

Children and Young People Committee

AD14

Inquiry into Adoption

SUBMISSION TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO ADOPTION

My name is Heather Ottaway and I am employed as a Lecturer in Social Work at Cardiff University. This individual submission is made reflecting my professional and personal interest in adoption. Professionally, I am a researcher within the adoption field with a particular interest in sibling relationships in adoption. In addition, I am a qualified children and families social worker with considerable experience of adoption matters whilst in practice (11 years). Personally, I am also an adopted person. The focus of this submission is on the importance of actively considering sibling relationships within the adoption inquiry, and it will draw on my PhD research on this subject.

Most children requiring adoptive placements today will have siblings (approximately 80%). However, many children grow up in their adoptive placements separated from some or all of their brothers and sisters (research studies indicate a figure between 50-75%). There are many reasons why brothers and sisters do not grow up together in their adoptive placements, including the individual needs of the children, the sibling group being too large to place together, some children within the sibling group remaining at home, in foster care or living independently, and other siblings being born after their brother or sister has been adopted. Social worker attitudes regarding the relative importance of siblings and attitudes regarding the difficulty of placing siblings together are also influential. While adoption agencies have embraced greater openness of attitude towards children having some form of contact with their birth brothers and sisters post-adoption, this is more often in-direct, in the form of letters and cards at fixed points in the year. Siblings more rarely have direct face-to-face contact with one another post-adoption.

When children are brought up together in families, their relationships with brothers and sisters have the potential to be one of the most long-lasting human relationships; one that can

last longer than those with parents, friends, partners and children given its roots in childhood. It is normal for sibling relationships to go through periods of warmth and hostility in childhood and for the relationships to change and develop over time in both childhood and adulthood. It is also very rare for brothers and sisters to completely lose touch with one another in adulthood. It is therefore vital, when considering the needs and rights of children adopted today, to actively consider the place of their sibling relationships within adoption, particularly given their potential for significance and longevity across the life-span.

My PhD research interviewed 20 adopted adults (age range 24-75 years) about their lifetime experience of their brother and sister relationships. Several issues within the study have relevance to this adoption inquiry:

- 1) **Knowledge of birth brothers and sisters.** None of the participants knew about the existence of all their brothers and sisters prior to searching for their birth families. A minority did know about the existence of 1 or 2 siblings. When they knew about their birth brothers and sisters, most were very keen to meet them. The majority of siblings found were half siblings, and for most the status of being a half or full sibling was not the major issue – as one participant said, “a half sibling is not a half relationship”.

The adults’ experiences in the study reflected the difficulty present today in children knowing about the existence of siblings. This is a complex area, but the findings from this study indicate the importance of knowing who your siblings are. Therefore, how can social services agencies ensure the presence of all siblings is noted on children’s adoption files? In addition, how can adopted children know of the existence of siblings born after their adoption where there is no social services involvement (for example siblings born subsequently to birth fathers)? Furthermore, how can their existence be recorded and linked to the adopted child for the future? A clear message from the research study was that adopted people are very keen to know about their birth brothers and sisters, but really struggled to find correct information about them.

- 2) **Developing meaningful connections to siblings.** Many of the participants in the study went on to develop positive and meaningful relationships with their birth brothers and sisters in adulthood. However, a significant barrier that affected their relationships was the lack of shared, meaningful experiences in childhood. They met as strangers in adulthood, having to build their relationship from scratch without the

benefit of knowledge of one another in childhood and usually not having physically met prior to their reunion in adulthood.

For children adopted today, particularly those who are older at the time of going into foster care or being adopted, they often know about the existence of their brothers and sisters and can have a pre-existing relationship with them. Although separating siblings through adoption may be unavoidable at times, more thought should be given to what happens to these sibling relationships post-adoption. Consideration should be given to how adoptive families can be supported over time to consider how children can develop positive, meaningful connections with their birth brothers and sisters across the life-span.

It is important to acknowledge that children's views on seeing their birth siblings may change over time, and this should be clearly reflected in post-adoption planning. However, without the knowledge of siblings and an opportunity/ choice to build the foundation of a meaningful relationship in childhood, significant barriers may be present in adulthood to developing positive and meaningful relationships with birth brothers and sisters longitudinally.

- 3) **Supporting prospective adoptive parents through the adoption process.** It is important for all adoptive parents to recognise and understand that adopting a child is different to giving birth to their own children. The adopted child's identity encompasses a dual connection – with their adoptive family and their birth family. Prospective adopters and existing adoptive parents need to be supported and encouraged to understand this.

My study highlighted the importance of communication in adoptive families, and that as children, when their dual connection was recognised and supported, the adopted people managed identity issues more successfully. Equally, when adoptive parents were negative or dismissing of their child's birth family then problems were more likely to arise in terms of building unhelpful fantasies. In addition, feelings of belonging in the adoptive family were sometimes affected. Recognising children's dual connection may also assist adoptive parents to think more proactively about the importance of birth siblings in their adoptive child's life across the life-span.

Finally, I recommend the following in relation to increasing the number of successful outcomes in adoption for children with siblings:

- 1) Sibling assessments should take account of the sibling relationship in the past, present and future. Currently, most sibling assessments provide a good overview of the current relationship but do not fully consider the context of these relationships, nor the levels of change that can occur. In addition, most assessments do not fully consider the sibling relationships longitudinally into adulthood.
- 2) Increased investment in adoption support services so that children's needs and rights, and those of their siblings, can be fully met, and adoptive parents provided with support that is tailored to their needs.
- 3) The political profile of adoption has recently been raised throughout the UK in order to highlight current needs. This may have the desired effect of attracting more prospective adopters to adopt children. However, a greater understanding is needed of the potential importance and influence of sibling relationships across the life-span. This could be achieved through raising the profile of sibling relationships in adoption via the National Assembly for Wales, and also with those who work professionally within adoption. This may have the positive consequence of attracting more prospective adopters to adopt sibling groups, and also develop professionals' views on sibling relationships and their potential significance over the life-span.

I would be very happy to provide further evidence to the committee, if requested.