coram | better chances for children since 1739

Adoption Matching - Practice Guide

November 2016

Impact & Evaluation Team

Acknowledgements

Sections

This practice guide captures contemporary developments and issues in enabling timely and enduring permanency placements for children.

1. *No Mystery about Matching.* An analysis of good practice in a sample of agencies with comparatively speedy matching timescales - Jeff Mesie, Head of Impact and Evaluation Services, Coram.

2. *Working Locally/Working Regionally.* The experience of linking and matching on a regional basis. - Sally Beaumont, Service Manager, Adoption Activity Days, Coram.

3. *The importance of personalised risk formulations for matching hard to place children.* Going beyond a simple idea of 'the damage done' to differential susceptibility to risks – Matt Woolgar Consultant Clinical Psychologist for the Conduct Problems Clinic and Adoption and Fostering Team at South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust

4. *Professional judgement, decision making and action in matching.* The continued importance of professional judgement in identifying the relevance of any evidence and minimising any potential error in matching – John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research & Development, CoramBAAF.
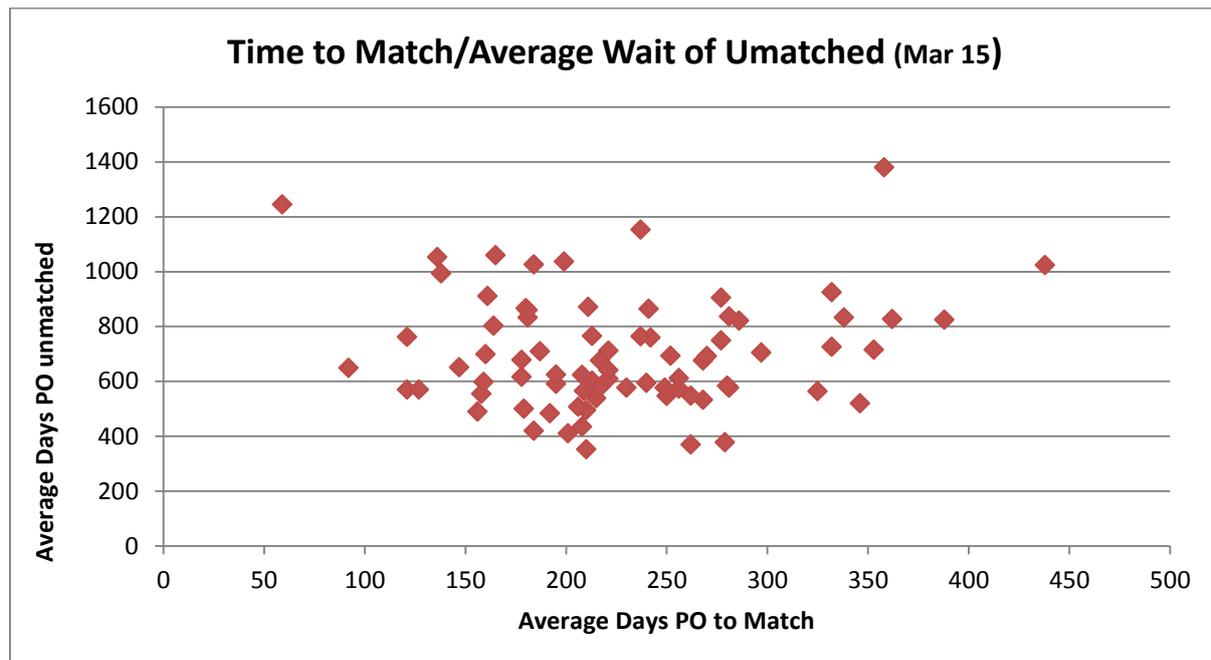
Contents

1. No Mystery About Matching

Speeding up the pace with which children are matched with adopters is a key concern of the government and agencies. Everyone agrees that there is room for improvement and that the delays experienced by some children are unacceptable. The scorecard and the Adoption Leadership Board data both show wide variations in timescales for children looked after by different authorities in terms of both length of wait and time between a Placement Order (PO) and a child is matched.

Time to Match/Average Wait of Umatched (Mar 15)

[scatter plot with y-axis "Average Days PO unmatched" ranging 0 to 1600, and x-axis "Average Days PO to Match" ranging 0 to 500]

(in this diagram authorities speedy in both areas are in the bottom left segment and, slow in both are on the top right segment).

The experience of Coram in undertaking diagnostic studies in a substantial number of local authorities also finds surprising numbers of children waiting for quite a long time before being matched, even when on the face of it these children should not be particularly hard to place.

At the same time there does not appear to be a great mystery about what comprises good practice in matching. Generally, managers and practitioners recognise that they already know what the essence of good practice is that leads to minimised delay. When practitioners comment and discuss good practice in matching they can feel underwhelmed or patronised by what are perceived as simple messages that add little to the 'state of the art', but rather reflect what they believe they already know or do.

In the following sections we document the approaches that emerged from a sequence of interviews with authorities who placed children relatively quickly. What was marked about these agencies was the focus and attention paid to working in this way. When we interviewed staff in one authority seeking to improve its performance, we

found organisational forms and processes little different from those in authorities that placed rapidly. However the agency identified that the processes had become largely symbolic in their operation and were not being used to imbue a sense of urgency and intolerance of delay to the matching process. This had been recognised and an improvement plan was underway to revitalise these processes and improve performance management at key junctures in the process.

Child Care to Refer at the Earliest Point

A common feature of almost all of the agencies was an emphasis on starting early in the looked after process. However precisely how early this was varied from authority to authority. In two the adoption teams became aware of children within two weeks of care proceedings being issued or when a child was in interim care prior to an Issues Resolution Hearing. In two other authorities there was a practice that the children in care team would immediately alert the adoption team to every new child that came into care. In others there would be a permanency planning meeting within four to six weeks of a child becoming looked after and the adoption teams would participate in this.

The bottom line was that adoption teams expected to know about children in the LAC journey as early as possible. In some areas they would be involved in processes that considered all looked after children and in others they would be notified of those LAC who were seen as unlikely to be returning home or be cared for by family members and therefore there was a probability that adoption would be the plan. An adoption team would expect to know about relinquished babies and children in care proceedings by the first LAC review other children by the second LAC review at the latest.

Agencies were also at pains to avoid administrative delays in asking the best interest decision, as this is a process under their control.

> *"The Final Care Planning Meeting takes place every Tuesday and the ADM makes a decision by the end of the same week."*

In addition some informants highlighted the advantages of having an adoption panel that meets frequently so that children do not need to wait.

Profiles and Family Finding

At the time of interview all but one of the authorities claimed to have sufficiency in recruitment and had adopters who they knew well. The advantage of this was that at the very early stages of a child's entry to care they were able to consider potential

links to approved or soon-to-be-approved adopters. However the first step identified for all agencies was the production and dissemination of the child's profile.

An individual profile was produced for each child. When asked about the quality of the profile, all were happy with the current standard in their agency, although some had indicated that this was after major improvement in recent years. Features that were described as indicating quality were profiles that:

"give a real sense of the child's personality and character"

One way of doing this was to make sure they contained *"images of 'children in action' - digging, building, cycling, running, playing football to show their interests and personality"*

There was a desire that, rather than being a list of problems or difficulties the profile should bring a child to life and cover what the child has to offer. It was acknowledged that in one authority profiles has previously been very problem orientated.

One agency mentioned that the CoramBAAF guidance on profiles relating to activity days was helpful and informed the approach taken.

If there were specific health or other issues the approach taken by one agency was for foster cares to describe how this impacted on the child's daily life and how it was managed rather than simply describing the issue itself. The point was also made that profiles should mention the support that would be available post-adoption.

Mentioning the support package offered in the profile was said to have led to adopters wanting to be considered for children with difficulties; examples were given of a child with behavioural issues and two children with autism who were recently placed in this way.

The consensus was that there were considerable benefits to using professional photographers and filming staff to produce the profiles and get high quality images. However, one of the services said that they had images taken by the family finding team or by the foster carers because they had received feedback that children preferred this to having a professional they don't know coming in and taking the pictures and children would be more relaxed in the profile.

Access to the profiles

There were some creative methods taken to make the profiles available to potential adopters. One agency had an app consisting of words and pictures that were shared with adopters on tablets at link and exchange events. For them an ipad was used at preparation training days or an exploring adoption event to give, not a detailed picture, but a flavour of a child. One agency had a web portal for children's profiles

with secure login available to all local approved adopters. This had been set up with an adoption reform grant.

All of the authorities mentioned that it was considered standard for profiles to be shared in local and national exchange days, as well as the government endorsed national adoption register (relaunched as *Adoption Match*) and *Adoptionlink* after the Placement Order has been made if there is no link by then. Some authorities had strong consortium arrangements whereby children's profiles would be shared at a fairly early stage

Early family finding also took place with the permission of the court. Agencies would seek, and usually obtain, leave from the court to share all of the information with adopters, so they can get the CPR plus parental assessment reports if relevant.

It was a common practice to share anonymous profiles if there was not yet a PO when it was thought likely that one would be obtained. If court permission was not available visits to adopters still occurred to discuss information on a non-identifying basis.

Profiles were more likely to be shared at adopter information meetings and through the adopter preparation process.

In Oldham "We have a Recruitment Officer who makes a significant contribution to the quality of our profiles. She proofs profiles (adopters and children) and is active in registering us for exchange days, keeping an up to date mailing list of agencies to distribute profiles. She checks the quality of photos and the text. Previously we were too wordy and used casework language."

The authorities would pass the case to other agencies if a child was hard to place. However, given the fall in children being placed they rarely needed to go out to other agencies and at the present time could generally find an in-house match so that a link may be being considered before the profile was distributed.

Encouragement to consider adopting a wide range of children

There was considerable discussion about how adopters could be encouraged and supported to consider adopting a wider range of children than they had originally considered when they first began to think about adopting. For most authorities this started early in the adopters assessment and training process where *"the training opens their minds"*.

The context is that adopters are on a journey where there are few younger children. Agencies reported that in response to this they gave this information to adopters at stage one and stage two and were clear about the reality of the children available.

To shift perceptions some agencies used stages one and two to bring in a range of

adopters who have adopted a range of children eg single sex adopters, adopters of siblings, adopters of older children. The real experiences of actual adopters were said to have far more impact than anything a professional said. Presentations from adopters who have adopted older children were said to give a very realistic picture of what it is like to adopt an older child. Contact with a strong experienced adopter was seen as helping to give a sense of the support that children need. One agency would consciously try to reflect who is in the group and the children coming up for adoption.

The point was that adopters would be equipped to get a good overview of what it is like to adopt across the range of children. Adopters were then encouraged to consider other children who are waiting eg to consider an older child.

It was suggested that by using Adoptionlink, adopters could see more information about children and made them real to adopters. This helped adopters to think again about what they can deal with. Activity days were also seen as good at encouraging adopters to consider a wider range of children. Like an activity day, a good profile was described as also helping adopters to look past the information to the child.

In looking at a potential link, one agency indicated that the stated preferences of adopters would not stop them approaching adopters about children who were not a perfect fit eg if the children were a little bit older but a good fit in other respects.

Progressing Links

The precise mechanism varied but a typical approach was for a weekly examination of all adopters and children (both pre PO and post PO) to look for possible links. A key requirement for successful matching was said to be to have a good understanding of both the children who are coming and the adopters. In most authorities this was done via dialogue and communication between adoption and the children's social work team. One agency achieved the communication by having cases formally held by the adoption team following placement order.

Typically the family finding team would pick two or three possible links and the Children's Social Worker (CSW) would decide which ones to pursue via joint visits. The linking was based on knowledge of the child. It was felt to be useful if the adoption worker as able to answer any question from the adopters without referring to another worker. A good understanding of the child's needs was seen as helping to make solid matches as well as providing the basis for a robust support plan.

As usual in adoption, a meeting would be arranged with the foster carer and the adopter, to share information with the adopter about the child's care and needs, as well as the usual medical advisor appointments. There was some but not universal

use of Life Appreciation Days, their advocates saying that they give an opportunity for the adopter to meet face to face and have access to all of the information that could be gathered about the child and their life pre adoption.

Making a good match was seen as being based on encouraging adopters to understand their own vulnerabilities and prepare them for the journey ahead.

> *"Matching is based on the adopters own strengths and we help adopters to identify their strengths and are not setting them up to fail".*
> After Adoption

The assessment of parental capacity was generally based on insights gleaned during the approval process. So some adopters were seen as being able to cope with conflict but not rejection, while others as being able to cope better with rejection than conflict, and this would feature as part of the matching decision. A service would provide advice on attachment and this could be included in the core skills training. A rather more formal approach seemed to be taken by one agency that specialised in hard to place children and used the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) to determine adopters' attachment style and Dyadic developmental psychotherapy (DDP) to encourage attuned empathetic parenting.

The point was made that the ability to cope with a range of behaviours is not always predictable. Adopters continually surprise and had proven sometimes to be highly resilient and resourceful in their parenting approach.

Progress monitoring and case tracking processes

Many of the agencies used permanency planning meeting or similar to track cases and prevent drift. A formal time line for escalation was usually not used, but at least one authority commented that they needed to improve and be more consistent and effective in how they escalated concerns if a child has been waiting a long time. In one authority, children who were still waiting for a placement after nine months would come back to a final care plan meeting where it would be decided if they needed to change the plan from adoption or to look at other options. Only two of the authorities explicitly mentioned the use of performance data such as ALB and Ofsted returns with a suggestion that comparison data is not routinely used as a performance tool.

Targeted recruitment of adopters

Two of the authorities used data to look at the pipeline of children entering care and had used this to do more accurate targeting of adopter recruitment.

> *Previously the LA looked at children with a PO and recruited around their profiles. This was a group that had moved on by the time the adopters were recruited. There was a mismatch between the targeted recruitment for previous children and the needs of current children. We meet quarterly to understand the adopter and child pipeline and can target recruitment based on the children coming into the system.*

The message here is that generic adopter recruitment is sometimes not very effective and a move to a more data-informed targeted approach to recruitment may be required.

Adopter-led activities

Given the emphasis on 'adopter led' matching in the 2014 draft guidance, agencies were asked to identify the practices and processes in their agency that they that they would identify as adopter-led.

Overall interviewees described four sorts of activity:

1. Potential adopters being able to access a wide range of profiles and express an interest (eg via Adoption Match, Adoptionlink, , exchange days);
2. Potential adopters being able to put their own profile on relevant websites to attract interest;
3. Potential adopters able to meet with children in adoption activity days or similar events; and
4. Potential adopters being able to contact the children's social worker directly without going through their own adoption social worker or the child's family finding team.

Interviewees were generally positive about one to three, although it was said that three required careful gatekeeping. They are less keen on four as they felt that the adoption social worker's understanding of the adopter's strengths and weaknesses needed to be factored in at the earliest stage before things progressed any further.

Adoption activity days were also seen as having been a catalyst for wider impact on the adoption process.

> *"We have become more creative in how we manage introductions and try to bring the child and adopters voice into this process. Activity Days have taken us through a door which has opened up the way for changes to their involvement in the process".*

Summary

So all in all the results were not novel, but what was clear was the focus of the agencies on avoiding unnecessary delay.

For many it was the practice arrangements that were seen as drivers of good performance. These focused on:

- having a permanence planning process which is continually reviewed
- picking up children early in care proceedings and tracking them
- being able to call upon other adoption agencies, particularly neighbouring authorities, for placements
- avoiding any lag between Final Care Planning and ADM decision
- having an adoption panel that meets frequently so children don't need to wait

Working together was also a common theme e.g having Children's Social Work, Independent Reviewing Officers and Adoption Social Workers all working and planning together.

Finally, one agency stressed that the family finding social worker has to believe that a family can be found for this particular child and that this belief really makes a difference to the outcome.

2. Working Locally/Working Regionally: the experience of linking and matching on a regional basis

The first support initiative under the project was to approach eight agencies who had received diagnostic support from Coram. These were offered intensive additional family finding support as a means of satisfying themselves that all options for specific harder to place children had been considered.

Each agency was invited to identify up to 6 children who had a plan for adoption, were not yet placed and who were traditionally harder to place.

Four agencies initially decided that the offer was relevant to them and 17 children were referred for additional matching support.

Under the offer we agreed to:

- Review and edit the children's profiles (incorporating any changes to plan)
- Profile the child/ren at a Coram Exchange day
- Search the AAD database for any potential matches with adopters waiting and follow up potential links
- Contact the National Adoption Register to ensure children's details were accurate and to establish if there were any potential adopter links to follow up
- Offer a place at an AAD and ensure attendance at any forthcoming National Exchange days.
- Provide an independent written summary of additional family finding work undertaken. This was utilised to inform the permanency plan as well as for inclusion in court reports in proceedings.

Outcomes
Of those 17 children initially referred 5 children were subsequently matched including a sibling group of two. Given that these children were deemed by agencies to be on the verge of a change of plan likely to mean permanence via fostering, this was a small but significant outcome from a small scale review of family finding.

Following this we targeted matching on a regional scale.

Regional Approach
The Central East Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) piloted a five month Department for Education (DfE) funded regional linking and matching project.

The main focus was to encourage a regional approach to utilise the greater pool of adopters for those children who are considered hardest to place. There were two voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) and six local authorities (LAs) participating from its inception, and another local authority joined the process at a later stage.

Process

After initial consultation with partner agencies, it was agreed among participants that agencies would complete and send through two templates to the Coram Matching Coordinator every week.

The first template detailed children waiting for adoption that agencies wanted to include on the RAA list. Children likely to be made subject to a Placement Order in the coming weeks are also referred anonymously as 'early alerts'. These templates included their basic information (e.g. gender, date of birth, details of any complex needs) that helped the Matching Coordinator at Coram to gain an initial understanding of the children in question.

The second template detailed approved and soon-to-be approved adopters that agencies wished to refer to the RAA list. Similarly, these templates included basic information about the adopters' matching criteria and specific skills/ experience.

Coram also requested that agencies send them both child and adopter profiles to further enhance the linking and matching process. The data analyst within the project filtered out potential links which was further refined by the social worker utilising information provided within the profiles.

This refined list of potential links for each child across the region was provided to the child's respective agency in advance of the weekly meeting. In addition, each agency representing the adopters was provided with the corresponding child's profile prior to the meeting. Preparation ahead of the meeting enabled further filtering out of unsuitable links by the agencies.

Although initially this process took place on a weekly basis, some agencies still managed to make contact with the relevant highlighted agency link ahead of the meeting in order to exchange information about children and adopters.

The weekly matching meeting (which was either conducted face-to-face or by means of a conference call) provided an opportunity to discuss in greater detail the identified links. The idea was that discussion among agencies would enable a finer filter for them to progress to exchanging Prospective Adopter's Report (PARs) and arranging visits to their preferred adopters.

The meetings provided a chance for agencies to exchange and share relevant information regarding the children and adopters on the list, such as support available, medical prognosis and further detail about any siblings and contact.

During the span of the project, there were some children and adopters that were found links externally to the project – due to the ongoing contact with agencies, Coram as RAA lead was continually updated regarding these links and could therefore provide an accurate overview of the available adopters and children on a real-time basis.

What's different about the RAA matching project ?

This model of providing a weekly focus on matching is not necessarily a new feature within individual agencies. However, a regional approach does provide a real spotlight on seeking out potential adopters from the wider regional pool.

The regional project complements the existing Family Finding practice within agencies whilst encouraging regional working. The Central East RAA has a greater awareness of the children waiting in their whole region and of their adopter cohort and adopter shortages. The region is now more informed about those children who are waiting the longest as well as potential future shortages in specific adopters required to meet the needs of children with additional needs.

The project has also encouraged proactive regional thinking in terms of upfront creative family finding events for certain cohorts of children needing wider profiling. Two regional events took place – an Adoption Activity Day on 11th June 2016 (19 RAA children attended – more information is provided under 'Outcomes and matches within the RAA') and an Exchange Day which took place on 21st July. Both events targeted adopters to invite from the national pool not currently represented within the regional cohort. The 21 July Exchange Day was attended by eight agencies and 35 adopters. This enabled a wider matching opportunity for those children that had waited the longest.

Another unique point about the RAA matching project was the role of the matching coordinator. As this was a new model, this was found to be helpful – the matching coordinator offered independent scrutiny, a single point of referral and for the first time was able to generate valuable data offering a holistic overview of the region. The matching coordinator possessed an accurate and up-to-date understanding of the children and adopters in the region and was therefore in a good position to answer a number of queries in a timely, informed manner. These queries included requests for specific information for court proceedings in relation to adopters available for specific children where a Placement Order (PO) is anticipated.

The complementary roles of the practitioner (social worker) and the matching coordinator enabled a joint approach that combined both practitioner knowledge and analysis that is not always available to other agencies.

Progress monitoring and case tracking

The tracking and monitoring process identified children who are waiting the longest for links and matches. Each week agencies are followed up to provide progress updates for the children and adopters on the list.

The aim of these regular updates was to monitor any reason for delay, to confirm the date of the home visit, the progression of matches and identify any reason for not progressing.

Data

Data provided from week four onwards has informed the region regarding the following:

- The ages, gender, sibling groups and ethnic background of children referred;
- The geographical spread and numbers of adopters in each area within the region;
- The ethnic breakdown of adopters;
- The skill base of adopters and their likely ability to meet more complex needs; and
- How an agency compares to each other in terms of approved adopters, process and children waiting.

Data overview at week 20

Overview of links identified via RAA process

Week	No. of children	No. of adopters	Links identified via RAA process
1	22	82	102
5	25	94	123
10	29	78	70
15	48	88	91
20	54	82	79

At the half way stage of the project (10 weeks) the regional list contained 79 adopters and 29 children. By week 20 the number of adopters referred had stabilised at 82 and the number of children referred had increased to 54. This reflected the increased confidence in the project to seek out more suitable links as well as the increase in agencies referring children anonymously ahead of court proceedings (early alerts).

Key data findings:

- 108 children in total[1] were referred to the RAA list and 160 adopters were referred across the twenty weeks
- The majority (58%) of children on the RAA list are male
- 29% (31) of the children have complex needs, whether this be a significant level of delay or a genetic condition.
- The majority of children on the RAA list were to be placed in sibling groups of 2; a significant proportion (17%) were to be placed in sibling groups of 3[2]
- 18% (19) of children are from BME backgrounds.
- 44% (46) are 5 years or over[3].

Total number of children and adopters by agency across Week 1 to 20:

---
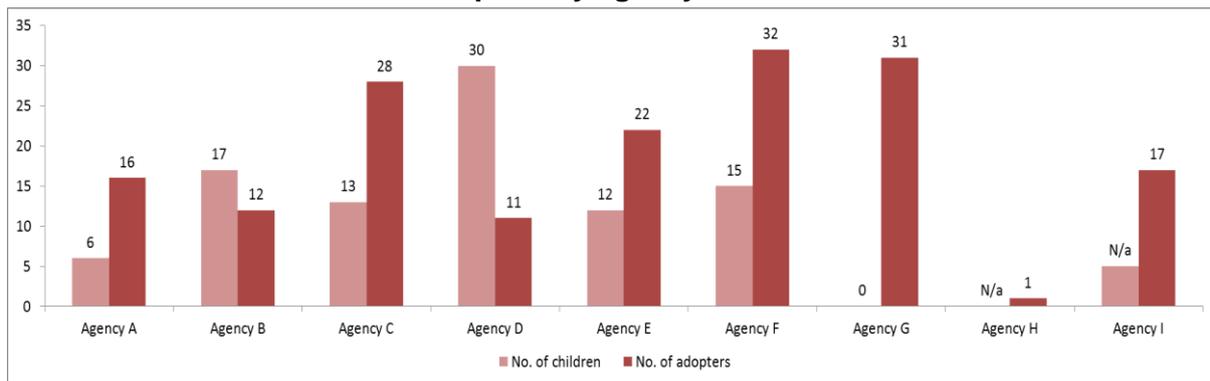
[1] This is individual children referred, not counting repeat referrals
[2] This proportion is of sibling groups of 3 is actually an underestimate as a number of children came onto the list as sibling groups of 3 but it was decided in some cases that splitting groups further would result in more links for prospective adopters
[3] For a number of early alerts, the exact DOB is not specified so this figure takes into account those children that will be 5 years old in the next 6 months

Ethnicity of children referred from BME backgrounds:
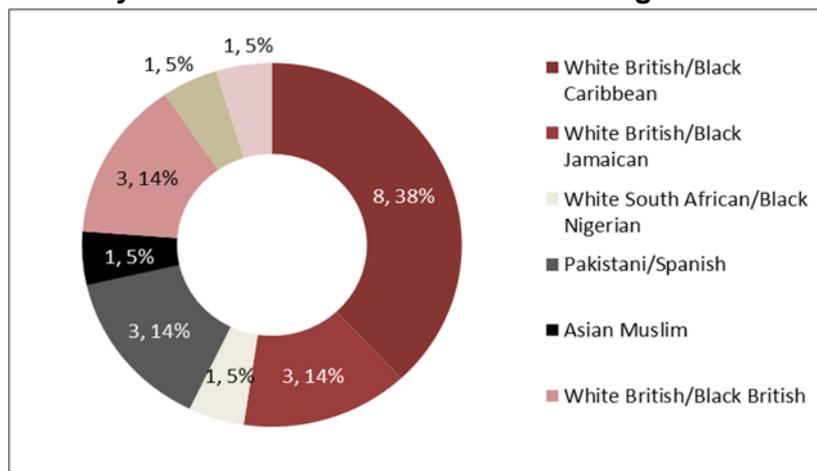
Challenges highlighted from data findings:

- 93% of the children on the RAA list are categorised as "harder to place".
- Mismatch of adopters' preferences for size of sibling group with the reality of children on list (e.g. 3% of adopters were looking for a sibling group of 3, compared to 17% of children).
- Lack of "ethnic" matches of adopters and children (when this is required by CSW). For instance, 15 children were from a dual heritage (White and Black) background, compared with two adopters.
- Most agencies within the region have a generic pool of adopters who are now waiting a significant time for any links.

Ethnicity of adopters from BME backgrounds:
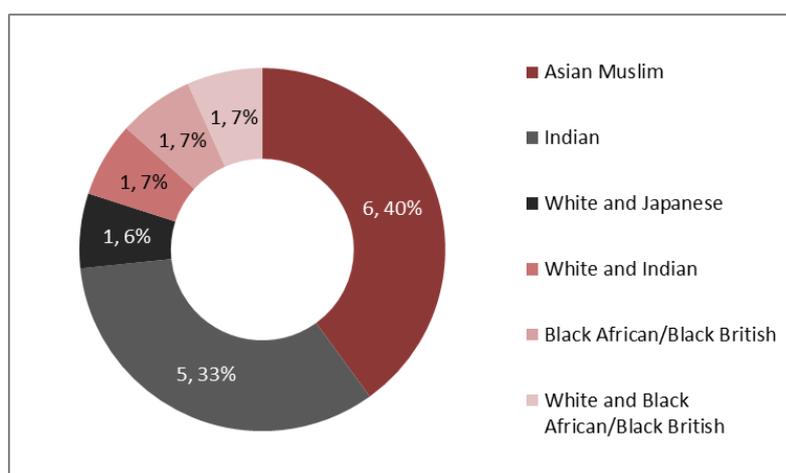
The information gathered from the RAA linking and matching project was also used to inform a future targeted approach using the data to inform adopter recruitment across the region.

As a region, recruitment will now need to focus on seeking adopters able to meet the needs of children shown to be waiting the longest, specifically for siblings and

children from BME backgrounds who are over-represented, particularly those of a dual heritage (White and Black) background. The first targeted regional campaign is likely to be focussed on family finding for sibling groups.

Outcomes and matches within the RAA

As at 1st June 2016, there have been 14 children matched within the RAA through the linking and matching project. These matches are explored in greater detail below:

Matches within the RAA

Child information	Age at time of match	Ethnicity	Agency matched with
Girl 1 and Girl 2 from Agency C	2 years old; 1 year old	White British	Agency B
Girl 3 and Girl 4 from Agency C	4 years old; 3 years old	White British	Agency G
Boy 1, Boy 2 and Girl 5 from Agency D	4 years old; 3 years old; 2 years old	White British	Agency G
Boy 3 from Agency D	4 years old	White British/ Black Caribbean	Agency G
Boy 4, Boy 5 and Girl 6 from Agency D	2 years old; 2 years old; 4 years old	White British	Agency B
Boy 6 and Boy 7 from Agency F	3 years old; 4 years old	White British	Agency G
Boy 8 from Agency D	3 years old	White British	Agency G

Children matched through the RAA by agency (as of mid-June)

Agency	Children matched
Norfolk	4
Buckinghamshire	2
Northamptonshire	8

Adopters matched through the RAA process by agency (as of mid-June)

Agency	Adopters matched
Central Bedfordshire	2
Buckinghamshire	1
St Francis	4
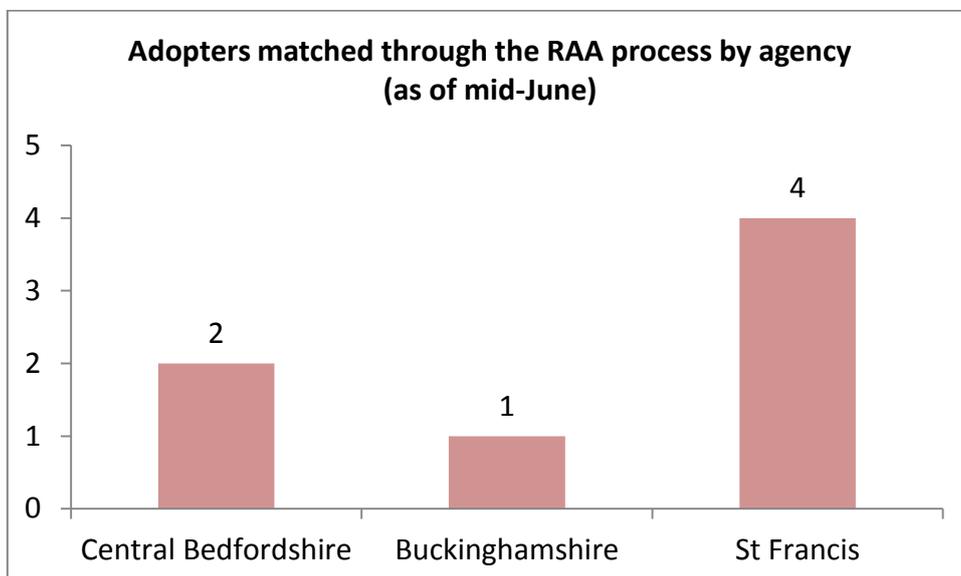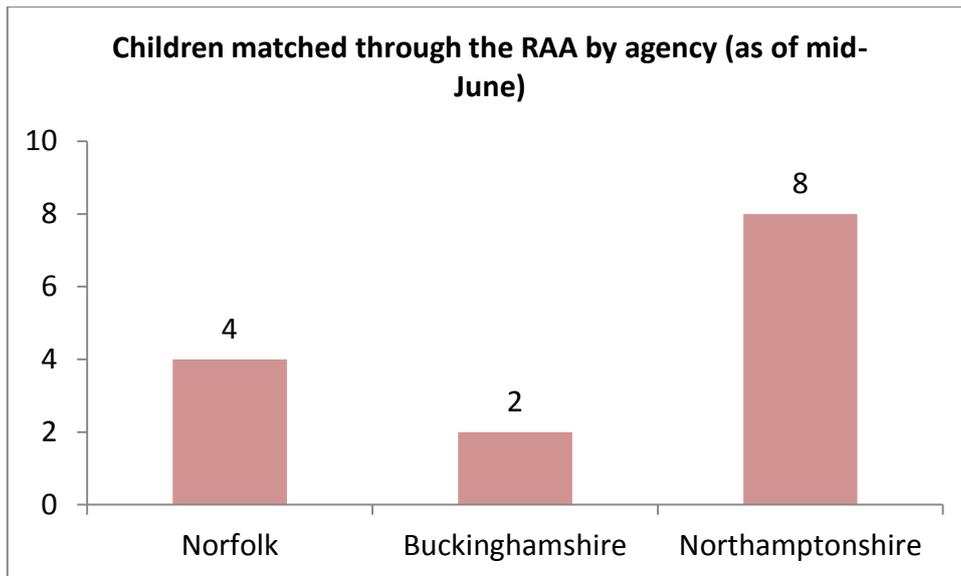
As evident from the above table and graphs, all agencies except two (agencies E and H), benefitted from the project through either a match for their children or for their adopters.   Agency H did not benefit because it was a VAA with no adopters (bar one in the first week of the process) referred to the RAA list. In relation to Agency E, links established through the linking and matching project for children of Agency E were deemed unsuitable, either due to children requiring specific ethnic matches or more suitable in-house links being identified.

The RAA Activity Day for Adoption – 11th June 2016 (facilitated by CoramBAAF)

The RAA Activity Day for Adoption took place in Grendon Hall (Northamptonshire) after discussions among the Central East agencies around creative family finding initiatives. It was hoped that it would stimulate interest in the children on the RAA list that had been waiting the longest (i.e. those harder-to-place children).

There were twenty six children initially referred to the RAA Activity Day for Adoption, although seven did not attend for various reasons: one sibling group of three as the eldest child was not considered suitably prepared; one sibling group of two and one child were exploring links; and the remaining child was not considered ready to attend an AAD.

Nineteen children attended the day ranging from age 0 to 6; twenty three prospective adopters attended. There was one sibling group of three and four sibling groups of two. Fifteen of the nineteen children were categorised as "harder-to-place".[4]

On the day, twenty one expressions of interest (EOIs) were recorded for seven of the children that attended (and one for a child that did not attend but was profiled in the booklet) and a further two EOIs were recorded in the days following the AAD. This all serves to highlight the positives of the event in seeking matches for the regions children for whom family finding was presenting challenge. Seven children subsequently proceeded to a match, including a sibling group of three.

Survey feedback from region

An online survey was sent to agency representatives that participated in the matching process. The aim of the survey was to establish feedback from agencies, in particular regarding what they found useful about the RAA matching process and suggestions for future improvement.

At least one representative from all nine agencies completed the questionnaire. As some agencies had more than one representative, there are two agencies (Agency C and E) with responses from more than one representative. It should be noted that the survey was intended to target those representatives with a significant level of involvement in the process, although inevitably this was subject to a degree of variation.

---

[4] "Harder-to-place children" fall into at least one of the following categories: i) of a BME background, ii) in a sibling group of two or more, iii) with complex needs, iv) five years or older.

The chart shows a horizontal stacked bar chart with categories (top to bottom):

- Discuss differences in agency family finding procedures: Strongly agree 3, Agree 4, Neutral 2, Disagree 2
- Inform future recruitment of adopters: Strongly agree 2, Agree 6, Neutral 1, Disagree 2
- Confirm matches from within the region: Strongly agree 2, Agree 4, Neutral 4, Strongly disagree 1
- Find additional links: Strongly agree 2, Agree 4, Neutral 3, Disagree 2
- Forge/enhance links with other partners in the region, including less familiar agencies: Strongly agree 5, Agree 6

Legend: Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly disagree

X-axis: 0%, 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, 100%

- All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the RAA matching project helped to forge/enhance links with other partners in the region, highlighting the positive relationship-building aspect of the project.
- Over half (6, 55%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the linking and matching project helped agencies find additional links, whereas 3 (27%) answered 'Neutral' and 2 (18%) disagreed. One of the agencies that disagreed with the statement was a VAA - which was unable to participate fully in the process due to their specialist adopters not able to be included in the generic list. Similarly, 55% (6) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participating in the RAA linking and matching project helped agencies confirm matches from within the region. 4 respondents (36%) answered 'Neutral' and 1 disagreed.
- Seven of the nine agencies (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that the RAA linking and matching project provided valuable information regarding the future recruitment of adopters.
- The RAA matching meetings provided a useful platform to discuss differences in family finding procedures across agencies for 64% (7) of respondents.
- Seventy-three% (8) of respondents felt that the data provided during the face-to-face meetings was useful or very useful. Indeed, the same proportion of respondents felt that the RAA linking and matching meetings were a useful forum for discussing other family finding opportunities.
- Seven respondents felt that twenty weeks was about the right time period for the project to make a difference in terms of family finding. Three felt that it was not enough time. The differing views of respondents is further highlighted

by two respondents from the same agency - one respondent felt that twenty weeks was 'too much' whereas the other felt that this was 'not enough time.'

- The general consensus among agencies was that face-to-face meetings were the best way of conducting the RAA linking and matching meetings and a preference for continuing this forum in the same way.

Critique of project

When asked what respondents would keep the same if this process were to continue, the majority (eight of the nine that responded) commended the face-to-face meetings for encouraging communication e.g. the sharing of practice and networking across agencies. The remaining respondent praised the organisation of Coram's project lead and data analyst, saying that the combination of skills was 'good' and 'responsive', making 'swift adjustments when required.'

Regarding what respondents would want to change, the frequency of meetings was a recurring theme; most respondents wanted 'less frequent meetings' given their own time constraints, and to allow more follow-up time to pursue established links. Two respondents felt that the process of following up with links and sharing information between the children's and adopters' agencies was problematic, with one respondent stating that it was 'time-consuming' and could be improved by using LinkMaker.

Take-up of additional services offered via the Linking and Matching project

The survey also explored respondents' utilisation of additional services – 60% of respondents made use of regional searches offered by Coram on behalf of children who are in the court arena (i.e. to identify likely adopters who would be interested). One respondent praised this additional service, saying it was 'very useful' and provided them with 'informed data' to be used in court reports. In contrast, most people did not access further support from the project to help with profile editing as at the time they felt that their profiles were of a sufficient standard.

Key learning from the project to date

- The high number of new regional links for children sometimes slowed linking down as the resulting follow-up work was overwhelming for agencies in the early stages of the project.
- The project highlighted the need for the right level of representation at the meetings. Attendees could be operational managers, social workers, family finding workers or social work assistants. The important criteria is the need for staff to be informed about the needs of the children and to have a good enough awareness about the adopters put forward. This also demonstrated the importance of a proactive commitment and consistency from the lead attendee.

- The importance of providing trends and data even at Week 4 in contributing to shift agency attitudes to view the regional matching project as offering value.
- At the 20 week stage, matches between regional adopters and children stood at just over 13%. Additional in-region matches are currently progressing and the outcomes of further visits are awaited. Given that the RAA has referred only harder to place children to then, for these children, this further opportunity to achieve permanence via adoption is very encouraging.

The challenge and cultural shift required to become one agency cannot be underestimated. Coming together as a region takes time, as does viewing adopters and children as belonging to one agency. It is a new means of engaging with colleagues more formally and the Central East RAA had a preference for meeting together on a regular basis which did help to progress this vision and the journey to becoming one agency.

Future focus

Aside from refining the process for the immediate future, a greater emphasis will be needed on monitoring and escalating issues resulting in delay for children waiting for permanence.

The region will now need to reflect and seek agreement as to what constitutes an acceptable timescale for progressing links. A survey undertaken within the region with partner agencies evidenced that identified links are followed up within a timescale that varies from 48 hours to three weeks. Qualitative information provided detailed the lack of immediacy from the children's social worker in prioritising the reading of selected PAR assessment papers. A system of having another person who knows the child well (for example, life story worker, social work assistant and foster carer) reading and shortlisting the available adopter paperwork early on maybe one means of speeding up confirmation of selecting adopters to then visit.

There are differences in the approach to finding an appropriate ethnic match for BME children, which have been highlighted across agencies. The focus may also need to shift from seeking the best match to a good enough match for children from BME backgrounds, in particular children from a dual heritage (white British/ Caribbean or African) background. Whilst the project can offer adopters who are open to considering a child from a different ethnicity, they are not always given due consideration by all partner agencies. This will be a challenge for regional matching policy in future.

3. The Importance of Personalised Risk Formulations for Matching Hard to Place Children

What is personalisation?

Personalisation refers to thinking about the individual's particular characteristics of risks, strengths and needs. There is a move in health care more generally to try and improve the effectiveness of interventions by going beyond the simple headline disorder and thinking about how it manifests in an individual, or sometimes groups of individuals. For example, in physical health interventions this could be changing pharmacological interventions to match the genetic risk characteristics of an individual. However, the sense of personalisation in this current context is not quite as specific as tailoring pharmacological treatment.

We can also think about personalisation in terms of the profile of risks that we understand from research. One of the areas where personalising risks makes the most sense, is with regard to the experiences of maltreatment, neglect or abuse that a child may have experienced any time from conception until the time they are placed for adoption.

There is increasing evidence that early maltreatment and neglect can have an impact on the neurobiological aspects of development. However, there must be an emphasis on the word *can* and the extent to which these early experiences *might* have an impact varies according to a whole range of factors (e.g., Woolgar, 2013) and increasingly scientist do not see this as 'damage done' but rather as an adaption to a negative environment, that then becomes a problematic legacy, but not invariable, once the environment changes for the better. It is not possible to say that where a child has been exposed to a specific form of abuse, for a circumscribed amount of time, and from that predict that they will have a certain outcome and therefore require a certain type of parenting or intervention. And it is certainly insufficient to say that because a child is being adopted from care that they will be like 'X' or will need 'Y' as the picture is more complex. It is very important that we move away from a deterministic account around the negative legacy of early maltreatment and understand the multiple factors that determine any long-lasting impact or outcome.

 We can think about a child who is freed for adoption of having a number of general classes of risks that may be relevant for them, and which could jeopardise their future placement and influence the type of family best suited to meet their needs. One of

the first risks that prospective adopters think about is the potential biological, or heritable conditions and risks that come from birth parents with mental illness and that will be the focus here.

Different environments

The consequences of exposure to early maltreatment and abuse has different impacts on different individuals - even within the same family it is unlikely that siblings who were exposed to neglect were all exposed to exactly the same kind of neglect, at the same developmental stage, for the same duration. There are also bound to be differences between individuals, even within a family, in terms of the abusive experiences they have encountered. One child may be more likely to have been scapegoated in the family system, another child may have been more likely to have been favoured for idiosyncratic reasons in the family system and another may have been a target of specific forms of maltreatment or abuse that were not shared equally amongst the other siblings. In other words, even within a generally abusive or maltreating family environment some children are likely to be exposed to these factors in very different ways. And certainly, looking beyond specific families to groups of children in different families who been exposed to similar headline types of maltreatment or abuse, the actual lived through experiences of that maltreatment and abuse are going to be felt differently. Each child would have grown up in different environments with different potential for toxic impacts on their development in terms of their individual neurobiology, psychology, attachment and their expectations for the future.

In recognition of this, we need to move prospective adoptive families, and also other professionals, away from the idea that because a child was raised in a family exposing them to maltreatment that it will lead automatically to a specific negative outcome. The fact that individual children's environments were specific to them is very important when thinking about the legacy of growing up in a maltreating or neglectful environment.

Differential susceptibility to risks

But even if family environments were broadly equivalent, a child's response is still likely to be highly individual. Many people will have heard about the idea of resilience; that some children are more robust in the face of negative experiences than others and they may also know that some children are more vulnerable to negative experiences than others.

But more recent studies suggest things are more nuanced than that. A useful metaphor for describing the fact that some children may be more susceptible to environmental risks than others is the idea of "dandelions and orchids" (Boyce & Ellis, 2005). This refers to the process of differential susceptibility, which talks about an individual's responsiveness to *positive and negative* environments.

Importantly, the notion of positive environments relates to the possible opportunities for interventions and improvements, once a child is placed in a better home.

For example, some children may show surprising resilience in the face of high levels of neglect and maltreatment. In the metaphor mentioned above these children might be thought of as 'dandelions', insofar as they will do pretty well across most environments. If the quality of the environment improves then we may well see some degree of improvement in their functioning but we may not see a huge amount. The downside of being resilient may be that the child is less responsive to a more positive environment, and is therefore less able to flourish. If that is the case then it may be that we need to manage expectations in terms of how much better the child may do, given how well they have already done in the face of hardship. This can be especially true for how much therapy they need. If we keep offering therapy to a child who is already doing as well as they are likely to achieve then we may risk pathologising their normal, their good enough.

Another child may be more susceptible to a relatively mild negative environment. They may have shown a relatively catastrophic response to what on paper appears to be apparently low levels of maltreatment. The interesting feature from the differential susceptibility point of view is that this vulnerability may also confer a high level of responsiveness to a new positive environment, so long as that environment is tailored *exactly* to them. For example, continuing the metaphor above, if they were an orchid then many environments will not allow them to flourish but if the environment is tailored exactly to their needs then we may see them respond extremely well and positively to a new environment and flourish more than a dandelion would. The challenge is to find what kind of environment they need and, to be aware that on the downside, it may be that what might be a perfectly "good enough" parenting environment for most children, even other siblings, is just not good enough for the orchid – this can be a challenge for parents, therapists and schools.

We cannot currently predict what types of children would fit into these rather coarse categories of dandelions and orchids - and that is probably a good thing - although there is some evidence of genetic factors, for example with disorganised attachments. But it does highlight perhaps that there are more subtle processes going on in terms of response to maltreatment. That resilience to a toxic environment may come at the expense of doing well in a more optimal environment. Similarly, the cost of being particularly susceptible to a maltreating environment may be in part offset by the potential for greater positive response in a better environment, so long as that environment is tailored to the individual child's needs. The interesting point in relation to the study is that it returns us to having to think about individual children and individual need profiles and to move away from global assumptions about risk and the damage done and deterministic thinking

Heritable risks

One area that prospective adopters have a great deal of anxiety about is the potential for heritable or genetic risks coming down through the birth family. Genetic factors are important in all our lives and adopters are wise to think about these. If we look at the science emerging around genetics, and in particular its complex and dynamic relationships with different kinds of environments, then once again we need to move away from an oversimplified models of genetic inheritance determining outcomes. It is important that we do not underestimate the potential for elements of the birth parents' personalities or mental health to occur in their children, but on the other hand it is important not to overstate such risks.

We have reasonably good information about the likelihood of mental health problems being passed from one generation to another via genetic factors in general but one of the problems we have is that this usually assumes that the environment stays broadly the same. In other words most of the studies are based upon birth families where the child of a parent with a mental health disorder is also raised in the family in which a parent with a serious mental health disorder and that will influence their parenting and the environment around them – a gene-environment correlation.

That is to say if the birth parents of a child both have a clear psychotic disorder and the child is raised in that family in which both parents show what may be deemed very strange behaviours, with, say delusional and hallucinating themes, then the child's parenting environment will be shaped by the presence of strong psychotic presentations alongside any genetic risk they may have – their genetic risk is correlated with the environmental risk. If children are raised in a family in which there are no serious mental health problems, then the environment will be less

characterised by the oddities and environmental risk factors of psychosis and that link is broken.

If we hold this methodological problem in mind, but look at the data, we can see that having one parent with a mental health problem does increase the risk a little. For example one parent with a severe mental health issues (such as psychosis) increases the risk of any common or severe mental health risk in the child, from 10% to 21% (i.e., doubles it) but having both parents with a mental health problem increases the risk further to 36% (Uher, 2010). We find these statistics quite useful for helping parents think about the profile of potential risks and especially that even with two parents with significant mental health problems that the child is likely not to have a serious mental health problem. Not least that in birth families, and not just those under the care system, with neither parent having any kind of mental health problem the risk is still about 10% for any mental health disorder.

Table 1: Risk of *any* mental illness requiring medical attention (per 100 offspring)

		Birth Parent 1		
		No Mental Health issues	Common Mental Health issues	Severe Mental Health issues
Birth Parent 2	No Mental Health issues	10	20	21
	Common Mental Health issues	20	31	33
	Severe Mental Health issues	21	33	36

(from Uher, 2010, Adoption & Fostering)

There are some studies that have looked at what happens when a child is not raised in a birth family who have mental health problems. In other words where there has been a separation between the genetic risks and the environmental risks that go alongside them. There is some evidence that where a child has been adopted away from these environments then the risks of acquiring a mental health disorder can reduce dramatically. But there is also evidence that suggests that if adoptive families struggle to parent optimally, which can occur for a variety of reasons, then the genetic

risks start to increase again. It is likely to be more complicated than that, as one of the reasons why some adoptive families struggled could relate to the child manifesting higher levels of premorbid problems – i.e., that perhaps they had inherited very high levels of genetic risk and this was making them more challenging to parent even before any disorder formally emerged. In any case, the headline message is that breaking the link between the correlation between genetic risks and the birth family environment can be a positive thing.

In the end, it is important to say that genes play apart in all developments but that we cannot really separate the interactions that occur between genes and our environment, or as commonly understood between nurture and nature.

Such distinctions are artificial that have an important impact on adoption because when a child is removed from a birth family with the highest genetic risk (e.g. both parents with a clear psychotic illness) they may take their initial genetic risks with them but the environmental risk of growing up in a family in which both parents are clearly psychotic is removed and new potentialities begin. So, the more able we are to help adoptive parents to parent a child in a way that meets their needs the more likely we are to be able to reduce any genetic risks even further.

Conversations around genetically heritable factors need to take place cautiously. To dismiss the risk of certain types of personality or mental health issue being carried forward into the children of these parents is naive and could be seen to be potentially dishonest - and it is likely that well-informed adopters will recognise that. On the other hand, to overstate the risks may be to unnecessarily worry parents when there is some evidence that taking children out of challenging parenting environments and placing them in the opportunity of a better environment can significantly reduce the genetic risks. But not to zero – the risk is never zero in any family. Of course, for some families, parenting children will be extremely difficult for a variety of reasons and that child may well end up with some for mental health problem that may or may not be related back to the problems and the parents. This will happen from time to time.

One of the other features to consider is that the diagnostic aspects of birth parents is not always terribly accurate. So to some extent we just will not accurately know the genetic risk profile of birth parents. Sometimes statements are made about birth parents in which diagnoses are attributed (especially with regard to learning disability or personality disorder) which may not have been formally diagnosed and as such may not be reliable indicators of genetic risk – and may overstate them. Conversely, many

birth parents may have manifest mental health disorders that remain un-diagnosed. This may occur for a variety of reasons including challenges in engaging with mental health services, and sometimes there is simply little known about a birth parent's mental health history. Essentially, we often do not have very good ideas about the genetic birth family risk factors. Hence, in many ways it is probably wise to have a conversation around the potential for genetic risks, the probability that such risks are likely to be attenuated by an improvement in the parenting environment and that for many disorders the empirical genetic risk is still possibly lower than parents might think. Where in any child there remains a risk of serious mental health problems and we cannot predict it accurately in any child, and especially not for an adopted child, and so that for parenting there must always be to some extent an act of faith

Hence, in summary we need to consider

- the potential genetic risks;
- the probability that such risks are likely to be attenuated by an improvement in the parenting environment;
- that for many disorders the empirical genetic risk is still possibly lower than parents might think; and
- that in any child there remains a risk of serious mental health problems and we cannot predict this accurately in any child, and especially not for an adopted child.

Matching

Adopting a child, particularly those from harder to place backgrounds, is always going to involve some degree of risk when thinking about the developmental opportunities. We need to recognise that, as parents and practitioners supporting families. The aim of this paper has been to try and ensure that the advice and guidance we give to prospective adopters is based on a clearer understanding of the evidence than simplistic approach of the damage done - be that damage to attachment processes, the developing brain or whatever other processes might be invoked. The impact of maltreatment on children is varied and variable and we need to bear in mind the individual child and their particular needs

An open mind is needed to think about the possible impact of risks for parents, considering what the child is like now, in all their diversity. But also being aware that placing harder to reach children may require an on-going relationship with re-assessment and rethinking at different times of their lives. For example, the potential genetic risks of some serious mental health disorders, may not become apparent until the teenage years at the earliest

These recommendations may particularly apply to sibling groups where we may need to think about whether the needs of different siblings are so different to each other that most families may struggle to meet all their needs in a single placement. Siblings may have shared similar maltreating homes and may have many genes in common but still have very different needs in the light of those experiences. A child who is a dandelion, may require different levels of support to adapt than one who is an orchid. But to get the parenting right for an orchid may mean investing far more time and energy, at the expense of the one who is doing okay – and in a way that becomes apparent and unfair to the dandelion more resilient presenting child. Alternatively, there may be two environmentally sensitive children, two orchids but different types, who require very different approaches to parenting, and that could stress any family system. But some potential permanency arrangements may be more able to cope than others, depending on support being available throughout the adoption journey.

Practice points in conclusion:

Multi professional support to the family must raise beyond deterministic ideas of impact and outcomes to a more complex landscape of varying resilience between children.

Open and honesty with adopters from the start so a realistic but not overly pessimistic appraisal leads to the benefits of nurturing and positive parenting impacting on life chances

Analysis of the strengths and supports required for each child at the point of the matching arrangements noting that this can change during the development cycle.

4. Professional Judgement, Decision Making and Action in Matching

What do we think matching *is* in child placement? For professionals this is a complex question and one of some significance given it consequences. From a child's perspective it is a hugely significant question as well given its long term, indeed lifelong consequences. Imagining what the child's thoughts and feelings about being matched with their prospective adopter/s is seriously challenging. And again there are similar questions about the perspective of prospective adopter/s - their hopes, ambitions, fears and the unknown. And we must not forget the birth parents, although maybe they are often forgotten despite the huge implications for them of their child being matched with prospective adopter/s.

As central as linking and matching is to adoption, there are important questions to be explored about this combination of process, action and decision-making. Above all those involved in the process need to explore and understand their own sense of its criteria for success, when it is working well and what good outcomes look like. It is likely that this will include:

1. Finding adopters who are willing and motivated to adopt a child/ren with their specific individual characteristics and circumstances. There is common perception and indeed experience that many if not most adopters are motivated to adopt children as young and as healthy as possible. This may change over the course of preparation as adopters become more familiar with the circumstances of children with adoption as their permanency plan but this original desire probably forms an important source of influence as the adoption journey progresses. The impact of this original image may continue to evolve as the reality of children with adoption as the plan comes to the fore – especially after approval of suitability to adopt.

2. Finding adopters for the harder to place children – older children, children in sibling groups, children with special health needs or disabled children and children from minority ethnic groups. Altruism may play its part as a motivating factor for these groups of children with the extra likely demands and need for a variety of resources when thinking about disabled children, children with special health needs or sibling groups. Children from minority ethnic groups may raise other questions – the capacity of the adopters to manage visible differences between themselves and the child and their capacity to actively address the evolution of the child's identity and their heritage over time.

3. Ensuring that adopters are identified and matched in a timely way with a particular emphasis on avoiding delay. Delay is quite the opposite of what a child who has had a profoundly uncertain life to date needs.

4. Ensuring that any proposed placement will settle and not disrupt. This means all those involved feeling confident within reason that the range of actual and potential placement issues have been fully identified, explored and resolved including access to support services.

5. Where the child's plan has been agreed by the court as adoption, ensuring that that plan does not have to be changed because a suitable adoption placement cannot found.

The issues set out above will be familiar to anybody involved in the adoption process. At their best they are child and adopter centred issues. They are not easy or straightforward to do well and they typically involve a considerable amount of work from those involved. But there is also another set of issues that emanate from the complex systemic context within which the adoption process proceeds. These include:

1. Managing the 'supply of children' – those with adoption as their permanency plan - against the demand for those children from those suitable to adopt. For many years the number of children needing an adoptive placement has been greater than the overall number of 'suitable adopters - an overall shortfall. This resulted in a number of proactive recruitment campaigns including National Adoption Week and other connected activities such as the re-working of the information, preparation and approval process including establishing a national information and advice service – First for Adoption. The impact of court judgments – Re B and Re B-S has dramatically reversed this with the number of children with adoption as their plan falling by around 50%. This has resulted in a reversal in the previously familiar shortfall of adopters. Linking and matching are inevitably affected as larger number of sometimes quite desperate adopters re-explore both their own aspirations and re-evaluate their presentation in order to make a positive impact on social workers in their selection from the long list.

2. The impact of any hierarchy of exploration of potential adopters – within the local authority's own pool of adopters, then within local Consortia, and finally more broadly (Farmer and Dance). This includes the agreed (and statutory) timetable for referral to the Adoption Register and the use of family finding services such as Adoption Link and Children Who Wait.

3. The impact of the inter-agency fee on the identification of adopters outside of the local authority. This issue has been subject to policy change in recent years – the equalization of the fee across all inter-agency placements and more recently the availability and continuation of that availability of DfE funding for children in specific sets of circumstances.

4. The internal process mechanisms in local authorities for identifying children with adoption as the plan and ensuring the early engagement of family finding teams and on-going monitoring of the effectiveness of the family process.

These systemic issues have continued to raise questions about possible barriers to timely and child centred linking and matching and they currently drive the policy developments in the Regionalisation of Adoption Agencies across England. At the same time there has been a further challenge to the practice of linking and matching centred on a note from Martin Narey, former chair of the Adoption Leadership Board (ref) and a second paper from the Behavioural Insights Team commissioned by the DfE

The Narey paper questions the evidence base for matching with a significant statement setting out a summary of his experience of social workers' views -

'Many of them believe passionately that matching is a precise science.'

The statutory guidance is then quoted and then challenged in supporting that view -

'Making a good match between a child and a prospective adopter is a highly skilled task.'

And then continues –

'In fact, there is scant evidence to support the view that practitioners can effectively discriminate between different prospective parents for any particular child.' And finally *'The process of matching is time consuming, expensive, desperately frustrating to adopters, and, most importantly, is to the disadvantage of children because of the delay it involves.'*

The consequence of this is directly identified in the decrease in timeliness – the time between the adoption decision and placement (although there is an error in the note's reported statistics).

The argument is supported by the research reviews of Quinton and Selwyn (see also Simmonds, 2014). These reviews identify known characteristics in children that can lead to serious challenges in the adoptive placement and the identifiable characteristics of adopters that mitigate these. However, reliably predicting these adopter and child characteristics in the assessments undertaken up to the point of placement and the making of the Adoption Order and then their impact on any individual family over time is very difficult. The conclusion from the research is summarized by Narey by paraphrasing Quinton – '

Successful adopters are simply likely to be committed, flexible, open communicators and willing to listen to advice.'

The way forward in addressing these issues is identified as being a combination of:

1. 'Adopter-led' matching
2. Adoption Activity Days
3. Foster carers adopting
4. Being less prescriptive

In conclusion the note says that

'The case for greater pragmatism in matching, for greater speed (since we know with certainty that delay harms a child waiting for adoption) and for routinely allowing adopters the initiative in arriving at matches is very strong.'

This statement reflects an earlier DfE statement:

We believe that a great deal more pragmatism in matching and a greater role for adopters in initiating matches would not endanger placements. That is not to argue that the suitability of a child for adoption can be established only by the adopters themselves. But we need to trust adopters more to start the process. (DfE, 2013). P34)

The Behavioural Insights Team paper has two loosely connected themes. The first outlines some well-known themes from literature on human judgment and decision making with a specific focus on bias and error. Seven well-known themes from the literature are identified with some suggested links to how they might play out in adoption linking and matching. The second part of the paper reports on interviews with 2 practitioners from each of 4 local authorities with a variety of roles within the adoption process. A list of familiar issues are identified from these interviews which outlines the dilemmas faced by practitioners and decision makers including Adoption Panels.

The overall message directly links to the Narey note:

1. the evidence is poor;
2. Certainty in predicting outcomes is not a realistic expectation from professional practice in adoption; and
3. Adoption policy and practice is subject to the same kinds of errors that appear in other professions – even those with a much more rigorous scientific and evidence base such as medicine.

The message to the sector from these two documents is to question and challenge existing practice on a case-by-case, an agency and sector wide basis. The objective

is to reduce delay and maximize the likelihood that children with adoption as their permanency plan are successfully placed. The risk in this challenge is in creating uncertainty in the profession, and maybe opposition by undermining what currently informs practice and indeed enables the majority of children to be placed. There are undoubtedly important questions to be explored at the heart of this challenge. Two significant studies of outcomes from adoption – the English Romanian Adoption Study (ref) and the British Chinese Adoption Study (ref) are important here where there was no explicit process of matching in the placement of children in both groups. Indeed in the majority of adoptions across the world – inter-country adoptions – matching is not a significant part of the process at all. Continuing to explore these issues and the argument as set out by Narey and the BIT team is the objective of the rest of this article.

Research Studies

There are few studies that directly explore the effectiveness of the linking and matching process. The Adoption Research Initiative commissioned by the Department of Children, Schools and Families in 2005 following the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 included a specific research project exploring linking and matching policy and practice as it was then.

A second study specifically focused on the placement of black and minority ethnic children (Selwyn). The first study[5] consisted of two parts – the first an online survey of policy and practice (Dance) of both local authority and voluntary adoption agencies in England. The second part of the study (Farmer, 2015) focused on 10 local authorities and 149 children in two groups – 82 children who had already been placed for adoption, and 67 who were followed in 'real time' from the point of the adoption recommendation through to 6 months following placement. Both samples included a high number of children who are typically considered to be harder to place. Extensive case file information was available to the researchers together with interviews with social workers and adoptive parents – 27 adopters at the point of the match.

In the 'real time' sample, 18 (27%) of the children had not been matched by the end of the study period. For 11 of these children, their plan had been changed to long-term foster care. For the remaining 7 children the search for adopter/s continued. It is important to note that for 8 of these children the researchers identified the lack of a proactive approach by social workers to family finding as being a key factor in suitable adopter/s not being identified – an issue of significant concern.

---

[5] The study precedes many of the issues associated and resulting from the Coalition Government's Adoption Reform programme.

For those children that had been placed, the researchers categorized each placement according to –

1. How adopter/s had responded to the parenting task and had addressed any difficulties in that task.
2. The impact on family members as a result of the placement.
3. Any difficulties for the child and adopter/s in the development of relationships within the family.

This categorization allowed the researchers to assess the stability and quality of the placement over the first 6 months. In terms of placement stability –

Positive and continuing	40%
Positive with some problems	27%
Significant problems	18%
Risk of disruption	5%
Disrupted	5%
Unknown	5%

It is important to note two issues with these figures. Firstly, this sample group of children had a high number of 'harder to place children'. Secondly, the first 6 months of an adoption placement are likely to be challenging with an expectation that it is likely to be seriously challenging given the enormity of the change for both the child and the adopter/s. While this may be and for many, likely to be balanced with enjoyment, fascination and delight, 6 months is a short period of time. In fact, in terms of quality of placement, the researchers identified 87% as being of positive benefit for the child and 8% adequate.

Another important theme of this study was evaluating the quality of the match at the time was made and this involved evaluating the extent to which there had been compromises in the identified characteristics of prospective adopter matches.

Seventy-three percent of the matches were considered to be 'good' matches and where compromises were made in order to identity a match, these were more common for the 'harder to place' group of children. When the quality of the match was set alongside the outcomes for the placement, 63% of the poor matches had resulted in

a disruption or significant instability in the placement to make a disruption possible. In the group of placements that were rated as 'good' or 'fair' this was so for only 5% of placements. The detail of the identified characteristics used in the search for and then the matching of prospective adopters was available from the file search. Some of the identified characteristics were always met in the sample – the requirement for the adopters to be a couple, agreeing to the plan for contact and maintaining relationships with the child's previous carers. It should be noted that these issues were identified for a minority of children – 42% in the case of couples and 38% for retaining relationships with previous carers. Contact, not surprisingly, was identified for a majority of children at 63%. It might be noted that the most significant requirement identified was in respect of geography and that requirement was met for 93% of matches. For the vexed issue of ethnicity, this was identified in respect of 46% of the children and addressed in 66% of the matches. But there was also a category in the study of religious needs for 28% of the children (met in 76% of matches) and language and cultural needs for 32% (met in 68% of matches). Apart from these issues there were a range of child health and psycho-social factors that were identified as needing to be addressed by the adopters – attachment in 41%, personality and temperament in 40%, behavioural, emotional and social in 38% and the child's previous adversities in 39%. Being placed with siblings was identified as important for 35% of children. It might be noted that practical, financial, housing and employment issues were not specifically identified in the list of issues and neither was the availability of local support services.

Overall the researchers assessed that the eventual placement made met the child's needs very well in 57% of the sample, fairly well in another 36% and with one major factor not being met in a further 7%. Where this was the case, the major unmet need was in relation to ethnicity, culture or religion. The compromise was necessary where balancing the child's overall range of needs means prioritising one against another given the availability of prospective adopters. It should also be noted that the needs/aspirations of prospective adopter/s also need to be assessed and play an important part in evaluating the match. This was evaluated to have been very well met in 64% of matches, with the high priority factors met in 28% and 8% where one compromise had been made. It must be noted that the researchers identified a number of matches where a significant compromise had been made without any positive balancing factors and that this had resulted in a serious set of issues developing in those families. They conclude that where compromises or priorities are made that the risks are fully identified and appropriate support services identified.

These figures suggest that overall, matching is both a necessary and for the majority of placements a successful process. If there are questions to be addressed, they are

about improvement in current practice but not in dismissing it. There are particular issues about poor practice – specifically the lack of early proactive family finding with the expertise to support this and where compromises are made in the match and placement, the identification of the risks and the availability of services to help address those risks.

What is required for high quality linking and matching and creating a family for life?

Linking and Matching is rooted in information and specifically information about the child and the prospective adopters. It also means acquiring that information, making sense of it, evaluating its significance and forming an overall and balanced picture of that information that forms itself into a coherent whole. This means bringing two primary sources of information together – that which focuses on the adopters and that which focuses on the child/ren. On this basis judgments are formed, decisions are enabled and placements made. In the longer term the hope and expectation is centred on creating a family life for the child and the adopter/s that will be lifelong with all many advantages that this brings. If only it were so straightforward.

Typically, parents are not normally matched with their children. They certainly get to make them and as a result genetic inheritance plays its part but the only thing parents can be sure of is that mostly, after about 9 months or so, the child will be born and for some there is no certainty in that. The rest is not exactly chance but the working out of a complex range of variables that interact with each other over time to create a multi-layered set of characteristics in the child, some of which are relatively stable and others that provide pathways to further development and outcomes. In understanding these pathways, it is more helpful to see development as placing the child on a continuum of development as they interact with their human and physical environment - drawing on its opportunities and resources and managing its limitations and stressors – parenting and family life, community, school and education. For example, sex and gender are often identified as individual, coherent and stable characteristics but this is one of the rather oversimplified pictures we have of human beings. We have come to understand that for each individual there is a continuum that moves well beyond a simple definition by genitals. Heterosexuality, homosexuality and bi-sexuality indicate one continuum and gender that recognises issues of trans-gender characteristics another. As many societies have given way to definitions of individuals based on powerful images of 'what should or must be' driven by the morality and beliefs of social groups within those societies, the right of individuals to explore and express their own subjective experience and beliefs have come to the fore. An individual's own sense of wanting and needing to exercise their right to think, feel, be and then directly live this out through their daily lives reflects

this continuum of characteristics including recognizing, accommodating and adjusting to a wide variety of strengths, aptitudes and challenges. This is not to underestimate the struggles that most individuals have in establishing coherence and meaning in their lives.

One of the most significant questions in all of this is the role of the parents. Parents have a wide range of hopes and expectations prior to the birth of a child – that the child is healthy and that the birth will go well but then a whole range of other possibilities – that they have certain physical characteristics, that they will excel at a particular sport or in music or art or that they will be happy. These may be specific or they may be general expectations; they may be strong parental ambitions or loosely formulated; they may lead to great satisfaction or significant disappointment. Imagining the actual experience of parenting may draw on the parents' own experiences and what friends as parents have been through or now days from social media. Sometimes this may result in a desire to be 'as good as X' or a determination to do 'much better than Y'. What we do know is that predicting actual experience and eventual outcomes from early hopes and aspirations is likely to give way to a high degree of error as the child and parenting becomes a reality. The child will play their own part in this evolving picture and the parents' adaptation another. The unexpected and the unplanned will also feature and lastly the availability of resources and opportunities. How any of these evolving sets of circumstances enables early expectations to be realized or early fears to be moderated is a challenging question and probably does not lend itself to a reliable answer.

Individual development is tightly embedded in experience and shaped by opportunity. The impact of the past on the present is significant and the capacity of individual family members and the family as a whole to respond to new demands, experiences and opportunities is essential. At the same time routine in daily life is important in creating a sense of stability and security and at its best, routine allows new experiences and problems to be incorporated into experience in a safe way. It is also important to note that the advantages of routine can be transformed into a source of frustration – the effort it takes, the boredom and the opposition. For small children routine is particularly important and parents spend much of the early months and years in trying to establish routines and helping the child to comply with them. Predictability of people, places, and time enables a child to develop a subjective and objective sense of security - a base from which they can negotiate new experiences, the unexpected and the challenging.

When an individual's need for predictability - a child or an adult - becomes elevated to express an attempt to over control or avoid their environment, then this may suggest emerging difficulties. Our capacity to predict the likelihood of events and control experience means both accepting and understanding that there are limitations. Where there is emerging information that suggests that we need to find a new solution to a familiar or unfamiliar problem – that we need to learn and adapt – then we draw on our cognitive and emotional skills to do so. Problem solving is key to human survival whether those problems are practical, emotional, relational or social. Nothing could be more true when becoming a parent – a new born baby is a complex mixture of physicality, emotion and experience and parents are required to quickly learn and adapt and under some pressure to do so to ensure the baby's survival, growth and development. There have been multiple studies of these processes and the contribution that the parents make as they interact with the child and the child as he or she interacts with the parents. The range of variables that might be taken into account are enormous and this includes among others, the physical and social circumstances of the parents – housing, income, social stability or their physical or mental health – disability, post natal depression or longer term mental health conditions. Then there are factors in the child – their temperament, physical health, capacity to adapt and make adjustments to parenting and the daily routines of feeding, hygiene and sleep. However, these might be described and set out in detail there is a very personal set of experiences for the parents in undertaking this journey however they might be described and categorized by research. Sroufe et.al. (pp52) provide a list of parenting tasks that succinctly summarises the above:

- Regulation of arousal
- Appropriately modulated stimulation
- Provision of a secure base and safe haven
- Appropriate guidance, limits and structure
- Maintenance of parent-child boundaries
- Socialisation of emotional expression and containment
- Scaffolding for problem solving
- Supporting mastery and achievement
- Supporting the child's contacts with a broader social world
- Accepting the child's growing independence

Exercise

Our perspectives on 'what counts' change over the generations but there are many aspects of parenting and family life that are subject to history, belief, culture and tradition whatever messages or guidance research might currently deliver.

1. How do your beliefs, culture, tradition and history impact on your understanding about parenting and the child in the early years?
2. Are there particular views or experiences you have had that have become particularly important to you when considering the matching of a child with prospective adopter/s?
3. Do you think it is possible to predict children's development over time?
4. What is your experience of managing the need to establish routine and predictability and then adapt and change as emerging information suggests?
5. How do you think the expectations of parents with born to children and the adjustments that they have to make differ from those of adoptive parents and the adjustments that they have to make? What explains those similarities and differences?

It might be expected that many of these issues have very great significance when it comes to adoption in both preparing adopters and in assessing their suitability to become adoptive parents. It might also be expected that identifying, with some degree of confidence, that in relation to specific child/ren, there is a degree of match between the needs of the child/ren and the adopter/s parenting capacity. But identifying what this might look like and having some predictive confidence that what is planned or expected is what will actually happen is a hugely challenging question. It is a question that needs to be addressed as the Dance and Farmer research demonstrates, but is a question that needs some deeper understanding.

The Place of Attachment

One of the most powerful and significant concepts to have made its mark on our understanding of the impact of parenting and child development in the early and subsequent years has been attachment. The concept of attachment highlights the importance of the relational world into which the baby is born with a focused emphasis on parental sensitivity to the child's physical and emotional needs expressed through the parents' commitment and delight (MARY Dozier, Grasso, Lindheim, & Lewis, 2007; Mary Dozier & Lindhiem, 2006).   Attachment behaviour can most reliably be observed through separation and reunion of the child from the parent following the pattern of relatedness established through the first 6 months of the child's life. Detailed observation of the child's response to separation and particularly the behaviour and responsiveness of the child in being comforted and reassured (or not) by their parent has resulted in 4 identifiable attachment patterns – autonomous-secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant and disorganized.

There a significant number of studies that have explored the transmission of attachment patterns from parent to child. The London Parent Project (Steele 1996) undertook an assessment of 100 first time expectant mothers and fathers attending

antenatal sessions. The sample was largely middle class, well-educated and white. The Adult Attachment Interview (George, 1985) was administered to all of the study participants during the final trimester of the pregnancy. The strange situation procedure was then used to assess the attachment classification of the child with the mother when the child was 12 months and with the father 6 months later. This first phase was followed up through three subsequent phases - early childhood, middle/late childhood and finally mid adolescence (16 years). The amount of material collected and then subject to analysis is substantial. The researchers identify one outstanding feature from their studies – the Adult Attachment Interview as 'a uniquely valid measure of competence in the parenting role'. What the AAI identifies and especially in relation to the autonomous secure classification is the importance of the parent '*being able to reflect in a coherent manner* upon childhood experiences of being upset, ill, separated from caregivers, rejected, and possibly having suffered loss or abuse. The capacity to reflect on these experiences '*contributes to a positive emotional state.'* (pp.146). The AAI identifies the individual mother and father's capacity to openly reflect in a coherent way on emotion and experience that involves both the positive and the distressing and provides strategies for directly resolving these without recourse to avoidance, contempt, turning away or escalation. This is true both for the individual in terms of what happens inside of themselves – their internal method of emotional regulation when there is conflicting or stressful issues - or in their relationships with others.

What is particularly important in the AAI identifying these patterns is the subsequent impact of the child's internal and relational models for emotional regulation in the management of conflict or stress. For instance, in exploring the capacity for understanding mixed emotions in a cartoon-based exercise for this group of children at 6 years of age, 40% demonstrated a moderate to high score. What is notable is that this was particularly so for those whose mothers had been classified as autonomous-secure prior to birth and as securely attached at 12 months. A similar conclusion was drawn when the children were assessed at age 11 (Steele and Steele 2004). Here the children were asked questions about what they liked and disliked about themselves, their relationships with their parents and with any brothers or sisters or friends (Steele and Steele 2004b). The issue that stood out in assessing the young person's overall coherence in giving their perspective on these issues was the truthfulness and credibility in the mother's pre-birth AAI. Father's AAI's were also seen to have a specific influence on boys. They conclude 'Children need to learn (from mothers perhaps) to appreciate the intentions of others and negotiate inner emotional conflicts while also learning (from fathers perhaps) how to achieve and maintain conventionally appropriate behaviour that enables one to feel successful in negotiating interactions with siblings, peers, and others. (pp.155)

The study has been critically important in identifying the long-term impact of attachment representations over the life course. Similar issues have been raised through other attachment informed longitudinal studies (Grossmann, Grossmann, & Waters, 2005). But as has been set out above, attachment security (or lack of it) is not the only significant influence on development over the life course. The Minnesota Longitudinal Study (Sroufe, 2005) has tracked the development of a group of 180 children born to a original group of 267 mothers first identified in the third trimester of their pregnancy. The circumstance of these families was one of 'poverty'. These children have been frequently assessed through to their 30's with assessments of their social, behavioural and cognitive development through extensive and detailed engagement with them as children/adolescents and adults and their families. With such a comprehensive study over such an extended period of time, the conclusions are, not surprisingly, complex and multi-faceted.   Two quotes are helpful '…in the light of the complexity of development and the myriad of influences on it, it is to be expected that attachment history would not predict some important social outcomes at all well, nor would it uniquely predict more than a few outcomes of interest. Yet this in no way diminishes the importance of early attachment experiences.' (Page 53).

Sroufe continues 'the idea that strong prediction of outcomes comes when uses the attachment history in concert with other measures shows up in all areas of our work. Dramatic examples arise when we employ broadband competence constructs. One example is our measure of global competence at age 19 years. Following detailed coding of a lengthy interview covering all aspects of functioning, overall ratings were made of the degree to which the individual was functioning well with regard to the domains of (1) School/work; (2) family, peer, and romantic relationships; and (3) self-direction/ personal responsibility. Attachment security in infancy was significantly related to this distal outcome, but it accounted for only 5% of the variance. But when we also use as predictors other aspects of the early care and home environment quality, competence through the elementary school years, and parent-child support at the transition to adolescence, the variance accounted for approached 50%.' Attachment as a concept is undoubtedly important as a key factor in a child's development over time but its value comes from setting it within and combining it with a wider range of influences. When it comes to adoption, the capacity of adopters in respect of their own attachment representation has established itself as important in practice, at least in principle. The key question given that many children will have already formed their own internal working models in the context of adversity is the impact this may have on the adoptive parents and the adjustment that both the child/ren and the adopter/s need to make in establishing a new pathway for development. There is the related question of how to explore this prior to the placement being made – in other words – 'What might this mean in terms of matching?'

A study (Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, Hillman, & Henderson, 2003) of the placement of two groups of children for adoption sets out the issues very clearly. One group consisted of children with a mean age at placement of 6 years and 1 month, placed either singly (10), or in sibling groups (25). They had experienced significant and severe adversity – neglect, abuse and multiple moves between carers before being placed for adoption. They were placed with 25 mothers (fathers have been a separate part of the study). The second group consisted of 31 children who were all placed under 12 months with a mean of 3.73 months. The AAI was administered to the adoptive mothers with 31 being rated as autonomous secure, 10 insecure dismissing and 2 insecure-preoccupied. Story stem completion tests were also undertaken on the children with the first group having been in placement on an average of 4.2 months at the time of the assessment and the second group 5 years 9 months. The assessment was then undertaken again one year and then two years later. The story stem completion test enables an assessment of the quality of the child's direct engagement with the story and any avoidance of the themes and conflicts that the story might suggest or arouse in the child. It also allows a perspective to be taken on any degree of disorganization and aggression within the narrative. Analysis of the data shows a marked difference between the late placed children and those placed within the first year. The late placed children were more likely to try to avoid the story especially where it posed emotionally conflicting themes, higher degrees of catastrophic fantasy and extreme aggression. But it was also notable that at the two subsequent follow-ups, these notable differences in the late placed children had significantly decreased and by the third assessment, there were no significant differences. When exploring the children's representations of parental figures in the story – did the child see them as being supportive or helpful - there were again significant differences at the first assessment between the late and early placed groups. But by the time of the second assessment, the late placed group again positively changed in seeing parental figures as being helpful in the narrative although there continued to be themes of adults being aggressive or rejecting. There is an important conclusion to this – 'It appears that aspects of new and more positive representations develop but they do not automatically transform the already established representations.' Finally, 'aspects of these representations may sometimes remain as enduring vulnerabilities, despite the efforts of the new families; while in other ways children may show remarkable developmental recovery.'

These findings from this important study have become familiar themes in family placement and adoption in particular. The impact of the past on the present cannot be dismissed – it lives on in the child's mind and in their relationships in ways that contribute to their vulnerabilities both in the present and in the future. But children also adapt to new relationships and circumstances and opportunities – it is what we hope and expect from placing them. The longer the child experiences adverse

circumstances, the more likely that challenge is going to be. The earlier the child is removed from adverse circumstances and placed with sensitive, resilient and mind minded loving parent/s, the easier most children will find to make use of those new relational opportunities. From this research and many other research findings much of this is predictable but not in any simplistic form. The Minnesota Longitudinal study, (Sroufe, 2005) identifies the course of attachment in the context of other factors where attachment plays its part but is linked to other related factors such as 'peer competence' in middle childhood, 'friendship security' in the teenage years and romantic relationships in the early 20's. In two papers which explores the nature of romantic relationships in the Minnesota sample, Simpson (Jeffry A. Simpson, Collins, & Salvatore, 2011; J. A. Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007) illustrates this by further exploring conflict resolution in romantic relationships.   Simpson argues that knowing when to appropriately disengage from conflict in intimate relationships should protect the individual and the relationship from the dangers of escalating levels of conflict. Disengagement from such conflict is likely in turn to be linked to the individual's capacity to appropriately regulate their or their partner's emotions. This is likely to be further linked to an individual's internal models of 'self' in relationships (Bowlby, 1980).   And lastly there might be the influence of one partner on the other partner in buffering existing vulnerabilities. In is not surprising that one of the conclusions from a study by Laub (2009) of men to age 70 who early in life had established a criminal career was that those that escaped a life of crime had combined military service with a relationship with what was termed 'a good woman' - a significant and stabilizing alternative influence on the man's established set off 'life style choices'.

These combined influences must also be true in adoption placements and they strongly suggest that a multi-factorial set on influences must be taken into account with attachment playing its significant and connected part. But predicting in retrospect is not the same as predicting in prospect – using what we know from research evidence to predict and/or control the future is problematic. At the same time, we must use what we do know in order to make plans and decisions about the future – if we didn't all would be left to chance. And given that highly vulnerable children are at the centre of family placement, chance is not an explicitly acceptable strategy. This is why 'matching' plays such an important part in family placement – it cannot be left to the 'first come, first served' taxi rank of placement. But how do we use what we have come to reliably know to make decisions that are complex in their delivery and huge in their impact.

The Cognitive Continuum

Core to matching is the exercise of judgement in deciding between various options as they present themselves through the process. In the end this results in making a choice between various alternatives - are these adopter/s a better choice for this particular child or children than another? If they are the only adopter/s, is this the right placement for the child/ren? What is the evidence for this and how much detail do we need to explore to be confident that the right choice and decision is being made? One other important aspect of judgement in matching is that it is concerned with the events that will happen in the future – what the outcomes are expected to be for the child and the adopter/s as a result of the judgement and decision making process. Predicting the future is complex when this process is framed by professional values, knowledge and skills, and is expected to operate at a particular level of competence, accuracy and predictive power. The role of intuition – our sense of what is right – is an uncomfortable area in professional practice because it suggests an element of personal feeling about the judgement being exercised and the decision being made. The term 'professional decision' strongly suggests that it will be evidence-based or at least evidence informed and that the decision can be justified both in the present and retrospectively by identifying what the evidence was and how it was used to make that decision. This suggests a high degree of accuracy in identifying the relevance of any information in relation to the decision or choice being made and the minimisation of any potential error. There are many areas of human activity which need to draw on a high level of accuracy in exercising judgement and decision-making – driving a car or flying a plane; diagnosing a health condition or and in consequence, prescribing a drug or surgery. This is also true of daily activities such as getting to work on time or preparing an evening meal or regulating the temperature in the house. Having the right information, combining it together in a credible way and acting upon it means exercising judgement, making a decision-making and taking action. When making a judgement and decision to place a child with adopters, we would expect the same high degree of accuracy and objectivity but whether this is equivalent to that of a pilot or surgeon or indeed just the routine of ensuring that we get to work on time is a challenging question.

The one factor that plays a very significant part in judgement and decision-making is that of uncertainty and connected to that of human fallibility. However rigorous we are in establishing an evidence base and designing a process for utilising that evidence, there are always degrees of uncertainty. For the pilot there is the factor of weather, crowding at airports or system failure in the aircraft itself. But each of these is designed into the overall operation of the system so that while passengers may become frustrated at delays and indeed the reason for those delays, in terms of the operation of the system as a whole driven primarily by safety, this can be justified. There are related matters in the field of health and medicine where uncertainty also

plays a part. Assessment and diagnosis may have a high degree of accuracy and treatment protocols provide a pathway for effective interventions. At the same time, there are degrees of certainty in the way that any pathway determines the specific outcomes for a specific patient. There are degrees of uncertainty for most diagnostic and treatment options and they should be built-in to both the pathway plan and the information that the health professional provides to the patient. This may cause frustration or anxiety for the patient but it is a necessary reflection of the fallibility of both the evidence and the decision-making and judgement processes that operate at the centre of medical practice.

The professional responsibilities involved in matching must be considered within the context of likely uncertainty and significant stress given the life changing impact of the decision. As much information is known and time is spent on linking and matching, there is likely to be areas of incomplete knowledge that impact on the confidence of the decision and the plan. There are limits to the availability of probabilistic data on any one factor let alone the combination of factors that enables a 100%, 75% or 50% degree of certainty that this will be a 'successful match' and even more so when it comes to predicting the likely developmental pathway for the child – recovery from abuse or neglect, the adjustment to the adopters or the quality of their relationship with adoptive parent/s over time or the child's educational outcomes. Matching takes place in a complex environment where multiple features are being addressed and have to be weighed at different levels – is this factor more important than that factor – and over time – if this happens now, what happens in 6 months or 5 years' time?

The development of the Cognitive Continuum has been one way of trying to explore the nature of these issues. The model identifies professional judgment and decision making as comprising of two dimensions – a horizontal axis expressing the degrees to which any judgment is dependent on the use of intuition. The second dimension of the cognitive continuum is the vertical axis that identifies the degree to which any task can be or is subject to being structured. In combining these two axes there is then a grid that combines the two dimensions as set out below.

Intuitive judgement plays a significant part in human decision-making but as noted above professionals are expected to base their judgement and decision-making on a process that is at least evidence informed and to a significant degree, rigorously applied. Evidence requires analysis and by its very nature requires a high degree of conscious control and the application of a methodology that requires time to administer that methodology. The full and proper use of the method determines the

outcome. Intuition on the other hand is a 'weighted average strategy' that suggests low levels of cognitive control and relatively instantaneous decision making. But that is not to underestimate the significance of that process – ask a footballer how they calculated the force of their kick and the trajectory of the ball as they made a shot at goal and they are likely to look astonished at the question. Even the most sophisticated computer programme with algorithms driven by the laws of physics is unlikely to process that information in the way that the footballer does. If a football coach were to say 'Stop, reflect, analyse before shooting, a goal will never be scored. For the footballer, accuracy clearly plays a part but so does error – not every shot on goal will be successful. One superbly struck ball on target is unlikely to be helpful in establishing a professional career because that is more likely to be the result of luck rather than judgement. Only when the error rate is reduced in the context of multiple shots at goal is the player likely to be signed up as a team player at whatever level of the sport that they aspire to.

The part that intuition and/or analysis plays in any judgement is much more about understanding the relevance of the approach taken for the task at hand and not that either intuition or analysis is superior. In fact, the notion of quasi-rationality – what we might typically think of as common sense - indicates an approach where the analysis of known relevant factors is combined with an intuitive 'feel' for what the 'right thing' is to do. This then suggests an important degree of adaptability to the issues being considered and decided upon. But when it comes to analysing common sense, Hammond states 'Quasi-rationality has many advantages, which may be one of the reasons that the notion … has persisted and been valued by the layperson for so long, despite the fact that virtually no one has convincingly described it' (Hammond, 1996, Human Judgement and Social Policy)

In matching, the issues of combining analysis with intuition and the place of quasi-rationality could not be more important but describing it is another matter. We know for instance that the attachment status of parents generally and of adopters in particular are predictive of the attachment status of their children and that includes recovery for children who are assessed before placement as insecure or disorganized. We also know from meta-analytic studies (Juffer, van IJzendorn, 2007) that developmental catch up is identifiable across all domains of development – physical, social and emotional, cognitive, self-esteem and identity. The analysis concludes 'Adoption is a successful intervention that leads to remarkable catch-up in all domains of child development…Adoption documents the astonishing plasticity of human development in the face of serious adversity and subsequent drastic change in child rearing circumstances.' This is a powerful statement with a clear emphasis on placement in an adoptive family as *the* intervention in a child's life that brings about

recovery. The attachment status of the parent/s is one part but as the Minnesota study (Sroufe, 2005) identifies, other factors combine with the process of attachment to create pathways for children's subsequent development. There are also a wide range of other conceptual frameworks that seek to influence our approach to parenting – setting boundaries, help with problem solving, support in making friendships, providing opportunities to learn, providing advice and guidance. Some of this can be categorised into parenting styles – authoritative, authoritarian, passive and uninvolved (Baumrind) and research has attempted to identify the impact of these styles on child outcomes – with some success. But whatever success such studies may have had, they always rely on correlational analysis. And that indicates the confidence we might have or not have in the distribution of single features and then their combined effect.

So this is the challenge in linking and matching. It is based on predictive judgement and decision-making – that we believe on the basis of the information we have that this child in these circumstances and these adopter/s in their circumstances will form a family life together that will endure and be life-long. There will be issues that are positive in indicating that this will be so and there are probably issues that are negative in indicating that this is so. But on balance, the positives outweigh the negatives. There are a wide range issues that will influence this – the urgency in finding a placement and placing the child – timescales and scorecard issues. The anxiety that a placement may never be found so a compromise may be necessary or even urgent. A fear that something may have been missed – do we really know the child and what may determine their development, have the adopter/s really understood what the long term consequence are of abuse and neglect? Do the adopters fear if they do not express/pursue an interest in this child, there may never be another? Do we as an agency responsible for the child really want to explore the use of adopters from across the Consortia or from an Independent Adoption Agency or elsewhere when it costs money, is resource intensive and surrounded by uncertainty? And how is any of this likely to work out in 6 weeks, 6 months and 6 years' time? And if this my view, how is it likely to be seen and experienced by others – my manager, the Agency Advisor, the Adoption Panel, the adopters, child or birth parent/s? Will they agree, disagree, will there be criticism or indeed conflict?

All of this suggests effective and responsible judgement and decision-making in linking and matching is firmly located in quasi-rationality – we do what we can to make best sense of what experience tells us in combination with making best sense of the information that is available to us at the time and whatever frameworks that support us in facilitating that process. BUT a critical element that is not usually identified in this is the relational component – how we manage our professional

responsibilities in the context of heightened emotion where anxiety and uncertainty is likely to inform how we feel about our responsibilities for the proposed link and match balanced alongside feelings and beliefs such as hope, excitement, relief about the possibilities and the potential of the proposed link and match for the child and the prospective adopter/s. These feelings are shared across a whole range of people – professional, adopters and the child who will have their own individual issues, preoccupations and concerns. These work themselves out in the relationships that people have with one another in the context of their roles – professional or personal. While the hope must be that these relationships are based on trust and a strong sense of cooperation, in any decision making process where significant issues are at stake and there is considerable emotional investment in those decisions, strong feelings are likely to influence those relationships and trust and cooperation may suffer as a result.

The Dynamics of Linking and Matching

The relational perspective strongly suggests that exploring and understanding the dynamics of linking and matching is important. However, this has not been common in the literature or in practice if it has happened at all. This is surprising as attachment has come to be seen as such an important concept in family placement and as a concept it is primarily relational. Establishing a secure relational base, which fundamentally allows the child or adult to develop a strong sense of their own 'self' and in turn to explore their environment and learn and adapt along the way, could not be more important. This could not be a more important as a descriptor for the process of linking and matching but as a part of this embedding the role of social workers and other professionals as a key component. Of course attachment is more usually confined to the intimacy of personal family or romantic relationships but a deeper exploration of the dynamics of attachment demonstrates the potential for links to other processes and that comes through the more recent links that have been made between attachment and mentalisation.

Attachment and Mentalisation.

The workings of the human mind are complex and have been subject to much discussion, debate and controversy. Attachment theory has been hugely influential in identifying the sources of development of key aspects of the mind – an individual's capacity to understand their own mind and the minds of others through the intimacy of experience with primary caregivers. Attachment revolves around the secure base (or lack of it) created in the mind of the child and significantly determined in and by the mind of the caregiver manifested through physical, emotional and social interaction between both. The mind of the child is ripe for engagement from day 1 and open to influence, learning and increasing stability as patterns become

established through repeated interaction. There have been many developments in our understanding of attachment including explorations and findings from neuroscience but it is important in making sense of what these new developments are telling us that we do not lose sight of the continuing challenge of making sense of either our own or other people's minds. Mentalisation (Peter Fonagy, Bateman, & Bateman, 2011; P Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, & Higgit, 1991)has developed into articulating these issues with a focus on the role of imaginative mental activity about other people's minds or one's own. At its heart this means the ways in which we perceiving and interpret our own and the behaviour of others in terms of intentional mental states.

We like to think that we understand the workings of our own mind and can exercise control over what it does for us – but that means making sense of what we think, what we feel and what we do. We probably accept that this is a bit hit or miss – that we get it right most of the time and make errors the rest. Some of these errors may cause a short term or temporary problem and sometimes these errors of judgement and decision-making may create more serious problems. Our mind may struggle to identify causes and then correct them, it may identify the cause of the problem in the minds or actions of others, it may take a view that 'life has handed out a hard deal and this recent event only confirms that. This may become a source of depression or may create a bad 'mood' that evaporates after a 'glass of wine' or listening to a piece of lively music. What is familiar in all of this is the struggle we have to make sense of our own minds and the minds of others and that it is important that we have learnt to manage these issues in the course of our development, especially with the early years as a foundation. Roberts links both attachment and mentalisation when he says:

> Secure attachment is marked by coherent stories that convince and hang together, where detail and overall plot are congruent, and where the teller is not so detached that affect is absent, is not dissociated from the content of the story, nor is so overwhelmed that feelings flow formlessly into every crevice of the dialogue. Insecure attachment, by contrast, is characterised either by stories that are over-elaborated and enmeshed… or by dismissive, poorly fleshed-out accounts. (Page 58)

This framing of attachment as a 'story' is important and is reflected in other approaches to the child's developments over time – and indeed through their life course. Resilience is a complimentary concept but again it is important that it is framed as a process and as interactive.

Resilience is… a capacity that develops over time in the context of person-environment interactions. Factors related to resilience in our study are examined in terms of this transactional process. From our studies, we have found emotionally responsive caregiving to mediate the effects of high-risk environments and to promote positive change for children who have experienced poverty, family stress, and maltreatment. (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993)

It would be unusual to think of the process of linking and matching as a narrative that tells a story but that is exactly what it is. The story is shaped by two themes – finding a child from the adopter's point of view and finding parent/s and a family from the child's of view. There are other lines to the story that play an important part although they have may play a subsidiary part as the story unfolds – that of the birth parents for instance. The part that professionals play is key. But from a professional perspective, skills, knowledge and experience probably shape that perspective rather than the thoughts and feelings that evolve in the unfolding of a narrative. The professional's role is played out formally at one level – responsibility, decision making and delivery - but significantly influenced and shaped by thoughts and feelings – particularly in how they are represented in what is communicated and then interpreted in the minds of others who have a role in the unfolding narrative of matching.

'What does the social worker think about our commitment/wish to adopt this child? Are they convinced about what we have to offer? Have we constructed a case for ourselves based on what they are looking for? But - Do we actually know what we have to offer? Do we really 'know' this child?
(adopter/s)

Do the adopter/s really understand the significance of the child's history and its impact on their current development and how it might influence their settling in? But at the same time - Do I really understand this?
(social worker)

I want my foster carer mummy and daddy to be my mummy and daddy! Don't they want me? What have I done wrong?

Who are these strangers?
(child)

Trying to understand what is in one's own mind and in the minds of others and what the significance of this might be in making plans and decisions is a challenge from everybody's perspective. We might ask of ourselves:

> *'Are my current thoughts about this situation transitory or do they have substance?'* *Maybe only time will tell!*

> *'Are other people's thoughts about this situation transitory or do they have substance?'* *Will they change their minds when they really understand what this about?*

> *'Have I been properly understood what I have been told and what I experience and do I properly understand what others think and feel about all of this?'*

Paying attention to and thinking and reflecting on these questions are really important as a part of negotiating the human world – the world of minds and the world of relationships. In so doing, this raises the importance and necessity that learning and adaptation play in solving complex human problems – how things change and develop over time influenced by both the past, what we experience in the present and hope for the future. These questions may in themselves raise anxiety and uncertainty as they may be the opposite of what we feel we need in difficult circumstances - security and confidence in what we know and feel.   And this may be particularly so when so much is at stake in matching in adoption. This is directly reflected in the following quote from a study on the impact of attachment on later development and outcomes.

'Individuals actively participate in processes of constructing experience congruent with their relationship history by interpreting and selecting experiences and behaving in ways that are consistent with earlier experience (Carlson & Egeland, 2004)

If we also include a particularly important extract from the earlier quote – the need for *'emotionally responsive caregiving to mediate the effects of high-risk environments' (Carlson & Egeland, 2004)* and identify matching as a high risk environment, then this creates the need to build a deeper understanding of the process – 'emotionally responsive caregiving' that might drive it. Matching is not a one enough event or decision but one step in the evolution of a connected pathway of events where the past influences the present but the present is the outcome of the influence of learning and adaptation integrated within that earlier experience. Emotional responsiveness is key for all those involved and the process of matching needs to have that at its heart. And that includes being responsive to uncertainty, anxiety and upset. This suggests an openness of mind and a direct engagement built

with a trusting and flexible and established relationship. And this needs to be a part of the placement over time – matching is a process not an event and a process that extends prior to placement, through the authorisation to place and then introductions, moving and settling in and all that follows in years to come. It is the evolution of a set of factors where the early years play their part in shaping what is to come but where subsequent events provide opportunity to re-direct early experience for the better. The lessons have become well-articulated in research on development over time and those messages are key to best practice in this longer term, psychologically orientated perspective on what matching is.

Summary and Conclusions

This is all a significant challenge for a sector under pressure. Adding mentalisation, relationships and process to something that is often thought of as identifying a realistic and evidence informed agreement and authorised decision to enable the next part of the process to start. It may even seem to be one step too far. At the same time, there is now wide spread recognition of the significance of attachment, of the need for developmental recovery for the child, of the influence of the past on the present and of the inter-personal, relational perspective in understanding the essence of being human. In social work it reinforces a long standing perspective on the essence of practice - what Carl Rogers (1962) called 'person centred therapy' and (Carkhuff & Truax, 1966; Truax & Carkhuff, 2007) specify as genuineness, accurate empathy, and non-possessive warmth. Our current understanding of these issues through concepts like mentalisation have not made these historical issues irrelevant but have added depth and detail. And it is not as if discussion and an exchange of perspectives over time, reflection and learning is unfamiliar in adoption and family placement. But creating a 'safe space' where this can happen, built on relationships that have embedded within them an acknowledgement of the challenge in the meeting of minds where uncertainty, fear and anxiety play their part alongside hope, expectation and a belief in a better future for the child.

This reinforces the importance of supervision and consultation - in pairs and small groups, informed by the principles by reflective practice and learning enhanced by our understanding of the nature of relationships and particularly the qualities that have become the focus of mentalisation. It also raises the importance of Adoption Panels and their place in openly exploring and reflecting on the issues and evidence when recommending a match.

It must be remembered that the sector has been successful in placing the greater majority of children who have adoption as the plan. Delay has been reduced and

disruption rates are low. The children the sector finds it most difficult to place have long been recognised as difficult to place – older children, sibling groups, children from black and minority backgrounds and children with complex health needs and those who are disabled. There is an openness and innovation in linking and matching with Adoption Activity Days, Adoption Link and piloting adopter access to the Adoption Register. Early permanence provides another route. Developmental recovery for the child across a wide range of factors has been identified in many outcome studies. The huge responsibilities and implications of linking and matching continue. Creating a family for life for vulnerable children is one of the significant responsibilities that professionals and the State can undertake. We need those processes to be informed by the realities of what this is – a mixture of hope and expectation, love and commitment, uncertainty, anxiety and fear. And in addition the primary issues of separation, loss and grief. These drive the process from the child's perspective, the adopter/s and the all other people that play a part –personally and professionally. The immediacy of this is another part as well as the necessity of taking a long term perspective in the context of learning and adaptation. None of this is easy but it reflects the essence of what it means to be human.

5. References

Boyce, W.T., & Ellis, B.J. (2005). Biological sensitivity to context: I. An evolutionary-developmental theory of the origins and functions of stress reactivity. Development & Psychopathology, 17, 271–301.

Bowlby, J. (1980). Attachment and loss. London: Hogarth Press : Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Carkhuff, R. R., & Truax, C. B. (1966). Toward explaining success and failure in interpersonal learning experiences. Personnel & Guidance Journal, 44(7).

Carlson, E. A., & Egeland, B. (2004). The construction of experience: A longitudinal study of representation and behavior. Child development, 75(1), 66-83.

DfE (2013) Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes

Dozier, M., Grasso, D., Lindheim, O., & Lewis, E. (2007). The role of caregiver commitment in foster care. Attachment theory in clinical work with children: Bridging the gap between research and practice, 90-108.

Dozier, M., & Lindhiem, O. (2006). This Is My Child: Differences Among Foster Parents in Commitment to Their Young Children. Child Maltreatment, 11(4), 338-345. doi:10.1177/1077559506291263

Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Sroufe, A. (1993). Resilience as process. Development and Psychopathology, 5(04), 517-528. doi:doi:10.1017/S0954579400006131

Fonagy, P., Bateman, A., & Bateman, A. (2011). The widening scope of mentalizing: A discussion. Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 84(1), 98-110.

Fonagy, P., Steele, M., Steele, H., Moran, G., & Higgit, A. (1991). The Capacity for Understanding Mental States: the reflective self in parent and child and its significance for security in attachment. Infant Mental Health Journal, 12(3).

Grossmann, K. E., Grossmann, K., & Waters, E. (2005). Attachment from infancy to adulthood : the major longitudinal studies. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2009). Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70: Harvard University Press.

Rogers, C. (1962). On becoming a person : a therapist's view of psychotherapy: Constable.

Simpson, J. A., Collins, W. A., & Salvatore, J. E. (2011). The Impact of Early Interpersonal Experience on Adult Romantic Relationship Functioning. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 20(6), 355-359. doi:10.1177/0963721411418468

Simpson, J. A., Collins, W. A., Tran, S., & Haydon, K. C. (2007). Attachment and the experience and expression of emotions in romantic relationships: a developmental perspective. J Pers Soc Psychol, 92(2), 355-367. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.92.2.355

Sroufe, L. A. (2005). The development of the person : the Minnesota study of risk and adaptation from birth to adulthood. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Steele, M., Hodges, J., Kaniuk, J., Hillman, S., & Henderson, K. (2003). Attachment representations and adoption: Associations between maternal states of mind

and emotion narratives in previously maltreated children. Journal of Child Psychotherapy, 29(2), 187-205.

Truax, C. B., & Carkhuff, R. (2007). Toward effective counseling and psychotherapy: Training and practice: Transaction Publishers

Uher R. Health notes: The genetics of mental illness: a guide for parents and adoption professionals, Adoption & Fostering 34 (3)

Woolgar, M. (2013) The practical implications of the emerging findings in the neurobiology of maltreatment for looked after and adopted children: recognising the diversity of outcomes. Adoption & Fostering, 37 (3) pp.237–252.