

BARRIERS TO ADOPTION

PACT Research: Barriers to Adoption Report - Executive Summary

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Introduction

This research was undertaken in light of government and media focus on adoption. The survey examined the experiences and perceptions of a range of people who had reason to consider adoption.

A total of 260 responses were collected via online questionnaire and these were followed up with 7 in-depth telephone interviews. The research took place between March and May 2012.

Key Findings

Timescales

Almost one in three (31%) respondents think (wrongly) that the adoption process takes a long time. This they believe is a significant barrier to becoming an adoptive parent. How long it takes is a piece of information that is sought by all prospective adopters in their initial investigations yet most respondents were misinformed about the timescales. On average, participants in the survey anticipated that it would take 19 months to approval stage, and an additional 16 months to placement. Target timescales need to be clearly and convincingly communicated to prospective adopters for example by using real-life examples of case studies to back up the figures.

The Approval Process

Prospective adopters fear that the assessment process will be 'invasive', 'long winded' or 'arduous'. The nature of the questions were not understood and many worried that they would 'fail', or be 'judged' by social services. Those who have successfully completed the process were often surprised that the process had actually been far easier and straightforward than they anticipated at the outset. Prospective adopters want more soft information and from the perspective of someone they can relate to but who is further along the adoption journey such as reaching approval or placement stage. The research suggests that prospective adopters with concerns and those hesitating to come forward can be reassured if their anxieties are acknowledged and their worries are found to be common and surmountable.

The social worker

The role and remit of the social worker is not well understood by many prospective adopters. More than one in two respondents did not understand the social workers role in the matching process and perhaps as a result, were unable to understand or appreciate why social workers need to probe so deeply into the lives of the prospective adopter. Those who were more positive about the social workers role and responsibility had felt that the more the social worker understood them as a family/individual, the

better the match with a child was/ would be. Communicating the role of the social worker and highlighting their dual responsibility of supporting the family/individual and finding them the 'right' child will help to justify why the process has to be in-depth.

The reluctant partner

For one in three prospective adopters, one partner was at least initially, keener to adopt a child than the other. The survey found that approximately half of those who abandoned the idea to adopt, or who were still at the stage of considering adoption, identified that their partner was less keen. Usually adoption will not take place unless both partners are fully committed, and where this is not the case the idea will be abandoned. However, understanding why one partner is reluctant, and providing information that might allay anxieties could increase the potential pool of adopters. Invariably it was the male partner that was less keen than the female and issues around bonding seemed to be a particular theme. Again, communication is the key. Providing some accessible information about attachment theory and how fathers bond with their adopted children, alongside real-life examples could overcome these worries.

Information Needs

Prospective adopters are not especially well informed about adoption. They seek a lot of information at the start of the process, and they are looking for information beyond the facts. They want information that is relevant to them, that is accessible and that is convincing. A fact sheet is useful but needs to be backed up by narrative accounts – for example, case studies or information from different sources.

Prospective adopters want information to dispel some of the myths about adoption such as:

- who can adopt,
- the age of adopters,
- the types of children that are available,
- adoption timescales
- the role of the social workers,
- why the process is so in-depth,
- what the impact is likely to be on birth children,
- issues surrounding bonding and future contact with birth parents

The depth of information required will be different for different people, but providing leaflets, information packs, a useful website list, books that can be lent out, will aid prospective adopters in their information quests and ensure that misconceptions are removed early on.

Adoptive Children

Many potential adopters were concerned and unsure about the children available for adoption. Many adopters identified anxieties regarding the impact that early trauma has on children. They feared that negative behaviours would be exhibited by the child and worried about whether they would be able to cope as parents in the short and long term. They had concerns about unknowns in the longer term, whether they would be able to bond with such a child and around how the child would fit into their family.

Around a quarter of respondents expected adopted children to have severe behavioural difficulties and approximately one in three respondents were unable to say/or agree that adopted children are more likely to experience drink and drug problems in later life. Whilst 60% of respondent feel that they will be fully informed about the child's background, 40% are less certain about this. Clearly if one felt uninformed about a child's background, it is likely one might anticipate problems in the future. Explaining the matching process, the thoroughness of the background information provided, pre and post adoption support could help prospective adopters understand what types of children are available as well as understanding the likely short and long term effect of different difficult early life experiences.

A full version of this report can be obtained by emailing Francesca.fogell@pactcharity.org or call 01189 387 604.