BACKGROUND

Under new laws and regulations, social services must do more to help the parents and other birth relatives of adopted children, such as:

- Birth families must have access to a range of support services such as counselling, advice and information both before and after adoption.
- Birth parents are entitled to a support worker independent of the child’s social worker.
- Birth relatives have a right to ask for help with contact arrangements.

THE RESEARCH

This is a summary of the first stage of a government funded study of services supporting birth relatives. In this first stage we have asked social services and independent adoption agencies to tell us what they are doing to help birth relatives. (The second stage of this project is the ‘Helping birth families’ study – where we are asking birth parents and other relatives to tell us what support they had when their child was adopted.)

We sent questionnaires to social services and independent adoption agencies – we got 135 back. We also had telephone interviews with 60 adoption social workers, and had a focus group meeting with about 15 social workers.

KEY FINDINGS

- In some areas of England and Wales parents and other birth family members can get a lot of support if their child is adopted. In other areas there is much less support available. What help birth parents can get depends on where they live.

- Some social services are trying to support birth parents by offering them a support worker who works for the same social services, but who is not the child’s social worker. Other social services pay independent agencies to provide support to birth parents.

- Many social services and independent agencies said that they had problems in getting birth parents to use support services. They thought this was because many birth parents did not trust professionals, especially social workers. Also, many parents had many other problems in their life like drug or alcohol problems, mental health problems, learning difficulties, or worries about money, relationships or housing.

- Some agencies tried very hard to get birth parents to use support services. For example, they said if birth parents didn’t feel ready for support, they would ask them again at a later time. Or they might offer to visit someone at their home,
or provide transport to visit the offices. Other agencies did less to make it easy for birth parents to find out about and use support services.

- Very few agencies had made any special arrangements for people who were black or of other ethnic minority; or for those who had mental health problems, learning difficulties or drug or alcohol problems.

- Adoption staff from many agencies suggested that birth relatives were more willing to take up support services if these were connected to the contact they were having with their adopted child. For example some support workers said they tried the following things:
  - offering to help birth relatives write contact letters
  - sending a leaflet about support services when they posted on a contact letter
  - encouraged those using a letterbox service to meet with a support worker
  - Asked workers supervising direct contact to tell birth relatives about support services

What recommendations are the research team making?

1. Ideas to try and encourage more birth parents to use support services:
   - Services need to be non-judgemental
   - Birth parents should be able to have confidence that their support worker really is independent
   - Support services should be widely publicised so there are many different ways that parents can hear about what is on offer
   - Sometimes parents are not ready to use support services. These services should still be available to them at a later time if they change their mind.
   - Adoption support services should work with other professionals or agencies that are involved in helping birth parents (e.g. drug or mental health teams, advocacy services).
2. Help with post adoption contact should be part of the support offered to birth parents. Parents having post adoption contact should be offered support, and told about specialist birth parent support services.
3. The government and adoption agencies need to make sure there is enough funding to pay for support for parents.

The Research Team for the mapping survey

Clive Sellick, Elsbeth Neil, Julie Young, Nick Healey (University of East Anglia), Paula Lorgelly (University of Glasgow).