THE
BEHAVIOURAL
INSIGHTS TEAM

A report from the

Behavioural Insights Team

Exploring adoption 'matching' decisions

Client: Department for Education
Date: March 2015

Background

The Department for Education (DfE) engaged the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to conduct a short qualitative research project exploring how adoption 'matching' decisions are made by social workers.

This project forms part of a broader piece of work examining adoption matching practice and process, overseen by the Adoption Leadership Board. The intent of commissioning a piece of work that focused on human behaviour was to try and identify some of the factors driving decision-making that might be linked to the outcomes we see in practice.

BIT is uniquely qualified to undertake this piece of work. The Team started its life inside 10 Downing Street and Cabinet Office in 2010 with the mission of applying findings from academic research on human behaviour to benefit some of the toughest and most important policy areas in the UK. In addition to analysing issues through the lens of behavioural research, BIT also designs new ways of working to address these policy issues and, crucially, uses empirical research methods to test how well these changes work.

The scope of work detailed in this report was constrained by time and the desire to gain initial insights rather than conduct end-to-end research and implementation of new ideas. As such, the focus was on identifying potential behavioural drivers at play and how they might manifest in practice. BIT has made some initial suggestions for practical intervention but we stress that these are illustrative only and that further work would be required to refine interventions, implement them and – critically – test their efficacy in an empirical fashion that gives true insight into what works.

Process

The project involved conducting interviews with social workers in selected Local Authorities to examine existing practices in matching potential adopters with children. Interviews explored two key areas:

- **How individual social workers make decisions** about adoption matching, including the factors that most influence decision-making; and
- **How the current adoption matching process works** in practice.

Informed by interview observations, BIT conducted a short review of the research on matching, focusing on identifying behavioural factors relevant to matching that may be influencing decision-making.

This report presents seven behavioural factors assessed as being most relevant to adoption matching, drawing on the literature review and interview observations. Each of these factors comes from a well-established theoretical basis in the behavioural science literature and is backed by empirical research on how this kind of behaviour plays out in the real-world.

It is always useful to emphasise that such behavioural concepts apply to humans across all decision making environments and contexts. This is because people are faced with hundreds of micro-decisions in any given day and so we deploy sophisticated but necessarily simplistic rules of thumb to help ourselves navigate these decisions and still function effectively. For the most part, these rules work extremely well. However, in certain situations they can provide unhelpful distortion leading to sub-optimal decisions or adverse outcomes.

The seven factors discussed in this report provide examples of such potential distortions in action. So, in summary, we work from the starting point that social workers and others in the system are performing high stakes roles with the need for a number of decisions that have really important consequences. Their expertise and experience certainly provides some immunity to the kinds of biases in decision making we might expect from a lay-person, but it does not take away the fact that social workers are only human and human rationality is bounded.

Detailed findings from the interview process are also set out to provide further context to the behavioural factors identified.

We hope that this report can act as a practical source for policy-makers and other practitioners working in adoption matching. We also hope that the report will be able to facilitate discussions between professionals in adoption teams about potential behavioural factors that might be influencing their decision-making, as such acting as a first step towards developing practices to address these factors.

Behavioural factors identified

BIT conducted a literature review as part of the investigation into potential behavioural factors relevant to adoption matching decision-making.

Drawing in part on interview findings, the literature review identified seven main behavioural factors which have the potential to influence adoption matching decisions. The seven behavioural factors identified are:

1. Loss aversion
2. Availability heuristic and recall bias
3. Confirmation bias
4. Commitment bias
5. Groupthink and the bandwagon effect
6. Social desirability bias
7. Status quo bias and defaults

This section explores each of these seven factors, with a definition of the concept, followed by highlighted evidence and examples from the literature, followed by discussion of potential applications of the factor in the adoption matching context.

1. Loss Aversion
Definition: First demonstrated by Nobel Prize winning economists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979), loss aversion refers to the fact that people dislike losses more than they like equivalent gains. This seems a reasonable rule in many situations but it can lead to overly risk-averse behaviour. Loss aversion is also closely linked to the endowment effect (Thaler, 1980); a psychological phenomenon whereby people demand far more to give up an object they already possess than they would be willing to pay to acquire it.
Evidence & examples: Whether a transaction is framed as a loss or a gain has important consequences for how we approach the decision. In financial terms this means that a £5 surcharge fee has a stronger effect on consumer decisions than an equivalent £5 discount for a product (Kahneman and Tversky 1984).

1. Loss Aversion

Countless studies have shown the effect of loss versus gain framing on decision making. From marketing research, John Dawes (2004) showed that increasing the price of an insurance policy had over twice the effect on consumer switching compared to an equivalent reduction in price for a different insurance policy.

Many commercial subscription services utilise loss aversion to boost sales. Companies such as Netflix or Amazon Prime offer free trial periods in an attempt to integrate the subscription into a consumer's status quo. Once the product is perceived as already belonging to a person they are more likely to continue paying to keep it than they would have paid to get it in the first place.

More recently, much empirical work has been conducted on loss aversion in its application to education. Roland Fryer et al. (2012) conducted a field experiment to look at the various ways performance-related pay incentivises teachers. Based on the theory of loss aversion, Fryer et al. posited that framing performance-related bonuses as losses rather than gains would have a stronger positive effect on teaching outcomes. The study took place in the Chicago school district, with over 3,200 students and 150 participating teachers. All teachers were randomly assigned to either a control group or treatment group. In the control group, teachers were given a lump sum bonus at the end of the academic year if their students met certain measurable outcomes (tests scores). The bonus amounted to approximately 8% of pro rata pay, so was not an insignificant sum of money. The amount of the bonus was the same for the treatment and control groups, the only difference was the framing – either as a loss or as a gain. In the treatment group teachers were given the money at the beginning of the year and then had to pay it back at a per-student rate if their students did not reach the specified level in the tests. Fryer et al. found that for those students whose teachers were assigned to the treatment group (loss frame), test scores were as much as 40% higher when compared to the test scores from the control group (gain frame).

Application: A consequence of loss aversion is a tendency to avoid risk. While this is often a sensible approach to uncertain decisions, it can also lead to suboptimal outcomes.

In order to make a placement decision social workers have to assess potential gains and losses from the perspective of the child and decide on an acceptable level of risk. This amounts to trying to quantify complex relative gains and losses, as well as the risks of a potential placement. Due to the subjective nature of opinions regarding prospective adopters and the many unknowns about a match, making

1. Loss Aversion

this complex mental calculation depends on using rules of thumb. Loss aversion tells us that it is likely social workers will weight potential losses more heavily than potential gains during the matching process. This could mean that social workers are not taking forward matches which have identified risks, despite strong countervailing positive features.

Loss aversion could also apply when factoring in the quality of a foster placement relative to the suitability of a match with prospective adopters. If a child is in a strong foster placement, as opposed to just a satisfactory one, this could lead to a social worker subconsciously making less favourable judgement on prospective adopters, with the risks of making a transition to a new location looming larger given the existing strengths of the foster carer placement.

2. Availability heuristic and recall bias

Definition: The availability heuristic (also referred to as recall bias) is a mental shortcut that can cause us to over-weight the importance or likelihood of something just because it springs to mind easily. Events that are recent or particularly memorable (often because they evoke an emotional response, like fear) are often easier to recall than less recent or run of the mill events. As such, people tend to draw on such events more than things that are less recent or simply less notable when making judgements about uncertain future outcomes.

Evidence & examples: The availability heuristic was again first demonstrated by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1973). In a lab experiment they asked a sample of English-speaking participants whether there were more words in the English language that begin with the letter K or that have K as their third letter. Due to the fact it is a lot easier to recall words that begin with the letter K (king, kindness, kit) than it is to recall words that have K as their third letter (acknowledge, bike), participants overestimated the size of the former group. In fact there are approximately twice as many words with K as their third letter than words with K as their first.

The availability heuristic can also occur when there is certain information readily available at the point of decision-making. In a relevant context, a study by Rodney Triplet (1992) tested the presence of the availability heuristic amongst health professionals. Healthcare professionals were presented with case descriptions for

2. Availability heuristic and recall bias

hypothetical patients which showed typical symptoms for influenza and AIDS. Information regarding each patient's sex and sexual preference was also included. They were then asked to diagnose the symptoms. The results found, consistent with the availability heuristic, that AIDS was disproportionately diagnosed relative to influenza, and the study concluded that this was due to the highly publicized nature of the disease.

In the media, sensational stories are often equated with more news-worthy stories. Media coverage can also feed into a disproportionate fear of unlikely events occurring. People overestimate the likelihood of events such as homicides, lightning strikes, plane crashes, or shark attacks because they are reported far more than less sensational causes of death, such as car accidents or heart disease (Brinol, Petty, & Tormala 2006). Further research into this phenomenon confirms the availability heuristic and shows that exposure to vivid portrayals of violence on television, in films, and computer games increases the degree to which people perceive these events as occurring in real life (Riddle 2010).

Application: The availability heuristic can affect adoption matching decisions in several ways. According to the availability heuristic, known prior instances of disruption of a child's placement could affect future matching decisions. When breakdown occurs, social workers can more easily recall the features of the match which caused the disruption, and give undue weight to these features when considering other matching decisions.

The same can be true not just of personal experiences, but also of exposure to adoption stories in the media. Instances of failure in a Local Authority's safeguarding duties, particularly when resulting in severe neglect, can be widely publicised, often to an extent disproportionate to the frequency with which these events occur. The availability heuristic means that this coverage could potentially affect how social workers in other Local Authorities make matching decisions, with publicised failures from other areas remaining front of mind.

Another application could relate to ethnicity. If social workers regularly view a pool of white, comparatively affluent prospective adopters, they could overemphasise common or familiar characteristics when evaluating other prospective adopters. While socio-economic status or ethnicity should not be indicative of suitability, the availability heuristic could mean that more diverse prospective adopters face a more difficult path to adoption as it is easier to recall (and implicitly compare them to) previous successful matches with white and/or middle class adopters.

3. Confirmation bias

Definition: Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, or interpret, information that confirms one's preconceptions. Colloquial examples of this bias include 'selective hearing', or 'selective memory', whereby people profess to only hear or remember the information which confirms their prior beliefs or opinions on a subject.

Evidence & Examples: Confirmation bias has been studied extensively and has a long anecdotal history preceding its experimental elaboration. The evidence splits manifestation of confirmation bias into three broad categories: 1) biased search for information, 2) biased interpretation, and 3) biased memory.

Searching for evidence to support a specific hypothesis is nearly always likely to succeed given the volume of information that can be available. However, we can conduct *biased searches for information* as how a question is asked can have a strong effect on the answers found. Eldar Shafir (1993) conducted a study using a fictional child custody case to demonstrate this phenomenon. Participants in the study were presented with two hypothetical custodians, parent A and parent B. Parent A was a passably good enough match to be the guardian, but had neither particularly attractive nor unattractive characteristics. Parent B was described as having a mix of salient positive and negative characteristics (they were warm and bonded well with the child, but had a job which kept them away for long periods of time). When asked, "Which parent should be the guardian?" a majority of participants said parent B, focusing on the salient positive characteristics in reference to the positively framed question. When asked, "Which parent should not be the guardian?" they actively searched for negative characteristics and again answered parent B.

In real world situations, evidence is complex and often not clear-cut, and it is possible that the same information can lead to contradictory conclusions reached by different individuals. This is an expression of *biased interpretation*. Kurt Carlson and Edward Russo (2001) show that biased interpretation is present in jury decision-making, whereby early tentative opinions (either pro-plaintiff or pro-defendant) affect how new evidence is interpreted amongst the jury.

Even if information is gathered and interpreted in a neutral manner, individuals can still end up reaching divergent conclusions because of how information is recalled. This is an example of *biased memory*. Theories differ as to why this occurs. Some

3. Confirmation bias

studies suggest that if new information confirms prior beliefs it is more easily stored in the memory, whereas others posit that surprising or uncommon information is remembered more easily (Oswald & Grosjean 2004).

Application: Despite the existence of various policies and procedures to govern adoption matching decision-making, interviews revealed how social worker intuition and judgment still plays a key role in determining the suitability of prospective adopters for a specific child. Intuition is essential to help social workers to navigate the high number of decisions they have to make each day and still function effectively, though can lead to sub-optimal decisions in certain situations if affected by contextual influences.

For instance, if a Prospective Adopter Report (PAR) conveys a specific impression in the mind of the social worker about the prospective adopters (either positive or negative), this will allow social workers to form hypotheses about their suitability. According to confirmation bias, these initial hypotheses could bias what additional information is sought further along in the matching process, how that additional information is interpreted, and/or which information is recalled at a later stage of the decision process.

Input from other stakeholders in the child's welfare could also lead to confirmation bias. If the foster carer, for example, makes their opinion clear early that the child has specific needs or would be suitable for a particular type of prospective adopter, this could lead to initial opinions about the most suitable prospective adopters being formed and potentially biasing the future search for information.

Finally, confirmation bias could also occur in the case of prospective adopters who have been waiting a significant time for a match. We heard examples of social workers looking at these prospective adopters expecting to find reasons why they were unsuitable. This is an example of a biased search for information which could result in certain prospective adopters waiting longer than they need to for a match.

4. Commitment bias

Definition: Commitment bias occurs where individuals make poor decisions in the present to justify decisions they have made in the past (Staw 1976). Rationally, if new information arises after a previous decision is taken, this should be taken into account and the previous decision re-evaluated in light of it. Commitment bias

4. Commitment bias

occurs where this new information is ignored because of either a personal sense of commitment toward the current course of action or organisational inertia.

Evidence & examples: This phenomenon is widely seen in bidding auctions (Ariely & Simonson 2003). Professional bidders expend considerable time and resources in researching the items they bid for. This amounts to a significant commitment on the part of the bidder. As bidding is a sequential action, with one bid leading to a counter-bid, and then the possibility of a counter-counter-bid, and so on, bidders can lock themselves in to irrational courses of action.

As a stylistic example, imagine that a bidder knows she can resell a piece of artwork for £2,000. Imagine also that this bidder spends a week before the auction researching the art market and the painter of the work. When it comes to the auction, she knows as long as she pays less than £2,000 for the piece she can make a profit. However, in the bidding process she enters a bidding war with another bidder and because of the personal sense of commitment she feels – by publicly demonstrating that she wants to own the piece of art – and because of the prior effort she has expended in researching the item, her bids climb above £2,000. Irrespective of how much time she has already expended and regardless of the public demonstration of her desire to own the piece of art, it is irrational to pay more than the work's market value.

Application: In adoption matching, commitment bias could make it difficult for social workers to evaluate new information that is presented or emerges at a later stage in the matching process. This could especially be the case if the process had been proceeding well, and the social worker was initially positive about the match. If, at the eleventh hour, new information is presented which could potentially be a cause for concern, the existing positive sentiment for the match could impact on how this information is received and integrated into the decision-making process. For instance, if the same information surfaced at the beginning of the matching process, it could have been more influential in the matching decision.

Commitment bias could be more acute in adopter-led matching. When a prospective adopters proactively puts themselves forward to adopt a particular child, this can create a sense of commitment on the part of the social worker. As prospective adopters have invested time and resources in identifying the child as a suitable match, we heard through interviews how it can be more challenging for

4. Commitment bias

the social worker to say no to the prospective adopters if they are considered unsuitable.

Commitment bias could also exist on the part of prospective adopters in the matching process. In adoption-led matching, prospective adopters are encouraged to make an emotional connection with a child, and the strength of this connection can feed into the social worker's matching decision. If prospective adopters have a strong initial emotional connection with a child, and then later uncover elements of the child's needs that they weren't aware of before, commitment bias suggests that they could rationalise this new information to support their emotional connection instead of reconsidering whether they are willing and able to appropriately support the child.

5. Groupthink and the bandwagon effect

Definition: Groupthink occurs among groups of people where dissent and deliberation is side-lined in favour of harmony and conformity - where individuals supress their own opinions to not upset the perceived group consensus. The closely related bandwagon effect means that the higher the number of people who already hold certain beliefs, the greater the likelihood that additional people will come to share those beliefs – irrespective of contrary evidence. These effects can become increasingly likely when those involved in group discussions are already under pressure and where it is important to them to maintain good relations with the others in the group.

Evidence & examples: There is no agreed measure for identifying when groupthink has occurred. However, most studies use the number of ideas or views generated in group discussion as a proxy. If the number of ideas in a group session is relatively low given the number of people participating (say, only two ideas in a group of five people), this is taken as indicative of groupthink. Much of the research on groupthink has focussed on its causes, finding several which can influence how acutely it is present:

1. The lack of impartial group leadership;
2. Insulation and homogeneity of the group, in terms of socioeconomic and ideological backgrounds;

5. Groupthink and the bandwagon effect

3. Stressful external consequences and recent failure of group decisions; and/or
4. 'Deindividuation', where group harmony is valued more than individual expression.

While all these factors can be present in any one group context, they do not have to all be present in order to induce groupthink.

The bandwagon effect is a closely related phenomenon that has been used to explain a wide array of social behaviour. The bandwagon effect is used as an explanation for how some people vote. Some people vote for the party they think is going to win, based on how many other people they know are also voting that way or which party the media is proclaiming will win. The idea is that they are ignoring their own opinions on the matter so as to pick the 'winning side' (Nadeau, Cloutier, & Guay 1993).

Another explanation for how the bandwagon effect works is based on *informational cascades*, whereby individuals draw inferences on what they think is correct based on the number of other people who believe something or hold a certain position (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch 1992). It seems reasonable to presume that if a majority of a group believe X, then X is likely to be true. However, this sort of thinking leads to diminished group output and should not be valued in a group where the sharing of individual views is considered important.

Application: The adoption matching process is designed to achieve consensus across several interested social workers. Consensus decision-making provides a safeguard against bad ones and ensures a variety of perspectives are hear. Matching meetings are an integral part of achieving consensus, and at their best we heard how they are open forums for sharing concerns, ideas, experience, and insights.

However, as a group forum, matching meetings are also susceptible to groupthink and the bandwagon effect. Unless it is expected that all members of the panel contribute toward the discussion it can be easy to fall back on a perceived, rather than a real, group consensus. This is also the case when individuals do not feel that sharing dissenting opinions is valued by the group.

The social worker bringing the match to the matching meeting should be in favour of the match proceeding. If this person is a senior social worker or if they have a strong personality, this could influence the deliberation of the meeting.

5. Groupthink and the bandwagon effect

Confirmation bias suggests that this social worker's opinions could be less critically evaluated, and more likely agreed with, by other social workers who may perceive that others do not share their concerns and thus not raise potential issues.

There are several things which can be done to guard against groupthink and the bandwagon effect. Having one group member play the role of 'Devil's Advocate' can be an effective tactic, as long as this is a different person in each meeting. Additionally, the meeting chair should remain relatively passive throughout the discussion, acting mostly as a moderator. If a chair is too dominant, the group can converge to the leader's opinion.

Interviews revealed examples of tools used to avoid groupthink in matching meetings, such as use of a matching matrix to actively consider a range of relevant factors, including key strengths and risks. However, often there can be a balance of positive and negative features present following discussion, leaving scope for potential groupthink to emerge during the final decision-making process.

6. Social desirability bias

Definition: At its simplest, social desirability bias describes the tendency to say what we think others want to hear rather than giving answers in line with our true beliefs and feelings. It has its roots, as a concept, in survey design and administration where it is well recognised that, although there is no malicious intent, people cannot be relied upon to give accurate answers. This means that subsequent actions – which do fall in line with our core beliefs and thoughts – can differ substantially from the view expressed previously. How far words and subsequent actions differ is in large part due to how acutely the individual in question perceives social expectations and the punishment for transgression (Snyder 1987).

Evidence & examples: SDB is found in nearly all types of participant-based research, and has been studied for over 50 years. Brian An (2014) conducted a survey in the United States on attitudes toward immigration. Based on the premise that opposition to immigration is *perceived* as illiberal, he expected university graduates to claim to be more in favour of immigration. He found that graduates were almost twice as likely to self-report opposition to restrictions on immigration compared to others in the cohort who did not have university degrees.

6. Social desirability bias

An example that shows how social desirability bias is especially prevalent in socially and ethically complex situations comes from Hyunkyung Choi, Marcia Van Riper, and Suzanne Thoyre (2012). Their research analysed data from a large cohort of women who were asked in a survey if they would have an abortion if they became pregnant and found out their unborn child had Down's syndrome. Unsurprisingly, the majority answered "no"; this is both a socially desirable answer and one that it is likely the majority of them thought was true for them. However, follow up data on the actual behaviour of these same women revealed that they were far more likely to have abortions than their self-reported attitudes suggest when they found themselves in the exact situation described.

Application: In the adoption matching process, SDB could be present from both the perspective of the prospective adopter and the social worker.

For prospective adopters, there can be an incentive to emphasise attributes and beliefs they perceive as being more socially desirable, while concealing any views they perceive as less socially desirable. For instance, if a child born to a Muslim family is being considered for adoption, the social worker may ask prospective adopters about their ability to meet the cultural needs of the child given their Muslim background. In this situation, it is likely the adopters will seek to convey their social desirability – as tolerant, informed, and progressive people. They could respond with statements about supporting the child's Islamic heritage, irrespective of whether they have this capacity or positive beliefs.

For social workers, if a social worker holds personal views that they perceive are contrary to the prevailing views of their colleagues, they may choose not to express these views during group discussions, particular on socially sensitive topics. Social desirability bias could mean that social workers are not raising concerns in areas that are politically sensitive, particularly if they perceive or are anxious that colleagues may not find their viewpoint to be socially acceptable.

7. Status quo bias and defaults

Definition: Status quo bias occurs when the result of doing nothing is preferred over the result of taking another course of action, without consideration for the respective merits of each option. The default of doing nothing is known as the status quo.

7. Status quo bias and defaults

Evidence & examples: There is a wide body of literature documenting the status quo bias. It is often present when choosing complex financial products such as pension annuities or mortgages. For most people, the differences in the various types of annuities or mortgages available are difficult to understand and compare to each other. As such, as long as the status quo is perceived to be a moderately suitable option, we are likely to do nothing and as a default take no action (Choi et al. 2015).

Miriam Krieger and Stefan Felder (2013) conducted an experiment in the US, showing that the status quo bias is present when participants make choices on health insurance policies. They ran a randomised controlled trial, in which they defined a status quo level of insurance for the treatment and control groups but varied the complexity of the insurance policy descriptions they presented to each group. Consistent with theory, they found that people in the treatment group, who were presented with more complex policy descriptions, defaulted to the status quo more than people in the control group.

Application: While some adoption matching decisions are straight forward, others can be more complex and require rigorous evaluation to weigh up the pros and cons of the potential match. According to the status quo bias, there is the potential that not making a match can be more common in complex cases (generally given complex child needs). If no obvious suitable adopter emerges, the status quo bias means that social workers could be unconsciously defaulting to not making a match, continuing the search for a suitable adopter. Status quo bias could also be more prevalent where a child is in a relatively strong foster placement, as this can make the default option look more attractive.

In the long term, social workers know that delaying decision-making can have negative consequences for the child, as the longer they are in care the harder it will be to place them successfully at a later stage. To counter this bias, reframing thinking about the default from the current view of "if the match does not go ahead, the child will still have a strong foster placement", to "if the match does not go ahead, the child could experience extra months or potentially years without a stable family" could have a significant effect on decision-making.

Detailed interview findings

Interviews were conducted with social workers across four Local Authorities during February and March 2015. Two social workers were interviewed at each participating Local Authority. We spoke to a mix of family finding social workers, child social workers, family social workers, and Senior Practitioners.

Interviews covered a range of topics and issues, including:

- current approaches used to match potential adopters to children, including processes in place in each Local Authority;
- what factors social workers consider in making matching decisions and the weight they give to relevant factors;
- what factors social workers consider to be "red flags", including examples of when a social worker has said no to a match;
- what issues social workers worry about when making placements;
- how much social workers know about and use the evidence base on matching;
- how social workers and Local Authorities are held accountable for the matching decisions they make; and
- how social workers value and/or promote the 'customer experience' of prospective adopters and manage the emotional impact of decisions.

In addition, interviews also asked social workers about the level of priority placed on making an ethnic match within their Local Authority.

This section provides detail on what we heard from social workers during interviews. No comments are directly attributed to individual social workers or Local Authorities – this was seen as necessary to encourage more open responses.

Reflections on the adoption matching process

Interviews commenced with a general exploration of the current processes used in each Local Authority for adoption matching.

While processes differed across Local Authorities, most social workers described initiatives underway to begin planning for adoption matching as early as possible.

Children who were highly likely to proceed to adoption were identified early so that preparations for matching could commence (even before an adoption order had been made).

In terms of prospective adopters, all Local Authorities had a process in place that initially assessed whether prospective adopters were suitable for adoption. This process would form a view about the skills and limitations of the adopters, focused on the type of child they could manage. Objective factors could rule out prospective adopters entirely, including financial status, accommodation, health factors (e.g. smoking), age of birth children, recency of fertility treatment, and adoption motivations. In some Local Authorities, prospective adopters are presented to an Adoption Panel for initial approval, with this approval including reference to the age range, gender, and potential sibling groups that the adopters are suitable for.

The geographic size of a Local Authority was observed to impact on the processes used for adoption matching. For smaller Local Authorities, out-of-county adoption is more typical, working through regional consortia. For larger Local Authorities, finding an in-county prospective adopter is more common. One social worker noted that budget issues can place pressure to carefully consider potential in-county matches first, with justification required to move out-of-county.

Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) and Child Permanence Report (CPR)

The PAR and CPR were described as the two key documents in the adoption matching process. The CPR was seen as providing the critical initial document from which a social worker will develop an understanding of the child's needs and then consider the type of adopter required to meet those needs. Similarly, the PAR was the critical document from the prospective adopter's perspective in allowing a social worker to understand the type of child they would be suitable for.

Almost all social workers reflected on the importance of the PAR. The quality of writing was seen to make a difference, and could result in one prospective adopter being selected over another. If a PAR did not contain sufficient analysis of a prospective adopter's strengths and weaknesses, leaving the social worker with outstanding questions, that they could move on to another available adopter.

The quality of the PAR was described as mattering more for out-of-county prospective adopters, as further questions could be asked directly to the family social worker if they were located in the same Local Authority. Some social workers stated that there can be differences in the quality of PARs prepared across agencies.

When asked about the most important elements of the PAR, social workers provided a range of perspectives. For one social worker, it was critical that the PAR provides a clear sense of the prospective adopter's personalities, including their vision of parenting. For another social worker, it was important that the PAR was clear on why the prospective adopters decided what gender and age of child they were willing to consider, with strong motivations identified. Having a clear explanation of existing birth children and exploration of how they would be supported through the adoption process was also seen as very important by one social worker.

Some social workers also reflected on the importance of a good photograph on the PAR. When considering multiple potential adopters, it was noted that this first impression can make a real difference. Having a warm photo which provided a strong sense of the prospective adopters was seen as creating a good impression which could influence decision-making.

Adopter-led matching

All Local Authorities were found to engage in adopter-led matching, including through British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) activity days and exchange events and through use of external services such as Adoption Link.

Most social workers were supportive of adopter-led matching, believing that it can allow prospective adopters to make stronger connections with children, which can lead to greater resilience in the longer term.

Processes differed across Local Authorities in terms of how adopter-led matching took place. In some Local Authorities, the child's social worker took the lead in adopter-led matching, considering all prospective adopters who express interest in the child. The family finder will only become involved once the child's social worker believes there is potential for a match with a prospective adopter.

One social worker noted that it can be harder to say no to a prospective adopter in cases of adopter-led matching when the adopter has made an initial connection with the child. It was thought that more objective evidence is required about the reasons why the match will not go ahead, with social workers needing to be confident in their assessments and have evidence to support their views.

However, social workers stated that while they keep an open mind to potential adopter-led matches, they will say no to a match if required. Honesty and transparency to prospective adopters was seen as critical. Explaining to prospective adopters that you are acting in the best interest of the child to find the right match was identified as important in adopter-led matching.

Factors influencing decision making

Social workers were asked which factors they took into account when making decisions about adoption matching. A wide range of factors were identified, which is unsurprising given the diversity of social workers that were engaged with, even in the small sample.

Factors that were cited by almost all social workers included:

- Geography (location of the prospective adopters to birth family members);
- Age and gender of the child;
- Child health and developmental needs (current and future);
- Views of the prospective adopters on the age and gender of child they would be suitable for; and
- Ethnicity of the child and the prospective adopters.

This subset of factors was seen as more objective, resulting in a relatively prompt process of ruling out prospective adopters that were not suitable for the child.

Other common factors that were cited by social workers when making decisions about a potential match included:

- Demonstrated resilience (experience of managing adversity) on the part of the prospective adopters;
- The support networks available to the prospective adopters (family and friends able to assist in raising the child);
- The child care experience, skills and knowledge of the prospective adopters;
- The strength of the prospective adopters' relationship (including their ability support each other through stressful moments);
- The personalities of both child and prospective adopters (drawing on evidence of their respective attachment styles); and
- The prospective adopter's understanding of child trauma, development and attachment issues.

These list of factors were seen to be weighted more highly that other factors when considering the appropriateness of a potential match.

Several other factors cited by social workers during interviews included:

- Flexibility on the part of prospective adopters in considering potential future contact with the child's birth family;
- The prospective adopter's openness to working with social workers and other support services to meet the future needs of the child;
- The views of the child's foster carer;
- The motivations of the prospective adopter;
- The wishes of the birth parent/s about the prospective adopter that they would like their child to be placed with;
- The previous birth family or foster carer family environments of the child, with priority given to prospective adopter family environments that matched their previous experience (if available); and
- The openness of the prospective adopters to difference and their willingness to support a variety of future pathways for the child.

These factors were seen as beneficial to decision-making, but not as important as other factors listed above.

It should be noted that interviews did not ask social workers for an exhaustive list of factors that were considered in adoption matching, and there may be other factors not identified above that are also taken into account.

Priority placed on finding an ethnic match

A specific question was asked of each social worker about the priority placed on finding an ethnic match within their Local Authority. As noted above, this was identified as a key factor relevant to adoption matching.

All social workers stated that finding an ethnic match was not required or seen as an overriding consideration. However, in practice most social workers will look for an ethnic match first.

While ethnicity is not an overriding consideration, emphasis is placed on finding an adopter who can 'meet the cultural needs of the child'. This was described as the

ability to support the child in exploring and understanding their heritage and identity, assisting the child to have a positive understanding of themselves.

One social worker commented that assessing the ability of a prospective adopter to meet the cultural needs of the child is 'fluffy', given prospective adopters can say what they want you to hear during the matching process. Seeing evidence of openness on the part of the prospective adopters, such as diversity in friendship groups or connections to other cultures, was identified of one way of assessing ability to meet cultural needs.

Cultural needs and identity were described as more important in older children, who can have a greater sense of self. This sense of identity was identified as not just a consideration for ethnicity, but also for location within the United Kingdom.

Some social workers described how the onus was on prospective adopters to show the degree of effort they are willing to put in to meet the cultural needs of the child. Demonstrating a willingness to learn about a different background or religion and otherwise increase their cultural awareness was seen as important.

Interviews revealed that ethnic matches do not need to be specific. Placing a dual heritage child with a dual heritage adopter was described as a positive outcome. One social worker stated that they would try to get children to "look and feel like their adoptive parents", with the aim for the child not to stand out. One social worker commented how it was important that children with a particular ethnic background do not wait endlessly for a perfect match (which might not arise).

The ethnicity of the child within the community in which they would be placed was identified as a relevant factor. Placing a mixed heritage child in a predominantly white area or school was seen as something to be avoided if possible. The potential for isolation and bullying was seen as a consideration when thinking about placing a child with a particular ethnic background in a location where they would clearly stand out. Social workers described how they would look for diversity or other cultural links in the area where the child is placed.

Overall, all social workers agreed that if an ethnic match was not right, it would not be taken forward. The ability of the prospective adopters to meet other needs of the child was stated to be equally as important as meeting cultural needs.

Taking foster carer views into account

Another theme that emerged from interviews was the role of foster carers in the adoption matching process. There was diversity across Local Authorities in the engagement of foster carers in the matching process.

In some Local Authorities, the foster carers were involved throughout the process, attending matching meetings and having "equal say" given they are "experts in the child". In other Local Authorities, foster carer views were chiefly taken into account in preparation of the CPR. While the foster carer remained involved in the process, their direct consideration of prospective adopters was limited with contributions chiefly relating to their reflections on the child's needs in the CPR.

One social worker commented that there was a subtlety involved in taking into account the views of foster carers. It was noted that some foster carers can be older and have more traditional views. While social workers should listen to foster carers, it was seen as important that social workers not implicitly endorse potential prejudices of the foster carer, with a role to challenge those with traditional views.

If a foster carer was against a match, one social worker described how they would ask the foster carer to identify objective concerns, rather than concerns based on feelings or intuition. An example was cited of a foster carer who thought a very young boy was going to be an "outdoorsy boy" and needed a strong male role model in the context of a potential match with a female same sex couple. The social worker had to sensitively discuss the matter to unearth the traditional views of the foster carer that were influencing their opinion.

It was also noted that it was important for the foster carer to support the proposed match for the benefit of the transition process, particularly the initial introduction of the child to the prospective adopters. If a foster carer was not fully supportive, one social worker described how they had to tailor arrangements to try to make sure all parties were supported and the child was given an initial positive feeling about their adoptive parents.

Issues that social workers worry about in matching

Social workers were also asked for their reflections on issues that they worry about when making decisions about adoption matching. A range of issues emerged, with a common theme being concerns about how the prospective adopters might behave after the placement commenced. Examples of concerns about prospective adopters that social workers worried about included:

- Prospective adopters changing after the child is in their care, with the views and attitudes they expressed to the social worker during the matching process not reflected in reality;
- Adopters drawing a line in the sand between the child's traumatic past and their future, not taking into account their identity and life history to date. One social worker thought that it was a worry when prospective adopters want to change the name of the child straight away; and
- How the adopters will manage during the initial transition, including whether they will get sufficient rest and support through what can be a stressful time.

Other social workers described issues that they worried about during the matching process (before a match had been finalised). These issues included:

- Prospective adopters not being able to fully accept information about the child's identity, history and needs;
- Prospective adopters not having a positive attitude towards engagement with social workers. This was seen as potentially reflecting their ability to be proactive about seeking future support for the child. The worry was that the adopters may be sick of social workers and unwilling to engage with other support services needed for the child; and
- Potential reactions of birth children in the prospective adopter's family following placement – it was commented that birth children reactions can be difficult to anticipate for both adopters and social workers.

One social worker described that not feeling a "high level of warmth" from the prospective adopters towards the child during the matching process, particularly the first meeting, could also cause worry, though the social worker reflected that adults can express their emotions in different ways.

The overarching worry expressed by multiple social workers was whether they had accurately judged the ability of the prospective adopters to understand and meet the needs of the child. One social worker described how they were driven to carefully consider each match by their worry about being able to explain to the future 18 year old child why they decided to place them with the prospective adopter.

'Red flags' in adoption matching decision-making

Social workers were asked for their thoughts on 'red flags' that they identified during the matching process. There are clear links that can be identified from the 'red flags' discussed to the factors described as influencing decision-making. Most of the 'red flags' can be seen to have a negative relationship with factors identified as relevant to adoption matching decision-making.

'Red flags' cited by three or more social workers included:

- The prospective adopter having a limited support network available to assist in the upbringing of the child, or limited evidence of contingency planning for when difficult circumstances might arise;
- The prospective adopter having a limited willingness or ability to take an appropriate period away from work following the adoption to settle the child in to their new home;
- The prospective adopter having rigid views about the child, including their needs and what family life would be like. This extended to prospective adopters showing an unwillingness to accept or be willing to address specific child health or developmental issues which had been identified;
- A lack of exploration of how older birth children within the prospective adopter's family would adjust to a new family member. Similarly, if older birth children had not appropriately been informed about or engaged in discussions about the adoption, then this was a concern; and
- A lack of serious discussion or willingness to explore significant issues faced by the prospective adopters in the past. While the existence of prior issues was not a major concern, social workers thought that an unwillingness to explore or reflect on those issues was a red flag.

Other potential 'red flags' which were cited by one or two social workers included:

- Sensing a lack of warmth or connection between the prospective adopters and the child;
- Naivety on the part of prospective adopters about the needs of a child experiencing adoption, as evidenced by a prospective adopter thinking that raising the adopted child would be just like other children;
- Prospective adopters with purely altruistic motivations for adoption who describe 'saving' the child;

- Prospective adopters who minimise issues raised by the social worker or show signs of distrust or negative attitudes towards social workers; and
- Not sensing that both individuals within a prospective adopter couple are supportive of the proposed match.

Examples of when a social worker has said 'no' to a match

Various examples were cited of when a social worker had said 'no' to a potential match. Interestingly, all examples related to attitudes or behaviours of the prospective adopter.

These examples also reflect instances when a social worker has said 'no' to a match which had initially been proposed. For instance, in these scenarios the prospective adopter had been identified as suitable for a child, and at least an initial visit or enquiries had taken place, but the match was then not taken forward.

Examples of when a social worker had said 'no' to a potential match include:

- **Conditional acceptance of the child** – A prospective adopter was continually seeking more information about a child, without accepting information about the child's needs and background that had already been provided by the social worker. The social worker described how there should be a point when the adopters accept the child unconditionally and begin planning their future life together.
- **Unwillingness to make modifications to accommodate the child** - One social worker cited a prospective adopter who had house rabbits, and did not demonstrate a willingness to move the rabbits or make accommodations when the child moved in to the house. This was stated to show a lack of understanding of the need to prioritise the child.
- **Incompatible attachment styles** – An example was cited of a child who had attachment issues which involved rejection of adults. The prospective adopters looked suitable on paper, but the female adopter needed to be accepted and was very reliant on her husband for emotional support. The social worker made the difficult decision that the female adopter would not manage the likely rejection from the child given their respective attachment styles.

- **Denial of child's needs** – A prospective adopter believed that their love and nurture would be sufficient to meet the needs of the child, not taking the attachment difficulties of the child seriously. There was a sense that the prospective adopters were in denial of the child's needs because they wanted a child so much. Another example was cited of a prospective adopter who insisted that a child had autism, even though this was not in the child's medical report.

- **Fixed views about child's future** – A prospective adoptive father who wanted the adopted child to attend the best local school, despite the potential for developmental delays and special learning needs. The fixed views about the child's future pathway showed no willingness to adapt as challenges arise.

Use of the evidence base on adoption matching

Social workers were asked how much they know about and make use of the evidence base on adoption matching.

In general, most social workers referenced elements of the evidence base in discussing how they drew on evidence to inform their practice, both from a decision-making and communications perspective. For instance, one social worker cited the importance of the connections a child makes in their first 9 – 12 months for emotional development as a reason for earlier adoption matching. Similarly, another social worker cited the outcomes from long-term fostering as a rationale for early adoption planning.

In terms of what comprises the evidence base, social workers referred to reports and guidance documents from BAAF, Family Futures literature, and other relevant publications such as DfE reports. Some social workers commented on how new publications can be shared among the adoption team or discussed in team meetings. Internal staff development days were also cited as occasions where new evidence, research or practice initiatives are discussed.

Social workers also referred to formal training as an opportunity to link into the evidence base. Several social workers referred to recent courses they had attended (such as Family Futures courses and internal attachment styles training) which had provided useful evidence relevant to adoption matching.

The collective experience of other adoption social workers was identified as an important element of the evidence base. As explored further in the following section, key matching decisions are made collectively, drawing on the experience

of both individual social workers and that of their colleagues. This was identified as a way in which the evidence base is shared across social workers.

One social worker also commented that adoption social workers have the luxury of a bit more time to explore the evidence base than social workers in other areas. Closer engagement with the evidence base was also seen as more common given adoption social workers can be called on to justify a recommendation in court, where research and evidence will need to be cited.

Accountability for matching decisions

Social workers were asked how they were held accountable for matching decisions made.

The key accountability mechanism identified was the collective nature of matching decision-making. The matching meeting was seen as the critical point of accountability, with multiple social workers, including Managers, involved in scrutinising potential matches. Social workers stated that the matching meetings involved robust discussion, with the strengths and vulnerabilities of a potential match fully discussed. Minutes of the matching meeting are written up, with a Manager then making the decision for the match to proceed to an Adoption Panel.

It was thought that more experienced social workers can have a greater impact during matching meetings, but the depth of knowledge about the child and prospective adopter brought by each social worker is the main determinant of influence during the meeting.

In terms of other accountability mechanisms, most social workers described that when disruption or breakdown occurs, there are higher levels of scrutiny of matching decisions. An in-depth exploration of the placement occurs, delving into the matching decision. The review process will identify any gaps in the matching process, with lessons learnt identified and key risk factors noted for future practice.

Accountability also exists through review of placements by the Independent Review Officer (IRO). One social worker described how the IRO will visit the child and prospective adopter three and six months after the placement. While IRO involvement links to the process for finalising legal adoption, it was thought that useful feedback can also be provided on matching decisions.

In terms of data on adoption decision-making, most social workers thought that such data existed, but had not seen it directly, believing it was held by Managers. Interviews with senior social workers found that Local Authorities do collect and analyse data on adoption matching, as required for the Adoption Scorecard. Senior

Practitioners described how they track the number of matching decisions made, as well as the numbers of prospective adopters and children waiting.

It was noted that there is limited longer-term feedback on adoption matching given the formal involvement of a Local Authority ends when the legal adoption order is made (usually around twelve months after the adoption match was made). This means that social workers have limited feedback on matching decisions made outside of the initial twelve month period.

Reflections on the Adoption Panel

Interviews also explored the role of the Adoption Panel. In general, social workers had mixed views on whether the Panel provided a useful accountability mechanism.

One social worker stated that the Panel was of minimal use to social workers, given a match would not be taken to Panel unless it would be approved. Another social worker stated that a match would need to be "watertight" before progressing to Panel, with Managers withholding matches they did not support. Instead, the Panel process was seen as involving additional paperwork and time on the part of social workers. A further social worker commented that the Adoption Panel doesn't strengthen matching decisions, with most work done before a match progresses to this point. All social workers stated that it was unusual for a Panel not to agree on a match, though further information could be sought in situations where they were uncertain.

Benefits of the Adoption Panel were cited from the perspective of the prospective adopters. Social workers thought that it was useful for the adopters to have a formal moment at which they were recommended as the future parents of the child. The Panel was also seen as an opportunity to reinforce issues that the adopters will need to consider in the future, as well as other responsibilities of being a parent.

One social worker stated that it was also useful to have an independent view of a match from the Adoption Panel, considering the match again from an impartial perspective with no budget or time constraints. Another social worker commented that Panel consideration can help to ease any outstanding concerns they might have about a potential match.

In terms of feedback provided by the Adoption Panel back to social workers, different approaches were identified across Local Authorities. In one Local Authority, there were formal mechanisms in place for the Adoption Panel to provide periodic feedback to the adoption team, and for the adoption team to then respond

to the Panel. In another Local Authority, formal feedback was provided from the Adoption Panel on all matches presented, though this feedback could reflect more on the quality of papers prepared and how social workers should present to Panel rather than the matching decision itself. Another social worker stated that they received minimal useful feedback from the Adoption Panel, with no examples of how Panel feedback had shaped their practice.

Considering the 'customer experience' in adoption decision-making

Social workers were asked how they took into account the 'customer experience' of prospective adopters, especially managing the emotional impact on adopters.

The key theme that emerged was the recent change in emphasis given most Local Authorities now have higher numbers of prospective adopters to children available for adoption. This shift has required changes in how social workers engage with prospective adopters, as adopters can now wait longer for a match.

The social worker assigned to the family was identified as having primary responsibility for engaging with the prospective adopters. It was seen as important that social workers be very clear with prospective adopters about the matching process and likely timeframes to manage their expectations. One social worker stated that all eventualities of the matching process should be explained to prospective adopters. Another social worker noted that it was important that once a prospective adopter was approved (in general), they are told of any reasons why finding a suitable match may be difficult in their circumstances. It was thought that by the time a prospective adopter is approved, a strong relationship should be established with the social worker to allow this discussion to take place.

Timeliness in engaging with prospective adopters was recognised as a key issue that Local Authorities were working to improve. It was noted that for prospective out-of-county adopters, it can take longer to engage and set up an initial discussion. For consortia set up across Local Authorities for adoption matching, time limits are being set up to provide greater certainty for prospective adopters on time frames.

It was noted that prospective adopters can get frustrated if a potential match is not identified swiftly, particularly given the process to be assessed and approved as an adopter in the first place. One family finder observed that their role now includes managing relationships with prospective adopters, keeping them informed of developments and explaining the process. If required, Managers will also visit prospective adopters to explain the process and assure them that they are being considered. One Local Authority outlined how they had begun offering all approved adopters awaiting a match the opportunity to come together each month to touch base with family finders and other prospective adopters to share their experience.

One social worker commented on pressure in their Local Authority to first consider prospective adopters who have been waiting for the longest time. However, it was commented that social workers can be biased against those who have been on the waiting list for a long time, thinking that there must be reasons why they have been waiting. One social worker described how she visited a couple who had been waiting for a long time, but found they were strong prospective adopters, with a poorly written PAR found to be the main reasons for the delay.

It was noted that it can be more difficult for dual heritage couples and older couples to adopt. An example was cited of a dual heritage couple in a predominantly white area who are struggling to find a match, with available white children matched with other white couples (and there are lots of adopters at present).

Once a child is legally adopted, the Local Authority has no formal ongoing role. All Local Authorities seem to provide access to post-adoption support services for a further period however. Formal feedback was thought to be collected from all prospective adopters, but few social workers described how that feedback was then collated and acted upon by their Local Authority.

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