childhood experiences.

Relating to themes of identity and 'communicative openness', in some of the literature adults who were adopted as children described sharing their story with their own adult children. Amongst the participants in the South African study who discussed parenthood,



all had felt it was important “to disclose their adoption status to their biological children, as they believed that their children deserved to know” (Langenhoven and Greeff, 2022, p.199). They wanted their children to know about their heritage, to normalise adoption, and to prevent their children from finding out this information from someone else. Interestingly, Bork et al. (2023) found a spectrum amongst adults who were adopted as children—and their birth children of whether the adult’s adoption was a prominent and integral part of the life story. In their development of their ‘Theory of Creating a New Narrative’, Egan et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of the experiences of adults who were adopted as children in terms of openness and acceptance in how they readjust their adoptive identity as parents.

While the literature included here focuses on experiences rather than support needs, there are clear implications around the lifelong impact of adoption, and that the transition to parenthood may be a life stage at which adopted people might require support. Neil et al. (2023a, p.9) reflect that “the overrepresentation of parents who have been in care or adopted amongst the population of parents who lose their children to care or adoption [...] may represent both a failure to adequately prepare and support very vulnerable adoptees for parenthood, and/or may reflect professional attitudes which see intergenerational cycles of abuse and state care as inevitable”.

## Support for birth families

This section of our review considers the support birth families need in the context of adoption. It is divided into three sections, focusing on support for families before adoption, support during legal proceedings, and support after adoption. The discussion of birth families’ experiences of ongoing communication and spending time with their children in person after adoption is in the chapter [Keeping in touch and keeping in mind](#) and is therefore not included in this section of the review.

The literature included in this section comprises five papers from peer-reviewed journals identified in our structured database search, all based on studies undertaken within the UK. All five papers were based on qualitative research, with four undertaking primary research and one utilising a secondary analysis of qualitative interviews and observations. Nineteen pieces of grey literature and peer-reviewed papers were also included. These comprised of a combination of research and evaluation reports, policy documents and reporting of national services.

### Supporting families before adoption

As Cox et al. (2020, p.88) highlight, parents, and particularly mothers, about whom more is known, often ‘fall through the cracks’ between children’s services, mental health services and different treatment services, only re-appearing to services when they become pregnant again. Parents at risk of their child coming into care and being adopted have usually experienced disadvantage on multiple levels, including poverty, trauma and abuse in childhood, experiences of domestic abuse in adulthood, mental health difficulties, substance misuse and/or housing instability (Broadhurst et al., 2018; Gupta and



Featherstone, 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Alrouh et al., 2022; Critchley et al., 2023; PAC-UK, 2023). Policy responses and approaches to practice have only comparatively recently shifted in response to widespread evidence about parents who lose multiple children into care (Broadhurst et al., 2015; Broadhurst et al., 2018; Cox et al., 2020; Alrouh, 2022; Scottish Government, 2022), and the need to support parents proactively and holistically at a much earlier stage.

Addressing families' complex needs effectively requires a practice response which spans professions and services rather than being focused on social work alone. The importance of multi-disciplinary collaborative services being provided to families as early as possible is well-accepted across the UK and highlighted as essential within the literature reviewed (Boddy et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Scottish Government, 2022; Critchley et al., 2023). Bell et al. (2021) also highlight that support and interactions with families need to feel less adversarial to encourage engagement at an early stage. Critchley et al. (2023) notes, however, that the work is ethically complex and demanding, and requires high quality support and supervision to be in place for practitioners.

## Supporting families compassionately and holistically

Gupta and Featherstone (2020, p.168) refer to parents seeking support "in the shadow of risk". The authors are referring to birth parents' experiences of feeling powerless in the context of the emphasis from agencies on managing risk. They noted that parents reported: "receiving an assessment rather than support and feeling they were being scrutinized rather than helped."

The attitude of practitioners towards parents is crucial, and varying practice was reported in the literature we reviewed. Birth mothers frequently reported feeling judged and blamed for their circumstances by their social worker in particular, while other birth mothers had experienced kind, compassionate, skilled and respectful support from a range of practitioners, including social workers (Roberts et al., 2018; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020; Boddy et al., 2020; Critchley et al., 2023; Nolte and Forbes, 2023). Critchley et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of continuity in the social worker for parents. The mothers in this study found multiple changes of worker very difficult and confusing, particularly by the mothers with learning difficulties, and found it re-traumatising to have to keep telling their story repeatedly to different workers. Bell et al. (2021) noted that parents did not always feel listened to or believed prior to their children going into care, and many did not understand why their children were in care. Furthermore, when parents spent time with their children in care which was supervised, they were not always treated with respect. Parents also reported that their own experiences of care or of having experienced abuse or neglect in childhood could lead to feeling that they were being judged or stigmatised. Bell and colleagues (2021) also recommended that it would be beneficial if interactions and support were less adversarial, with practitioners equipped to better recognise the trauma and loss that parents experience. Lewis (2022) argued that it is essential for practitioners not to make birth parents feel pressured or manipulated into agreeing for their children to come into care or consent to adoption.

There were concerns expressed in the literature we reviewed about the unintended consequences of social workers viewing themselves solely as the social worker for the child, rather than for the family. Nolte and Forbes (2023, p.85) argued that taking this approach risks decontextualising children from their family, history and wider circumstances, and that:

*"stigmatising and pathologizing discourses around birth families and the notion of 'best interest of the child' can act to obscure, invalidate or corrode compassion and understanding for birth relatives. Bringing forth, acknowledging and validating the complex social and contextual factors in birth relatives' lives is necessary."*

Gupta and Featherstone (2020, p.168) stated: "For birth parents, living in poverty and struggling with domestic abuse and mental health issues, a lack of attention to their needs came across as unhelpful and short-sighted given that these impacted upon their capacity to parent well and safely." Similarly, some parents reported feeling abandoned by social workers once their child went into care, because the child was deemed to be safe.

As a result, valuable opportunities were missed which could have supported parents during a period of significant trauma, loss and grief, and helped them continue to address the difficulties in their lives (Bell et al., 2021; Critchley et al., 2023; Nolte and Forbes, 2023), which would also benefit their children. Taking a holistic approach to family support rather than focusing on the child's needs in isolation allows practitioners to acknowledge, validate and support the complex issues that a family may face (Nolte and Forbes, 2023). Morgan et al.'s (2019) study explored the use of counselling services for mothers whose children were living in foster care or adoption. They highlighted the importance of attending to the practical and emotional support needs of birth parents in the short and longer term, arguing that:

*"The findings of this study invite the provision of services for this client group that address the social and systemic nature of child removal, privilege the relational nature of recovery, empower birth mothers and create safe spaces for the processing of the emotional pain inherent in having your child taken away."* (Morgan et al., 2019: 151).

## Targeted services addressing 'repeat removals' of children from their parents

It is important to acknowledge that some language used in the 'care system' is rooted in long-established legislation and practice which does not reflect the experiences of the children and adults involved. It can be stigmatising for children, young people and families with experience of care and compound a sense of being different, especially when words are used about them, their lives and their experiences that are not used about their peers. For some, the word 'removal' as the term for a parent losing their child may feel inappropriate, misrepresent the circumstances or is not in line with a more trauma-

informed 'care system'. In this review, we have used the term only where it has been necessary to quote or refer to the language used by others.

Significant concerns have been expressed about the number of birth parents losing multiple children into care and the number of infants coming into the care system in Scotland, England and Wales. Broadhurst et al.'s (2015) study in England analysed the population level data of approximately 65,000 birth mothers held by the Children and Family Court Advisory Service (CAFCASS). This study produced the first national estimate of the number of mothers who experienced recurrent care proceedings, which was calculated as being 1 in 4 mothers appearing in subsequent proceedings within seven years. This research was recently updated using data between 2011/12 and 2020/21 (Alrouh et al., 2022), and the findings showed consistency over a 10-year period in England and Wales. Further work was undertaken to understand the proportion of families with infants subject to care proceedings in England which was calculated as being 27% (Broadhurst et al., 2018) and 30% in Wales (Alrouh et al., 2019). This work led to significant commitment by Governments in England and Wales to develop services which address the reasons and needs that lead to recurrent proceedings. Evaluations of some of these services are discussed in our review in the context of support for birth parents.

The Scottish Government also commissioned research to understand the circumstances where infants were removed from the care of their parents in Scotland, the children's paths through the care system and the permanence outcomes for them (Cusworth et al., 2022). This study analysed data from the Scottish Children's Reporter's Administration (SCRA) between 2013 and 2020 and established that 20% of all children who became 'looked after' through the Children's Hearings System were infants, with around a third coming into the care system as newborns (less than seven days old). This is a lower proportion than in England and Wales, where 30% and 27% of children become 'looked after' as infants respectively. An analysis of case file information for 70 infants included in the study highlighted that almost a third (31%) of their mothers were first-time parents, 92% of mothers who had older children had previously had at least one of her children in care; 20% had previously had three or more of her children go into care, and 46% had at least one infant go into care. The authors noted that less information was known about the children's fathers, but of the information available about fathers who had older children, 56% had at least one of his children go into care. The case file analysis highlighted the challenging circumstances of families, including poverty, housing issues, parental mental health concerns, domestic abuse/coercive control, parental substance misuse, parental histories of offending and the presence of learning disabilities or difficulties in parents. Just over a third of mothers (37%) and a quarter of fathers (24%) were care experienced.

Targeted services working with (birth) parents (more usually mothers) to prevent a number of children being at risk of harm and being removed from their care over time have grown in recent years, particularly in response to evidence about the frequency with which this occurs (Broadhurst et al., 2015; Broadhurst et al., 2018; Alrouh et al., 2022). However, there are complex ethical and human rights issues to consider in respect of some of these targeted services. For example, Pause in England requires women being supported

by the service to use long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) or other forms of birth control to prevent pregnancy whilst engaged with the service. Most others, however, including Reflect in Wales (Roberts et al., 2018) and three local services in the northwest of England reviewed by Cox et al. (2020), do not. All the other services considered in this review support women to consider their sexual health and contraception requirements, but it is not a condition of engagement (Roberts et al., 2018; Cox et al., 2020). Furthermore, the services evaluated in Cox et al.'s (2020) review have developed further to work with women who are, or become, pregnant. This is significant because evaluations of the effectiveness of Pause rely on women avoiding pregnancy, with reductions in 'repeat removals' in Pause areas being one of the key measures used (Boddy et al., 2020). For other services who work with women who are, or become, pregnant while being supported by these services, the focus includes supporting women to enable the development of their own parenting capacities, thus addressing the risk of repeat care proceedings (Roberts et al., 2018; Cox et al., 2020).

Evaluations of services to address the numbers of parents who lose multiple children into care emphasise that it is the combination of long-term emotional and practical support, delivered flexibly by practitioners who support parents with compassion and respect, that are key to their success (Roberts et al., 2018; Boddy et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020). The perceived independence of these services from statutory children's social care functions is also seen as crucial for parents being more willing to engage with them (Roberts et al., 2018; Boddy et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020). Across the services evaluated, the practical support offered reflected the complex long-term levels of need and vulnerability of mothers' lives (and of the lives of fathers where they were also being supported by these services), offering crisis support too where needed. Parents were supported to access a wide range of services, including support with domestic abuse, mental health issues, physical health issues, housing, financial support and sexual health. Significant attention was also paid to emotional health and wellbeing, including through the approach to relationship-building with the parents, supporting them with the trauma and grief they experienced due to the loss of their children, considering how to improve their well-being in their everyday lives, and through supporting parents to access counselling services (Roberts et al., 2018; Boddy et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020).

Longer-term evaluations of these services are needed, but evidence from evaluations undertaken to date show promise, and furthermore provide important messages for practice more widely. These include the centrality of compassionate and humane relationship-based practice and the need for early holistic support to address the complex and long-term needs of parents who risk losing their children to care and adoption.

## Support for families during legal proceedings

The need for improvements in legal advocacy for birth parents was highlighted in three papers which included consideration of the legal process around adoption in the UK (Lewis, 2022; Critchley et al., 2023; PAC-UK, 2023). Mothers from Scotland in Critchley et al.'s (2023) study talked of how confusing the legal proceedings were, and Lewis (2022) emphasised the need for birth parents to understand what their rights are, and to have the

benefits of legal advocacy in court to express their views, both before, during and after the granting of any legal orders concerning their child.

PAC-UK's (2023, p.4) Big Consult with birth parents noted that "Many respondents see court as a process in which they are neither encouraged nor assisted to actively participate". Critchley et al. (2023) highlighted that the birth mothers in their study found it very difficult to instruct a skilled and reliable solicitor in Scotland for child welfare proceedings. Lewis (2022) stated that it is vital for birth parents to have good legal representation so that they are supported to understand the meaning and practical function of the different legal orders, how and when they could contest or object to them, and what the possible outcomes mean in practice. Lewis (2022) also reported that some birth parents spoke of their decisions not to agree to the adoption as a means of communicating something to their child later in their life.

As Critchley et al. (2023) note, further research is needed in a Scottish context to understand more fully how the legal system is functioning in the context of complex child welfare proceedings. There are currently three 'systems' involved in adoption proceedings in Scotland (social work, the Children's Hearings System and the Courts). There have been calls for many years for the hearings system not to be involved in permanence decisions, partially because this was not part of Kilbrandon's (1968) original vision, and, more recently, it is seen as contributing to delays in decision-making regarding the permanent arrangements for the care of children in need of care and protection.

## Supporting birth families after adoption

Gupta and Featherstone (2020, p.165) highlight that for everyone living with adoption, the past is always in the present, and for birth parents there are painful, traumatic and long-term impacts associated with the loss of their child or children. However, this is not always recognised by practitioners. Support services post-adoption for birth families are recognised as requiring considerable improvement across the UK, particularly in their availability and the quality of services offered (PAC-UK, 2023; Critchley et al., 2023; Adoption England, 2024a; Ofsted, 2024; National Adoption Service, 2024). In PAC-UK's (2023) Big Consult with birth parents, only 22% reported being offered post-adoption services. Several of the studies in this review which spoke with birth mothers highlighted the importance of services recognising women as continuing to be mothers even though they had lost their children to adoption (Morgan et al. 2019; Bell et al. 2022; Critchley et al., 2023). For example, Morgan et al. (2019) talked of motherhood in the absence of children.

Recognising birth parents as continuing to be mothers and fathers provides a helpful framework for the provision of ongoing support services: to support birth parents with their ongoing grief, loss and anger at the loss of their children; to make positive and long-lasting changes in their lives; to support ongoing communication and, in some circumstances, seeing their children in person after adoption, and to prevent any of their other children coming into the 'care system'. Support with finances and housing were also raised in the literature review, given the consequences of losing children to adoption on tenancies and

benefits, which added further vulnerability, loss and hardship (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020; Critchley et al., 2023). Where support services are offered, birth parents reported how beneficial they are to their adjustment following the loss of their children, and to their wellbeing (Critchley et al., 2023).

Critchley et al. (2023) also discuss the shame, stigma and isolation which some birth mothers in their study experienced after losing children to care or adoption. The mothers spoke about the lack of support in the community, their own families distancing themselves from them, or the mothers having to distance themselves from their families due to the risks they presented. These narratives were also present in Bell et al. (2022), Boddy et al. (2020), and Gupta and Featherstone's (2020) studies, and point to the importance of ongoing, long-term support and counselling being offered for parents who have lost their children to care and adoption. The need for this support to be sensitive, respectful and non-judgemental was highlighted (Roberts et al., 2018; Critchley et al., 2023), as well as the need for practitioners to show flexibility and tenacity given parents' experiences of grief and loss (Roberts et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2019; Nolte and Forbes, 2023), with practitioners being able to keep reaching out periodically if parents are struggling to engage. Nolte and Forbes (2023) noted that it may take time for birth parents to shift their perception of practitioners where they have experienced less positive relationships previously. The timing of offering support was also highlighted, with recommendations that it is offered on an ongoing basis prior to children coming into care (Critchley et al., 2023), and especially once the decision for adoption is made (Critchley et al., 2023; PAC-UK, 2023). Furthermore, the needs of birth fathers are less well-known, and Critchley et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of further work being undertaken both to understand their needs and develop support services which work to address these.

The value of peer support was noted in three studies included in this review, all of whom referred to support for birth mothers only. Being able to talk to others who were in similar situations was seen as very supportive and affirming (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020), who "understand the feeling of knowing you have other children who you can't see" (Bell et al., 2021). Critchley et al. (2023) caution however that peer support groups for birth parents should not be a substitute for the multi-disciplinary support needed to support birth parents with complex, long-standing needs.

## Summary: Supporting adoption

### Supporting adoptive families

Our review identified that all local authorities and voluntary agencies in Scotland reported offering support for adoptive families, including adults who were adopted as children (Grant and Critchley, 2019). Research has highlighted that receiving and sharing photographs (Blackmore et al., 2020) and periodically checking-in with adoptive families (Rollock et al., 2021) are helpful ways to support adoptive families. While challenges continue, such as adoptive parents feeling 'forgotten' by their adoption agencies once the



adoption order was granted, or 'bewildered' by the complexity and fragmented availability of support (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020), promising practices were noted.

For instance, we read that developments in England and Wales in recent years have shown promise for supporting adoptive families. In Wales, the 'core offer' of adoption support identified by National Framework for Adoption Support outlined in the *Good Practice Guide* from AFA Cymru (n.d.) provides a model of three-tiered support from universal, targeted and specialist services. In England, the requirement of adoption agencies to provide information and support to adoptive parents in the Adoption Support Regulations was enacted in 2013 and, while challenges with funding and availability of services have been noted, an evaluation of RAAs highlighted a broader offer of universal support (Smith et al., 2022).

Overall, when support is normalised and offered on an ongoing basis from an early stage, this is the most helpful for adoptive families (Grant and Critchley, 2019)

### **Supporting adoptive parents**

We read that adoptive parents need additional help and support to manage some of the challenges they experience when therapeutically caring for their adopted child or children, in recognition of the trauma, loss and separation that their adopted child is likely to have experienced as part of the adoption process (Leake et al., 2019; Barrett et al., 2021; Bovenschen et al., 2023; Kohn et al., 2023). Some of these difficulties were exacerbated for adoptive parents engaged in 'concurrent planning' or 'fostering for adoption' (Mannion et al., 2023), while others may not be as prominent because of the bonds built between the adoptive parents, adopted child, and the child's birth family and wider support network during the 'concurrent planning' or 'fostering for adoption' process (Goodwin et al., 2020).

The research identified some of the types of support that adoptive parents would appreciate, and highlighted that adoptive mothers sought formal support, such as parenting groups, parent-child therapy, or training (Kohn et al., 2023), with Miller et al. (2019a) suggesting there was support among adoptive parents for virtual support groups. In some places, such as the USA, we read that support available early in the adoption process can include financial assistance in the form of subsidies and tax breaks (Goodwin and Madden, 2020), but that this support is not a replacement for support that is personal and relational, drawing on community and societal factors (Shelton and Bridges, 2022).

Overall, we read that adoptive parents need support services to be trauma-informed and 'adoption competent', demonstrating that they understand adoption and are responsive to the specific support needs of adoptive parents, adopted children, and adults who were adopted as children (Leake et al., 2019; Goodwin and Madden, 2020).

Some of the specific support services for adoptive parents included in our review included: AdOpt Parenting programme in the USA, the National Training and



Development Curriculum for foster and adoptive parents (NTDC) in the USA, and Nurturing Attachments and Foundations for Attachment in the UK.

### **Supporting adopted children**

Our review of the research overwhelmingly highlights that the early life experiences of children prior to adoption continue to have significant impacts on children long after they are adopted (Paniagua et al., 2019; Soares et al., 2019; McSherry and McAnee, 2022). These early life experiences can include the trauma and/or neglect that adopted children may have experienced prior to their adoption, as well as the separation and loss that children can experience during the adoption process (Soares et al., 2019). To help support adopted children to understand and overcome these early life experiences, there is a need for whole-family support, ongoing trauma and attachment training for adoptive parents, and mental health support for all children that is available and accessible (Coulter et al., 2022).

Supports in education described in the literature we reviewed were typically at a local authority or school level. The evidence from England highlights the role of Designated Teachers (DTs) in schools, and Virtual School Heads (VSHs) as senior officers within a local authority, in supporting care experienced learners and improving shared understanding of their needs. However, their responsibility towards adopted children is not the same as for children who are currently 'looked after'. Relatedly, while supports and interventions aimed at 'looked after' children, children who have experienced trauma, and those with other specific needs, may also benefit adopted learners, Stother et al (2019) caution against an 'assumed equivalence of need'.

Broadly, the literature we reviewed highlights a lack of understanding amongst educators of the needs of adopted children, leading to adoptive parents struggling to ensure appropriate supports in education. Nevertheless, there was some evidence from around the UK that educators' understanding of adopted children's needs is improving. The literature from England describes a range of individual academic and broader wellbeing interventions, some of which are facilitated through the VSH and may be financed through 'Pupil Premium Plus' funding. VSHs may also be involved in supporting school staff, both through training, and in supporting the implementation of any training in practice.

When we read about adopted children and their relationships with their siblings, specifically the sisters and/or brothers that they live with in their adopted family (whether these are the unrelated birth children of the adopted child's adoptive parents, the unrelated adopted children of the same adoptive parents, or the birth siblings of adopted children), we noted some specific considerations for supporting sibling relationships. The research highlighted some positive experiences and challenging experiences for siblings as a result of adoption, reflecting the complex emotional and behavioural challenges that adopted children experience before and after adoption, and the impact of these on the whole adoptive family (Frost and Goldberg, 2020; Hunsley et al., 2021; Hillman, 2023). Overall, support for the sisters and brothers of adopted

children, regardless of their birth relationship to the adopted child, is needed to help the whole family, including the adopted child or children, from the outset of the adoption and on an ongoing basis.

Some of the specific services that were identified in our review to support adopted children and young people include: the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund in England, the Program for Preparing Children for Adoption in Portugal, and the Hope Connection 2.0 therapeutic family camp in the USA.

### **Support for adults who were adopted as children**

The grey literature we reviewed highlighted three areas of support need which are particularly relevant to adults who were adopted as children:

- support with accessing birth and adoption records,
- support with tracing and contacting birth relatives, and
- wider therapeutic support.

These support needs in many ways parallel finds from the wider cohort of care experienced individuals, in particular around the challenges associated with accessing records (Social Work Scotland, 2024).

The social factors underpinning adoption in the UK have changed in the last few decades, such that current young adults who were adopted as children are more likely to have been in care due to concerns about their birth family not being able to care for them, while older adults may have been adopted as a result of birth parents' 'relinquishing' their right to care for their child (either voluntarily or otherwise) due to, for example, societal pressures and stigma around young and/or unmarried motherhood. Nevertheless, the needs of all adults who were adopted as children for support with accessing records, understanding their life journey, and recovering from trauma, are broadly similar.

The reports we reviewed are also clear, however, that these areas of support do not represent the totality of support needs that adults who were adopted as children may have, nor can support around accessing their records and tracing their birth relatives be misunderstood as purely practical tasks. These require skilled support from 'adoption competent' practitioners who have a good understanding of the adoption context, including the potential for support to be needed at any stage in life, and the social and psychological impacts of adoption and the circumstances that led to adoption. There is recognition that this has been an under-served area of practice in the UK which needs further attention, particularly in light of emerging issues such as genetic testing.

### **Supporting birth families**

Our review highlighted that parents at risk of their child coming into care and being adopted have usually experienced disadvantage on multiple levels. Addressing families'

complex needs effectively requires a multi-disciplinary practice response at the earliest possible opportunity.

The importance of support being compassionate and holistic was highlighted in the literature reviewed, with varying practice noted, including some birth parents feeling judged and blamed for the circumstances. The literature reviewed highlighted that practitioners need to be better equipped to recognise the trauma and loss that parents experience, and that it is essential for practitioners not to make birth parents feel pressured or manipulated into agreeing for their children to come into care or consent to adoption.

There were concerns expressed in the literature we reviewed about the unintended consequences of social workers viewing themselves solely as the social worker for the child, rather than for the family, as opportunities can be missed to support parents' needs, which would have a positive impact on the child.

Significant concerns have been expressed about the number of birth parents losing multiple children into care and the number of infants coming into the care system in Scotland, England and Wales. Targeted multi-disciplinary services aimed at preventing 'recurrent removal' of children from their families have developed in recent years, including Pause in England and Reflect in Wales, which show promise.

A need for improvement in legal advocacy was identified in the evidence reviewed. Parents need to be better supported to understand what their rights are, and to have the benefits of legal advocacy in court to express their views, both before, during and after the granting of any legal orders concerning their child.

Support services post-adoption for birth families are recognised as requiring considerable improvement across the UK, particularly in their availability and the quality of services offered. Recognising birth parents as continuing to be mothers and fathers provides a helpful framework for the provision of ongoing support services: Where practical and emotional support services are offered, birth parents report how beneficial they are to their adjustment following the loss of their children, and to their wellbeing. Peer support groups were valued by birth parents in the literature reviewed, but this should not be seen as a substitute for the multi-disciplinary support that is often required to support birth parents with complex, long-standing needs.

## Messages for policy, legislation, practice and future research in Scotland

This review has analysed what is currently known from recent research studies and other work about the availability, accessibility, quality and delivery of adoption services outside Scotland, including what works well, and what challenges and issues there are. Throughout the review we have also included, where available, information about what is known about the current adoption policy, legislation, practice and evidence in Scotland in the context of the research and examples we identified. Given the breadth of our review, and the time constraints, we had to narrow our literature search to evidence which has been published over the past five years in selected publications. Our review therefore presents a broad understanding of the current approach to adoption services in the UK and elsewhere, focusing primarily on children adopted from care. This review does not claim to be comprehensive, rather, it is a guide to what has most recently been shared, researched and discussed.

The aim of this focused mapping review was to identify key messages from recent evidence that can contribute to the future development of adoption policy and practice in Scotland. This section summarises these key messages, outlining opportunities for policy, legislation, practice and future research.

### Re-visioning the structure, organisation and delivery of adoption services

Evidence from England and Wales, where there is a regionalised and nationalised approach taken respectively to the structure, organisation and delivery of adoption services shows promise in terms of working towards delivering a more consistent approach for everyone affected by adoption there. Ongoing and persistent issues remain in these jurisdictions, particularly in relation to recruiting sufficient adoptive families and providing consistent high-quality support to everyone affected by adoption. Nevertheless, the regionalised and nationalised approaches taken have provided opportunities to begin to address these issues more systematically and consistently. Consideration could be given to whether adoption services in Scotland would benefit from taking a more regional or national approach. This would aim to address delay in the process of ensuring all of our children can be cared for by loving families in secure homes, recruiting the right adoptive parents for children, providing greater consistency of approach to adoption, and improving the support provided to everyone affected by adoption.

If Scotland were to choose to take a national or regional approach, then learning from England and Wales indicates that for this type of transformational reform to be successful, financial investment and sufficient time and resources to support the workforce would be needed. In the current financial climate in Scotland, this would be particularly challenging, but any significant transformational reform requires financial and workforce investment. Findings from the recent Children's Services Reform Research study (McTier et al., 2023;

Ottaway et al., 2023) clearly demonstrate this, and also highlights the importance of having a well-developed theory of change to support the implementation of any transformational reform.

## Developing the legal system in Scotland

The evidence from Scotland and other UK nations contained in this review suggests that there is the opportunity to consider a range of developments within the legal system in relation to adoption. Firstly, successive reviews of Scotland's Children's Hearings System have questioned its role in relation to permanence decisions for children where adoption is being considered as the permanence plan. This current approach is an additional layer of decision-making which adds to the time it takes to make a permanence decision, risking further delay; a decision which was not intended to take place within the Hearings system as it was originally conceived. Furthermore, whilst statutory guidance in Scotland recommends that permanence decision-making should be completed within six months, the literature drawn on in this review indicates that substantial delays continue in achieving permanence for many children. To date, Scotland has chosen not to legislate on this timescale, unlike England and Wales. However, given the long-term issues in addressing delays in permanence decision-making, Scotland could consider whether there is now a need to legislate.

The structure of the legal system in Scotland makes it challenging for legal practitioners to develop specialist expertise in matters relating to adoption. Scotland does not currently have the specialist family courts that are a central tenet of the English and Welsh legal systems for children. It may be that, as is the case with Judges in England and Wales, there would be significant benefits to having Sheriffs in Scotland who are specialists in matters relating to children, as well as advocates for all children subject to legal proceedings and legal advocacy for parents through specialist solicitors and barristers. This would need further research and analysis.

Adoption legislation in other jurisdictions includes a range of statutory provisions to support routes to early permanence for children through concurrent planning and 'foster to adopt', the provision of life journey work and life journey materials, and much more detailed provisions for the support of all adults and children affected by adoption than is currently the case in Scotland. Whilst developing legislation and statutory guidance in these areas does not guarantee successful implementation, consideration should be given to how, and in what ways, developing additional legislation and guidance in Scotland could support modernising the approach taken to adoption in Scotland.

## Recruiting and preparing adoptive parents to meet the needs of children

Recruitment campaigns in Scotland could build on existing good practice in Scotland and elsewhere to encourage people from diverse backgrounds and communities to consider

adopting so that children can live with families who, where possible, reflect their history, heritage and can best meet their needs.

Where appropriate, greater consideration should be given in policy and practice to early permanence and concurrent planning for children, recruiting adoptive parents via foster-to-adopt arrangements, which have shown promise.

Throughout the recruitment and preparation phase of adoption, adoptive parents would benefit from being given access to wider education and training to help them be fully supported as they prepare for adoption. Our review highlighted the importance of full disclosure of all information about their child's history, development and characteristics, clear, consistent and accurate information about the different steps and processes of adopting a child or children, and the realities of adopting today, so that adopters can have realistic expectations about the time that it will take, the level and frequency of communication they will receive, and the support that will be provided.

### The importance of investing in life journey work

Our analysis of the evidence included in this review indicates the central importance of life journey work in supporting adopted children to develop a coherent life narrative, which supports identity development and recovery from trauma. The evidence that currently exists in Scotland, largely through successive Adoption Barometer reports, suggests that current practice is inconsistent. We therefore recommend that support for life journey work in Scotland is prioritised. This could be achieved through investing in ongoing support and training for practitioners in children's services, improving timeliness for the delivery of life journey materials for children, developing resources to help ensure life journey materials are always of high quality, and considering how progress can be monitored. Adoption agencies in the third sector, who have considerable expertise in this area, could support the development of this work.

### Delivering services which are trauma-informed and 'adoption competent'

Our review highlights the importance for everyone affected by adoption in universal, targeted and specialist services, and of the practitioners who work within these services, being trauma-informed and 'adoption competent'. That is, being able to deliver the services that are needed in ways which recognise, understand, and are responsive to the complexity, nuances and implications of trauma and the experiences of adoption. The evidence we analysed highlighted that the development of adoption competent practice, in particular, needs more attention. This is especially necessary in universal services, such as education and health settings, and in social work practice outwith specialist adoption services. The development of adoption competence could be supported through further training for all practitioners across social work, health and education services, to be able to apply this knowledge as they work with children and their families.



## Improving practice around keeping in touch with birth families after adoption

The evidence included in our review emphasised the importance of adopted children keeping in touch with members of their birth family where it was safe for them to do so and being supported by their adoptive family to keep their birth family in mind. Practice approaches in other jurisdictions have developed in recent years in recognition that blanket approaches to letterbox, or in-direct communication, which has been the norm for many children adopted from care, were unhelpful. In addition, they did not reflect overall developments in the ways that people now interact with each other, including the increased use of digital and social media. There is also greater understanding of the support that is needed for everyone involved, given the complexities that can be present, to ensure that keeping in touch, whether in person or via in-direct communication, is experienced positively.

Research evidence regarding current practice approaches to supporting adopted children to keep in touch with their birth families is limited in Scotland. However, it is suggestive of the need to modernise, particularly in the context of a growing recognition of the need to support adopted children's ongoing relationships with their birth family, where it is safe for them to do so. Further research is needed to understand how adopted children and their adoptive and birth families are supported to keep in touch with one another, directly and in-directly, what good practice exists and what this looks like, what the current challenges and issues are, and how any improvements identified as needed can be achieved.

## Improving support for everyone affected by adoption

Support for everyone affected by adoption in Scotland needs to improve so that this support is available and accessible for adopted children, adoptive parents, siblings, birth family members and adults adopted as children. This aligns with the aspirations of The Promise Scotland's Plan 24-30, which states that support which reflects the principles of intensive family support models should be available to adoptive families at any life stage as needed, even if this need was not identified when the child was first adopted (The Promise Scotland, 2024). Our review has highlighted how important this is for all children and adults affected by adoption, not only in the transition process to adoption, but also before and after adoption.

A culture change is required to recognise and normalise the understanding that the impact of adoption on all those involved is lifelong. Subsequently, there is a need for comprehensive support for as long as it is needed, through childhood and adulthood. Supporting a culture change will provide the basis for buy-in at all levels and create the conditions to recognise that further investment is needed. Consideration should be given to some of the approaches taken in other jurisdictions to support culture change, as outlined in this review, including developing a more robust evidence base to draw from, and building momentum for change across the system based on the evidence.

The provision of a support fund akin to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) available in England, funded by the UK Government, should be considered as a possible model for part of a comprehensive adoption support offer to adoptive families in Scotland. However, the challenges and limitations around this funding should also be considered, such as the notable variation in service availability and the inconsistent funding landscape across Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) in England.

Services to support birth families are currently limited in Scotland. However, the Scottish Government has recently invested £900,000, delivered through the Corra Foundation, to fund projects which support the mental health and wellbeing of parents who have a child in care. The learning shared in this review suggests that the presence of multi-disciplinary support services to prevent parents losing multiple children to adoption, and the extension of existing provision in Scotland to support birth families flexibly and holistically before, during and after their child's adoption, is particularly beneficial.

Information is currently limited in Scotland about the experiences of accessing birth and adoption records by adults who were adopted as children. However, the latest Adoption Barometer report for Scotland (Adoption UK, 2024c) highlights that more support may be needed. Further information about the availability, consistency and experiences of access to records services across Scotland will be beneficial, alongside an understanding of current practices, to provide a more comprehensive picture about what is needed.

There are significant evidence gaps in Scotland around the provision and experience of adoption support services for all children and adults affected by adoption. Similarly, there is little understanding about practitioner approaches to adoption support, what practitioners' views and experiences are regarding good practice, and what the current challenges and issues are. Undertaking this research would provide a robust basis for understanding the current Scottish landscape more fully, identifying what changes are needed, and how this could be achieved.

## The importance of hearing and responding to the views of children, adults and families with lived experience of adoption

As other UK nations have developed their approach to adoption services and support in recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of meaningfully hearing the voices of everyone affected by adoption, acknowledging that views from people with lived experience should influence the development and delivery of adoption services at both a local and a national level. The evidence analysed for our review highlighted that a modern approach to adoption, and the support and services provided, values and works hard to gain and understand the views of adopted children, young people and adults, their adoptive parents and birth parents, and their previous carers, to influence, further develop and improve the services offered, and everyone's experience of these.

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## Appendix 1: Approach to the focused mapping review

Expanding on the information provided in the [Methodology](#) section, this appendix provides greater detail on how we approached the structured database search and the identification of additional grey literature and peer-reviewed papers.

### Database search

A series of structured database searches were conducted to identify peer-reviewed papers for this review. Each of the topics included in our focused mapping review was treated as a single specific subject, hence four literature searches were conducted in two databases: PsycInfo and SCOPUS. All four literature searches included core search terms plus topic-terms for each search. The core search terms were:

- Adopt\* AND (adult\* OR child\* OR teen\* OR "young pe\*" OR youth OR adolesc\* OR infan\* OR bab\*) NOT (transnation\* OR internation\*)

The topic search terms were:

- **Adoption support** – AND (support\* OR help\* OR contact\* OR relat\* OR "post adopt\*" OR "post-adopt\*" OR "after adopt\*")
- **Life story work** – AND ("life story work" OR "life story" OR "famil\* histor\*" OR histor\* OR background\* OR "famil\* tree" OR genogram\* OR "mobility map\*")
- **Recruitment, training, preparation and matching** – AND (recruit\* OR match\* OR pair\* OR link\* OR prep\* OR find\* OR advert\* OR train\*)
- **Contact after adoption** – AND (open\* OR clos\* OR contact\* OR \*direct OR letter\* OR box\* OR "famil\* time")

In PsycInfo, the searches were conducted in abstracts (AB). In SCOPUS, the searches were conducted in titles and abstracts (TITLE-ABS). There was no option to search across titles and abstracts in PsycInfo.

All searches were initially limited to 2014-2024 (10 years), although the decision was taken later in the process to conduct full reviews of paper from 2019-2024 (5 years) only.

After completing each search, the results were limited to the top 10 relevant journal titles. The decision to choose the top 10 relevant journals *after* the searches, rather than before, was made because (1) there is no definitive list of 'adoption' journals, (2) neither PsycInfo nor SCOPUS contained a feature to allow the search to be limited to 'social work' as a subject area, and (3) the research team acknowledged that some topics related to our research questions about adoption are likely to be contained in journals from the social sciences more widely. The journal titles had to include the following words (or variants of these words):

- Adoption



- Children
- Family
- Relationships
- Social work

Researcher judgement was also used to determine suitability where some journal titles did not appear to be a 'good fit' for this review. As an example, in SCOPUS, 'History of Education and Children's Literature' was excluded as the articles included were deemed to be irrelevant for this review. Additionally, some journal titles included only duplicate papers from other journal titles in the same search. For instance, in PsycInfo, 'Australian Journal of Sex, Marriage and Family' was excluded as all papers included in this journal were duplicates of 'Australian Journal of Marriage and Family'.

The decision to limit searches to the top 10 journal titles *after* the main search terms were included for each of the four searches in PsycInfo and SCOPUS meant that the top 10 included journal titles was different for each search. For instance, the 'adoption support' search in PsycInfo was limited to:

- Children and youth services review – 187 papers
- Journal of child and family studies – 79 papers
- Adoption quarterly – 70 papers
- Child abuse and neglect – 54 papers
- Child and family social work – 52 papers
- British journal of social work – 38 papers
- Maternal and child health journal – 34 papers
- Early child development and care – 29 papers
- Child: care, health and development – 27 papers
- Child psychology and psychiatry and allied disciplines – 25 papers

Whereas the 'life story work' search in PsycInfo was limited to:

- Child abuse and neglect – 62 papers
- Children and youth services review – 43 papers
- Child: care, health and development – 29 papers
- Family relations: an interdisciplinary journal of applied family studies – 27 papers
- Child psychology and psychiatry and allied disciplines – 23 papers
- Journal of child psychology and psychiatry – 23 papers
- Adoption quarterly – 18 papers
- Child and adolescent mental health – 14 papers

- Child psychology and psychiatry review – 14 papers
- Child and youth care forum – 12 papers

Notably, the 'contact after adoption' search in SCOPUS could only be limited to the top 8 relevant journal titles.

All articles were written in English.

The papers that were included in our review had to meet the following criteria:

- Have a focus on **domestic 'stranger' adoption**, not international adoption
- Be about **adoption from 'care'**, not relinquished infant adoption (except on topics related to adults who had been adopted as children, as we accepted there was a limited literature base and adopted children who were now adults were more likely to have been adopted during a time when infant adoption outside of the 'care system' was more prevalent)

Some papers loosely met this criteria and were included for full review and assessed on a case-by-case basis if the content was still relevant to the topics being studied and the overarching research questions. For instance, some papers talked about domestic 'stranger' adoption from care *and* other types of adoption (international adoption or adoption of relinquished infants); some papers focused collectively on 'resource parents' (kinship, foster and adoptive parents) without distinguishing between these groups in the findings/discussion, and; some papers contextualised adoption alongside other types of 'care' (foster care, kinship care, residential care, etc.), meaning adoption was only part of the paper.

As the review progressed, the decision was taken to focus primarily on papers from countries with a similar context to Scotland. This meant prioritising papers from the UK, Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. However, papers from other countries were still included if they were about topics where the literature was limited, particularly if they discussed adults adopted as children.

In total, 2,738 articles were returned. 1,470 were duplicates, leaving 1,268 articles for title and abstract review.

Additional manual searches of 'Adoption and Fostering' and 'Adoption Quarterly' were conducted for the years 2019-2024. After removing duplicates from this manual search, a further 226 papers were added to the title and abstract review.

This resulted in 1,494 papers reviewed at title and abstract review. 301 were included for full review (for the years 2014-2018 from the SCOPUS and PsycInfo searches, and 2019-2024 for the manual searches). After restricting the SCOPUS and PsycInfo papers to 2019-2024, the final papers reviewed in full were 169.

The papers included for review were distributed among three members of the research team, with the lead researcher providing oversight and guidance when members of the

research team were either unsure of a paper's relevance and/or in disagreement about the relevance of a paper's content. Information was extracted from the journal articles into a Word pro-forma to enable analysis and write-up of the review. The research team met regularly to discuss the papers being reviewed and agree on a way forward when disagreements or uncertainty arose. This helped to ensure inter-rater reliability between members of the research team and ensure that all relevant papers were identified and included. Ultimately, it was agreed that 81 papers were relevant to the research questions in this review and included in our analysis.

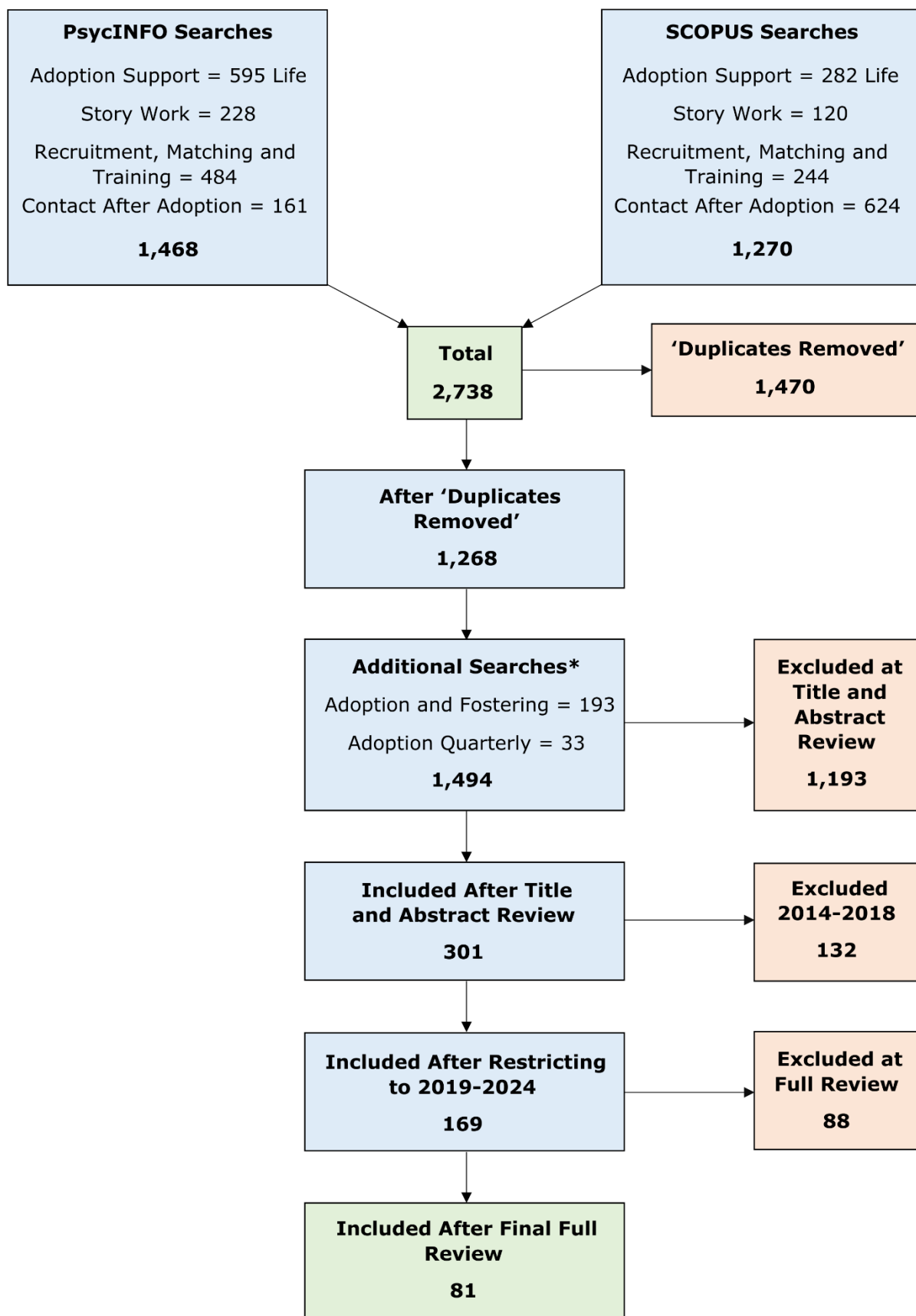


Figure 1: PRISMA Diagram of Peer-Reviewer Academic Papers Identified via the Structured Database Literature Search and Included in this Review

Peer-reviewed papers included in the review from the structured database search

Paper No.	Reference
1	Alves, S., Ribiero, C. G., Pastor, I. and Henriques, I. (2023) 'Integrating a child into an adoptive family in times of COVID-19: Lessons learned from adopters' and professionals' views', <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 155. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107208">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107208</a> .
2	Arribas-Ayllon, M., Shelton, K. and Clarke, A. (2022) 'Can genomics remove uncertainty from adoption? Social workers' and medical advisors' accounts of genetic testing', <i>British Journal of Social Work</i> , 52(2), pp. 719–737. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab017">https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab017</a> .
3	Barrett, K. C., Polly-Almanza, A. A. and Orsi, R. (2021) 'The challenges and resources of adoptive and long-term foster parents of children with trauma histories: A mixed methods study', <i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 24(4), pp. 277–303. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2021.1976335">https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2021.1976335</a> .
4	Bell, L., Lewis-Brooke, S., Herring, R., Lehane, L. and O'Farrell-Pearce, S. (2021) 'Mothers' Voices: Hearing and Assessing the Contributions of "Birth Mothers" to the Development of Social Work Interventions and Family Support', <i>British Journal of Social Work</i> , 51(6), pp. 2019–2037. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa138">https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa138</a> .
5	Best, R., Cameron, C. and Hill, V. (2021) 'Exploring the educational experiences of children and young people adopted from care: Using the voices of children and parents to inform practice', <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 45(4), pp. 359–381. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759211043255">https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759211043255</a> .
6	Blackmore, J., Burns, G., Waters, C. S. and Shelton, K. H. (2020) "'The very first thing that connected us to him": adopters' experiences of sharing photographs, "talking" albums and other materials with their children prior to meeting', <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 44(3), pp. 225–241. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575920945174">https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575920945174</a> .
7	Bork, V., Kwee, J. and Socholotiu, K. (2023) 'Intergenerational Voices of Adoption: Family Stories of Adoptees and Their Adult Children', <i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 26(1), pp. 22–50. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2022.2156010">https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2022.2156010</a> .
8	Bovenschen, I., Hornfeck, R. and Kappler, S. (2023) 'Relations between children's and parents' behavior in adoptive families – a longitudinal analysis', <i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 26(4), pp. 364–388. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2023.2198520">https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2023.2198520</a> .
9	Campbell, J. K., Soria Jiménez, S. P., Ahola, S., Hempstead, M., Shei, A. and Rothman, E. F. (2023) 'A trauma-informed intervention for foster caregivers in Central Massachusetts: A mixed methods pilot evaluation', <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 152. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107086">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107086</a> .

Paper No.	Reference
10	Cane, T. (2023) 'BRAC2eD model: An approach to de-bias decision-making in adoption assessments with prospective adopters from minoritised ethnic groups', <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 47(1), pp. 58-76. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759231160785">https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759231160785</a> .
11	Cashen, K. K. Grotevant, H. D., Wyman Battalen, A., Sellers, C. M. and McRoy, R. G. (2021) 'Tech-Mediated and Traditional Communication Modes in Adult Adoptees' Contact With Birth Parents', <i>Family Relations</i> , 70(1), pp. 120-129. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12477">https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12477</a> .
12	Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Halford, A. and Boti Phiri, M. (2022) 'The politics of matching: Ethnicity, religion and Muslim-heritage children in care in the UK', <i>British Journal of Social Work</i> , 52(8), pp. 4571-4587. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac068">https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac068</a> .
13	Chowdhury, C. (2021) "'They want to give our children to white people and Christian people": Somali perspectives on the shortage of Somali substitute carers', <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 45(1), pp. 22-36. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575921989827">https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575921989827</a> .
14	Collings, S. and Wright, A. C. (2022) 'Two families joined by a child: The role of direct contact in fostering relationships between birth and carer families in permanent care', <i>Journal of Family Studies</i> , 28(2), pp. 716-732. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2020.1756899">https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2020.1756899</a> .
15	Coulter, S., Mooney, S., MacDonald, M. and Daly, L. (2022) "'They shouldn't have to ask": Exploring the need for specialist mental health services for care experienced and adopted children and their families', <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 46(2), pp. 166-183. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759221094357">https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759221094357</a> .
16	Dugmore, P., Morris, B., Durling, E. and James, R. (2022) 'Using video feedback to support adoptive families in the UK: An exploratory pilot study', <i>Adoption and Fostering</i> , 46(3), pp. 268-285. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759221117619">https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759221117619</a> .
17	Feltner, A., Day, A., Vanderwill, L., Fontaine, E. and Cohick, S. (2021) 'Equipping resource parents with the knowledge and attitudes to effectively parent teens: Results from the CORE Teen training program', <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 121. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105835">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105835</a> .
18	Filippelli, J., Fallon, B., Truelsen, S. and Carradine, J. (2022) 'An initial evaluation of a resource parent training curriculum for child welfare-involved children who have experienced trauma and loss', <i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 25(1), pp. 27-46. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2021.1908471">https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2021.1908471</a> .
19	Fowler, J., Day, A., Lin, H-P., Tompkins, C., Vanderwill, L. and Cohick, S. (2023) 'National training and development Curriculum: Does having access to online "Right-Time" training positively impact Foster/Adoptive



Paper No.	Reference
	Parenting?', <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 155. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107305">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107305</a> .
20	Frost, R. L. and Goldberg, A. E. (2020a) "People said we were nuts ... I understand what they were saying now": An exploration of the transition to parenthood in sibling group adoption', <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 116. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105209">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105209</a> .
21	Frost, R. L. and Goldberg, A. E. (2020b) 'Adopting Again: A Qualitative Study of the Second Transition to Parenthood in Adoptive Families', <i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 23(2), pp. 85–109. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2019.1627450">https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2019.1627450</a> .
22	Gato, J., Henriques, M. R. and Leal, D. (2021) 'Adoption by Lesbian Women and Gay Men: Perceived Challenges and Training Needs for Professionals in Portugal', <i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 24(2), pp. 152–175. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2020.1834044">https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2020.1834044</a> .
23	Goldberg, A. E. and Grotevant, H. (2023) 'What do teachers know about adoptive families, and how do they use it to serve adopted children?', <i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 26(1), pp. 51–76. Available at: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2022.2156016">https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2022.2156016</a> .
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Table 1: List of Peer-Reviewed Academic Papers Identified via the Structured Database Literature Search



## Additional literature

Further literature was sourced in addition to the peer-reviewed literature identified in the structured database search. Two approaches to identifying additional literature were identified. The first was sourcing grey literature, which is defined as publications that have not been peer-reviewed for academic journals. These included government reports, empirical research reports not published in academic journals, government statistics, policy documents, research briefings and practice guidance. They were sourced through the websites of public bodies, specialist practice and research organisations, research centre websites, government websites and through the reference lists of research included in this review.

Our second route to identifying additional literature included searching for further peer-reviewed papers that were either (1) published in journals that were not included in the structured database searches, and/or (2) were published outside of the time period 2019-2024. We have chosen to include these either because they are seminal studies in the field, or because there was very limited literature available within the timeframe for a specific topic.

A total of 117 publications were drawn on from the grey literature and additional relevant peer-reviewed publications.

## Analysis

All of the papers included in this review, whether identified in the structured database searches or through sourcing the grey literature and additional peer-reviewed papers, were analysed thematically. After completing the review process and deciding which papers should be included or excluded, the authors followed the six steps of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). We began by familiarising ourselves with the data (1), before generating initial codes (2) and searching for themes (3). We then moved to reviewing our themes (4), defining and naming our themes (5) and producing the report (6). We were intentional in choosing to follow the process outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006), rather than employing *reflexive* thematic analysis as discussed by these authors in the years following the publication of their 2006 article. We did not utilise any software, like NVivo, to facilitate our thematic analysis, instead extracting relevant information and making notes in Word, with these notes enabling the generation of our initial codes and creation of our themes. These themes formed the basis of our report structure, allowing us to see the overarching key topics for discussion within each section. Throughout the analysis process, the research team met regularly to discuss emerging codes and themes, agreeing on the definition and name of the themes, and working together to produce the final report.

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