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Success factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social work managers and marketing officers

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Introduction

This research has been commissioned by BAAF who are working with the Department for Education to advance the adoption reform process as set out in government publications such as *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay (DfE 2011) and Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes (DfE 2013)* specifically in the area of improving adopter recruitment. One of the grant objectives is to share effective practices that reduce the time children wait before placement, including the effective recruitment of more adopters.

The goal of this qualitative research project is to highlight examples of good practice in recruitment. BAAF's intention is to disseminate this report to all adoption agencies in England and BAAF membership across the UK as well as online.

The adoption process involves many different interactions with potential adopters on their journey from first enquiry to approval at panel and subsequent matching. The research attempts to identify key success factors in the process, drawing together any common themes or triggers, as well as highlighting any significant barriers to success and how these have been overcome.

Qualitative telephone interviews were carried out and audio recorded with 25 key professionals each representing an adoption agency or adoption consortium. The participants comprised 13 adoption managers and 12 marketing officers. The agencies represented were 18 local authority adoption agencies, five voluntary adoption agencies (henceforward VAAs) comprising a mix of sizes of agencies from different areas of England and two adoption consortia. The sample was identified by staff at BAAF who also obtained their consent to take part in the research. For the purposes of the study, recruitment was taken to mean not just attracting people to come forward to enquire about adoption but also encouraging them to stay with an agency and become approved adopters.

Four main themes and some suggested "success factors" emerge from the study findings.

Executive summary

Introduction

This section summarises a study of the insights provided by the agencies in the sample. In depth qualitative telephone interviews were undertaken with these 25 professionals to highlight good practice and identify key success factors in adopter recruitment, significant barriers to success and how they might be surmounted. Four main themes emerged in the study:

i)   that marketing should be integral to the agency plan;
ii)   the growing importance of the agency website and web presence (e.g, social media and geotargeting) in recruitment;

     iii)   the need to cherish enquirers on their journey towards adoption
     iv)   what can be done to encourage adopters to consider more complex children.

These themes are placed in the context of the nature of adoption agencies, the geographical areas in which they recruit, their degree of cooperation with other agencies in local consortia and national factors affecting recruitment.

Key findings

1. Adoption agencies differ in their approach to marketing. Some have detailed and active marketing plans; others have less formal plans or carry out only a modest amount of proactive marketing.
2. Although most agencies make use of marketing expertise, in some agencies marketing is fully integrated into agency planning; in others it is somewhat peripheral.
3. Marketing personnel bring a distinctive customer focus to agency work encouraging consideration about the ways in which enquirers prefer to receive services from the agency.
4. Although adoption agencies share many of the same "selling points" in their advertising to potential adopters, agencies do make some differing claims about their services and are conscious of the need to build their reputations.
5. A few agencies base their marketing on sophisticated data; most have access only to partial or limited data.
6. Agencies use a variety of advertising media but no one method or combination of methods is regarded as effective in all contexts.
7. The agency website has now become the most important single source of adoptive enquirers and most agencies seek to guide enquirers to their websites in all their other media advertising.
8. Websites need to be lively, interactive and informative comprising a "brochure" for the agency's service to adopters.
9. Some agencies are struggling to achieve "brochure" websites because of corporate communication policies, management reservations about marketing and lack of investment. There are, however, examples of agencies overcoming these obstacles.
10. "Word of mouth" recommendations of adoption agencies by existing adopters are second only to websites as a source of enquirers.
11. VAAs in particular, are beginning to use web optimisation and geotargeting techniques to enhance their online presence.
12. Some agencies, particularly VAAs, are also using social media as a way of drawing enquirers into the ambit of the agency and accompanying them on their journey to adoption.
13. In the course of a gradual "journey" towards adoption, enquirers will typically have done much research and soul searching before approaching an agency. They will often approach the agency with a sense of excitement and anxiety.
14. Agencies therefore take care and make various arrangements to welcome enquirers warmly and listen to their questions and concerns.

15. Agencies have identified certain key messages of encouragement and inclusion which it is important to communicate to enquirers in person and in agency information.
16. All agencies sometimes agree with enquirers to defer applications because of prior issues the enquirer needs to resolve before adoption is possible.
17. It is of critical importance to keep enquirers fully informed in the application process and provide them with clear information.
18. The timeliness of the assessment process as experienced by enquirers is more important to the outcome than speed *per se*.
19. Agencies who are successful in helping enquirers to consider more complex children accept enquirers with their existing aspirations rather than expecting them to want complex children at the start of the process.
20. These agencies find ways to enable enquirers to encounter children as "real" rather than as a repository of problems. This can lead enquirers to imaginatively consider children previously thought to be beyond their scope.
21. Contact between enquirers and established adopters is critical at various stages in helping enquirers to identify with the role of adopter and feel that adoption is achievable.
22. Successful agencies provide opportunities for prospective adopters to learn and reflect and reach realistic assessments of their own capabilities and desires.

Implications for practice: Key success factors in recruitment

1. Marketing needs to be integrated into adoption agency's business plan rather than being seen as a "bolt on" function.
2. Agencies should welcome and learn from the customer focused perspective of marketing staff in its efforts to reach out to potential adopters.
3. Agencies should consider improving their capture and organisation of marketing data and use it to plan their marketing.
4. Existing adopters' good opinion of the agency is a precious asset for recruitment, encouraging potential adopters to come forward, and therefore relationships with existing adopters need to be nurtured.
5. High priority needs to be given to establishing and maintaining a vibrant "brochure" website as a key marketing tool for the agency. This may mean taking action at higher management and local political levels to loosen corporate controls on adoption recruitment sites.
6. Particularly those agencies that recruit at some distance from their main base may want to consider web optimisation and geotargeting techniques to enhance their web presence.
7. All agencies should consider using social media to help adoption recruitment, providing training for agency staff in appropriate and responsible social media use.
8. Take care to listen to enquirers' questions and concerns at the point of entry rather than attempting first to gather data from them or inform them about adoption.

9. Identify the core messages that the agency needs to communicate to enquirers. These need to feature in all the agency's media but also to inform the agency's culture and the genuineness of its welcome for enquirers.

10. Timeliness of service is more important than speed *per se*. Consult enquirers/ adopters in assessment about the speed of assessment that is appropriate for them.

11. It is of critical importance to keep enquirers fully informed in the application process and provide them with clear information.

12. At each stage from information meetings onward give enquirers/ adopters in assessment opportunities to encounter children as real personalities as well as providing accurate information regarding their needs.

13. Use encounters with children to foster "the idea of possibility" in the minds of adoptive enquirers/ applicants, i.e. encourage them to imagine what it might be like to parent that particular child.

14. Enable enquirers to meet, hear from, and be buddied/ supported/ mentored by successful adoptive parents.

15. Train and equip adopters to prepare for difficulties they are likely to encounter

16. In meetings with the assessing social worker, provide opportunities for enquirers/ adopters to reflect in depth about their encounters with real children, the feeling that these meetings engendered encouraging them to think about those feelings and realistically assess their own capacity to parent.

Limitations of the study

The study's findings are based solely upon the perspectives and insights of adoption managers and marketing professionals. There has been no attempt to gather other external data regarding adoption recruitment. Although BAAF attempted to identify adoption agencies which were innovating in the field of adoption recruitment, the accounts from this sample of professionals is unlikely to capture all current innovative recruitment practice in English adoption agencies although it is likely to have identified many of the main themes and issues.

"Marketing isn't just a bolt on function": Integrating marketing in the agency plan

This first theme draws together participants' experiences of marketing their services as an adoption agency to potential service users or "customers" - prospective adoptive parents. Agencies differ greatly in their approach to marketing. Some have detailed written strategies and budgeted plans based upon extensive data collection and analysis and put into action by dedicated marketers. At the other end of the spectrum, a few agencies have implicit marketing strategies that they see as working well for them and are more concerned about how best to convert enquirers to adopters (retention of enquirers) than mounting advertising campaigns (recruitment). Agencies have different requirements in respect of marketing related to their local context, but having a clear idea of a recruitment strategy and what marketing needs to be undertaken seems central to successful recruitment. Some marketing officers

believe that marketing is respected by their agencies with marketing considerations included in strategic planning. For others, marketing and the customer orientation for which it stands are only in the process of being accommodated within adoption agencies and marketing is something of a "bolt on" function.

Although many agencies recognise that they need marketing expertise to reach potential adopters, the customer orientated approach of marketing professionals is sometimes resisted by agencies and marketing officers can find themselves marginalised. Where marketing is integral to the agency's strategic planning, marketing professionals can not only provide marketing plans tailored to the agency's audience and unique selling points but also better represent the voice of the customer (the adopter) in the whole adoption process.

Learning to love marketing in adoption

Not all participant agencies have a marketing officer dedicated to adoption. Commonly, local authorities either draw on the expertise of their central communications team or have created a shared marketing post between adoption and fostering. Small voluntary adoption agencies usually employ marketing officers on a part-time basis whilst the only large VAA in the study have a marketing team dedicated to adoption.

Several participants spoke of the close integration of their marketing officers in the work of their agency, whilst others suggested that there remains some ambivalence; in some agencies they are still not seen as an integral part of the adoption project. For example, one VAA "communications officer" said that she was so titled because the chief executive dislikes the idea of marketing. She perceives a lack of "buy-in" from the organisation to "customer orientated" thinking.

Whilst some adoption managers feel they need marketing expertise within their team, they are not always happy to accept the suggestions marketers make. However, the relationship with the marketing officer is a dynamic one:

> *She [marketing manager] is always challenging us: 'Well, why wouldn't you do that?'*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Another VAA marketing officer, although she saw herself as "100% part of the team" was aware of the need to be sensitive to the very personal nature of adoption and appeared to be exercising some self restraint in the way she spoke about what she was doing:

> *…you can't be as blatant as advertising lipstick.*

Another VAA marketing officer remarked, however, that marketing an adoption agency was in essence just the same as selling anything else. It was-

> *…just like selling different brands of washing machine.*

Such comments suggest that marketing professionals are encountering a

different culture in adoption agencies from those of commercial organisations and are in the process of adapting their skills and methods to the sensibilities of adoption professionals. However, it is clear that the marketers are very committed to what they are doing, to their organisations and to the moral cause of finding families for children. Several marketing officers spoke in highly emotional terms of their passionate commitment to their adoption agencies and to finding homes for children who need them.

> *You have to get passionate about it because… It's not glamorous–it's not your traditional marketing job, it has elements of it.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

Marketing officers also spoke of their admiration of the work of their social work colleagues. One VAA marketing manager felt that all she needed to do was to deliver enquirers to an information meeting where, she was convinced, the warmth and wisdom of her social work colleagues would ensure that they stayed with the agency:

> *We know that once we've got them through the door and they've come to our first Wednesday, the job's done!… They are treated so nicely, they are treated with respect, listened to, they are welcomed and… That's it! So I know that all I have to do is get them through the door. I know that all the social workers that take the adopters through the approval process are amazing… They take really great care in matching the children… I know that post adoption they're really well taken care of. So, you know, I really believe in what we are selling.*

This adaptation by marketers to the adoption world was recognised by some adoption managers. One adoption manager reported that the adoption team had fully accepted the marketing manager and what she did because she was obviously so "child-centred".

Some VAA marketers' position in the organisation is still somewhat tenuous. Several of the marketing managers interviewed had joined their adoption agency within the last year and some are on short-term contracts, the renewal being dependent on their impact on recruitment or further support from Adoption Reform Grant funding.

Bringing the perspective of the customer into focus

The marketing managers had a range of views as to whether their organisations were truly customer orientated. The true measure of this was whether the organisation was prepared to try to understand what customers (in this case people enquiring about adoption) wanted and be committed to providing it for them. There was evidence of some marketing managers feeling that they have to work hard to put across this emphasis on customer focus in the face of feeling by some social workers that marketing discourse is alien to adoption. Faced with this scepticism, marketing managers were at pains to explain some basic tenets of marketing thinking as it applies to adoption recruitment. Marketing is, according to one VAA manager:

> *"…creating a mutually beneficial exchange with your target audience that is managing to anticipate and meet their needs"* or according to

> another: *"it is about understanding what people out there want and attempting to provide it for them.*
>
> *We try to structure ourselves around audience groups… getting to know what they want to hear, what information they need and how they want it communicated because they are obviously going to be more receptive to that. So, we are… helping the adoption service think in those terms and think about what it's like for an adopter to go through the system….*
> *(Local authority marketing manager)*

Paradoxically, this focus on consumer expectations can help sensitise the marketers to feelings in enquirers which, they believe, have perhaps been overlooked by their social work colleagues. For example, one voluntary adoption agency marketer found that some of the drop-in events and other promotional activity had left enquirers lacking the opportunity to have a proper discussion with one person:
> *…it feels a bit impersonal when you're thinking about it's the fact that you're trying to have a child.*
> *(Local authority marketing manager)*

A local authority recruitment officer felt that she was in a better position than social workers to spend time talking with enquirers on their own terms since enquirers could be intimidated by social workers whom, they might feel, were continually assessing them.

One large local authority commissions its communications and marketing department to collect data on adopter satisfaction at every stage of the process right through to adoption support to promote service improvement. So, marketers claim not just to help agencies attract adopters but to help them to retain their focus on what adopters want from the process. They can act as the voice of the customer.

Identifying agency unique selling points and building a good reputation

Although all participants mentioned characteristics that they felt distinguished their agency from their competitor agencies and which they featured in their marketing, what was striking was the core similarity in these characteristics.

Most agencies claim that they are open to all comers and do not turn away enquirers unless they are obviously unsuitable. Most claim to extend a warm welcome to enquirers. Typically agencies draw attention to the expertise and experience of their staff and their "forever" promise to be available when adoption support is needed. They speak of their adopters' satisfaction with their adoption support services.

The agencies do, however, make some distinguishing claims. Some VAAs stress that they can help their adopters carefully search the country for the right match and their low disruption rates. VAAs tend to emphasise the personal service that they provide and the sense that their adopters will be joining a community or something akin to an extended family. They are more

likely to meet whole teams of social workers and administrators and get to know them all by name.

A similar claim that 'small is beautiful' is made by some unitary authorities. The unitaries tend to emphasise that they are approachable, less bureaucratic, more flexible, pragmatic and joined up than large authorities. Some larger local authorities claim an extensive programme of post adoption training for adopters and support groups. They also present themselves as streamlined and efficient, conscious of the need to complete adopter assessments as speedily as possible. Some local authorities make their appeal to enquirers on the basis that they have the children needing placement and that this can speed and facilitate matching rather than needing to involve another agency. Some also indicate that in the wake of the 26-week reform of care proceedings, they are seeking adopters for many more children under the age of one year.

It appears that enquirers are guided primarily by word of mouth recommendations (when available) whilst making a choice between agencies, but that other small but significant factors can influence their decisions, for example, the tone of the presentation of adoption at open events or by the first person from an agency with whom they had a discussion. Several participants report that word of mouth recommendations by existing adopters are second only to website referrals in generating enquirers. Moreover, some commented that the quality of enquirers who come as a result of word of mouth recommendation tend to be higher, perhaps because these enquirers are more likely to have experienced at least one adoptive family first hand. One local authority which receives a high proportion of its enquiries from word of mouth recommendations actively encourages its adopters at social gatherings to tell their friends about the agency.

The reputation of the adoption agency is seen as a very precious asset. One local authority communications department surveys its existing adopters' levels of satisfaction to ensure that any outstanding complaints have been dealt with both to improve the service and to reduce the risk of adopters airing grievances in online fora.

There is agreement that enquirers should have the chance to choose between different agencies and that, therefore, some degree of competition is inevitable. Most participants are sanguine about the competitive element believing that there are enough adopters for all agencies, although some deplore the duplication of effort and advertising and in some areas of the country where adoption agencies are more densely situated, the feeling of competitiveness has apparently undermined the willingness of small agencies to share common tasks such as information meetings and preparation groups.

Using evidence to inform recruitment strategies

Agencies vary enormously in the attention given to marketing data. In some agencies, enquirers are asked in detail about their route into the agency. In others, little attempt is made to record this information. In some agencies, no advertising of any kind is undertaken without evidence. Evidence might be a

combination of "desktop study" (i.e. examining other articles and studies about adopter recruitment such as the Kindred Report), demographic analysis (some local authorities' communication teams have access to extremely sophisticated data enabling them to segment the population by postcode, ethnicity, age and so on) and adopter studies (see Box 1). However, a thoroughgoing data based approach is rare. In most agencies the data available is partial or fragmentary. Some agencies mount media advertising on a more or less "trial and error" basis doing their best to monitor the outcomes.

BOX 1

The marketing officer of **Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council** undertook a study of its own adopters' motivations to adopt funded by the adoption improvement grant. Fifteen approved adopters (mostly couples but a few single adopters) were interviewed regarding the recruitment strategy for the authority. The findings suggested that enquirers often do a great deal of online reading and searching before approaching agencies and so come with a good deal of background knowledge.

The main outcomes were the need for a warm welcome for enquirers and for adoption to have "a much more positive image… a lot of the time people were saying it's difficult to get information because it's more or less seen as a last chance saloon when you've gone through everything".

Adoption needed promotion at a national level as a positive choice.

The possibility of doing more to present adoption as a positive choice in the context of assisted fertility was suggested. Informants felt that there should be more emphasis in recruitment on adoption as a route to the creation of a family. These informants valued one to one discussions with professionals and existing adopters over general presentations. These findings have informed Rotherham's recruitment strategy.

Some agencies are attempting to improve their data collection for general management purposes, for matching and progress chasing and to be able to report on Government "scorecards". These developments have potential to provide better information to inform marketing plans. However, marketing officers currently do not always have access to reliable sources of data even if that data exists within the agency. As it is, some marketing managers used to basing their every action upon good data and trying to promote its importance, can find adoption agencies frustrating:

> I've tried to have several conversations about it… I'm not getting much of a reaction from anyone in my organisation.
> (VAA marketing manager)

Using a variety of methods to attract new enquirers

A few local authority agencies rely on their websites and word of mouth recommendations to attract the majority of enquirers:

> I don't think we have done anything massive in terms of trying to get people through the door because we've had people through the door and continue to get people rolling up.
> (Local authority adoption manager)

Most agencies perceive the need to engage in more active marketing and advertising. Agencies have used a wide variety of methods across many media to attempt to generate enquirers. These include leafleting in targeted areas; leaflets placed in promising locations such as leisure centres and GP surgeries; staffed stands at exhibitions, community events or in shopping centres; radio interviews; radio adverts; posters on the backs of buses and bus shelters; conventional press interviews and adverts. The message from participants is that each of these methods can be effective but that no method is effective in every community or indeed in the same community on a subsequent occasion.

> *Different territories are immensely different in the way they respond to different kinds of promotion.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

One local authority agency and a VAA successfully used radio advertising on a local radio station listened to by women within a particular age bracket. However, a radio advertising campaign in another part of the country yielded few enquirers.

Several agencies have given up using staffed display stands feeling that much valuable time is wasted and that it is preferable to target particular demographics in a more deliberate fashion than rely on "passing trade". Others argue that the method can be effective if the staff actively engage passers by and the right sites are chosen.

Bus advertising has proved effective for a unitary agency where buses went to and fro between the town and its surrounding areas which were the agency's prime recruiting grounds. The commonly held view is that advertising in whatever form rarely yields immediate results but tends to work cumulatively. The agency website is promoted in nearly all media activity.(Websites are addressed in a separate section).

Two marketing managers drew attention to seasonal variations in adopter recruitment. They suggested the new year is a time when people review their lives and make resolutions whilst in May, TV companies often air programmes on the theme of adoption and children looked after. Spreading campaigns throughout the year prevents "bunching" around the regular November slot for National Adoption Week.

Whatever the evidence suggested by research such as the Kindred Report, not all agreed that advertising should be targeted to particular demographics. Some agencies, particularly those with access to sophisticated council population data, have attempted to do this. For most, this is difficult to achieve and participants question the value of doing so. Several stress that their existing adopters are varied in background in age, ethnicity and partner status, leading them to direct their marketing towards anyone and everyone who might be interested in adopting.

Success factors in adoption marketing

- **The recruitment strategy for an agency needs to be part of the agency business plan.**
- **Agencies should improve data collection and retrieval allowing their recruitment strategies to become more evidence based.**
- **Agencies may not need a highly detailed marketing plan to support recruitment. It depends on the agency's ecology and the degree of local competition.**
- **Where a proactive marketing plan is necessary to promote recruitment, it is highly desirable that this should be based on good data regarding what has worked previously and the demographics of the areas in which the agency is recruiting.**
- **A variety of advertising media may be effective in some communities at some times but there is no general recipe for success in advertising adoption.**
- **Word of mouth recommendation by existing adopters is likely to be a very important source of enquirers. The agency needs to take care of its reputation with its adopters and encourage them to act as its ambassadors in the community.**
- **Marketing staff need to be welcomed into the heart of agency activity and not kept at the periphery. They need access to a dedicated budget and good recruitment data.**
- **Marketing staff should be encouraged to bring complementary perspectives into the work of the agency on recruitment issues but also, crucially on the need for the service to be customer orientated at each stage of the adopter's journey.**

"Everything we do we steer to the website": The growing place of the internet in recruitment

Although the promotion of adoption through the internet is not new, what was striking in this study is the prominence that internet marketing has now assumed in adoption recruitment. Participants identified this area as their leading source of enquirers. Most are far from satisfied with their web presence and spoke of work in progress and obstacles that need to be surmounted in order to provide enquirers with the information they need in the way they wish to access it. Some agencies have been experimenting with web optimisation tools and other web marketing methods. The use of social media in adoption recruitment is also growing.

The agency website as the marketing hub

Overwhelmingly, participants report that their website is the hub of their marketing activity, several being clear that most of their enquiries (up to 90% in the case of one large local authority) come through the website.

In terms of enquirers putting their growing interest in adoption into action, the website of an adoption agency is often the first port of call. People will often search Google by typing in "adoption" and their hometown:

> *Most people Google the local adoption agency and go straight to the website.*
> *(Local authority recruiting officer)*

Voluntary agencies point out that this favours local authorities who tend to be at the top of Google search lists; VAAs therefore feel they have to work harder to get enquirers to visit their sites.

The specific route by which enquirers contact adoption agencies varies but it nearly always includes a visit to the agency website. Enquirers sometimes do extensive searching on the internet over a period of time to find out about adoption and read around the topic. Others may have been pointed to the website by some other form of advertising or word of mouth recommendation. Enquirers may then contact the agency to express their interest by emailing from the website, completing an online form, phoning or texting. A few may have referred themselves at open events advertised on the agency website. What is clear was that agencies are deliberately using their website as the focus of all other marketing activity:

> *All advertising and publicity points to the website.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

> *Everything we do we steer to the website.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

The website is hugely important to marketing in several ways. Websites can appeal to enquirers at three levels of marketing: myth busting; pointing to the agency's unique selling points; and featuring the needs of individual children. Websites provide a wealth of information about the adoption process. Photographs of children, video presentations featuring adopters, social workers or celebrities can be incorporated to engage the enquirer. In principle, websites are easily updated to include the dates of forthcoming information meetings and so forth. Agency websites usually include contact details allowing people to email or phone or complete online forms expressing their interest in adoption.

One VAA marketing manager spoke for many others in aspiring to produce and maintain a "brochure" website, underlining the perception that this is perhaps the main opportunity to present adoption to enquirers in a way they are likely to welcome. Only a few participants are happy that their agency websites are fit for purpose:

> *We have done lots and lots of work making our website a live piece of…rather than just a page…it's interactive…it can answer all your questions.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

Most are far from satisfied with their web presence and speak of work in progress and obstacles that need to be surmounted in order to provide enquirers with the information they need in the way they wish to access it.

The struggle to achieve a "brochure" website

Both local authorities and voluntary agencies, conscious of the importance of their websites, are attempting to update and refresh them. In doing so, they tend to face different obstacles. Local authority adoption websites are usually embedded within a much larger council website and are relatively inaccessible.

> *It's about ten clicks away! [from the council homepage]*
> *(Adoption manager)*

Local authority adoption agencies often have to contend with council policies on corporate image. Several face restrictions as to content, style and format. One marketing manager described the dilemma experienced by several others:

> *We've got a very small corporate website team. They've got branding to control and templates and procedures that we need to fit into and follow. We're at the point where we are saying: 'really it's not about looking for bin day collections, things like that. We are a different service–we are completely different. It's more personal'. People need to access clips of people talking about their experiences. It's not enough for us to just put something on a page and–basically we are in a bit of a battle... We need to pull our finger out and compete but it's very difficult in the constraints of the local authority.*
> *(Local authority marketing officer)*

There are sometimes layers of hierarchical control making it difficult to produce an appealing and coherent site which is easily edited:

> *Too many people pile in… It's got to go to many layers of people… everyone's got to QA it!... there's nothing that goes out that hasn't been mashed and mangled by several people.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

As a result, some participants feel their websites are rather wooden and corporate in style. In many agencies, only central communications staff can alter web content so that processes around website editing is more:

> *…oil tanker rather than speedboat.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Several participants have pressed for a stand-alone website for adoption recruitment. In a number of cases this has been blocked by senior managers or central communications departments.

Some small voluntary agencies enjoy more freedom and can produce more dynamic websites,

> *We have a massive amount of people that come via the Internet now.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

Others are hampered by conservative attitudes of management to marketing. For example, one CEO did not agree to the marketing officer's proposal to display pictures of children on the website:

> *Whatever you are selling, you have to have a picture of it…and we are selling the idea of adopting children…this is what the customer is asking for and expecting.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

Another obstacle mentioned by a small voluntary agency is the lack of investment in web design and maintenance leading one marketer to have to redesign a moribund agency website on the basis of a free template. Moreover, small VAA marketing personnel who are often part-time staff sometimes struggle to combine website management with all their other roles. A national voluntary agency manager which featured adoption among a range of child related activities feels that, as in many local authorities, the impact of the agency's adoption pages are diluted somewhat because adoption is buried deep in the organisation's website.

One local authority has demonstrated that a dynamic stand alone "brochure" website can be achieved in a local authority framework when there is a clear grasp of priorities not just by adoption agency managers but also by corporate communications managers with political support essential (see Box 2)

BOX 2
A county council adoption agency have set up a stand-alone adoption recruitment site. A passionate council cabinet member representing children services had pressed for an adoption recruitment website which was not restricted by central corporate control. Their marketing manager explained that the director of central communications and other senior managers had also been influenced by the evidence of focus group studies of visitors to the council's main website. "We are delivering services to the public" she explained, and therefore the council has a duty to listen the way in which the public wish to receive this information. An external agency was commissioned to make recommendations concerning the branding of adoption. The new website includes the county logo but has a much more accessible feel. The central communications team monitors traffic to the main site and the new recruitment site and both sites have good hit rates.

Another local authority adoption agency has had permission in principle to set up a recruitment sub site and are planning how best to achieve this. In a third local authority the fostering and adoption teams have persistently argued the case for a more accessible recruitment website for some time. As a result of their representations, the central communications team are outsourcing a redesign of the whole council website to make it more accessible to the public and plans are in progress to allow the adoption recruitment pages to be made more fit for purpose.

Aggressive or confident?: Using new techniques to target markets and optimise web presence

As previously mentioned, small VAA participants tend to perceive their websites as being disadvantaged in Google ranking compared to local authority adoption agencies. Small VAAs often recruit from a wide geographical area crossing a number of local authority boundaries and the challenge for them seems to be to make their online presence felt, not just in the town in which their office may be situated but in localities perhaps 50 miles away from their central base. For these reasons, small VAAs in particular are beginning to be more creative and assertive in using a range of relatively new techniques to optimise their web presence to point enquirers to their websites. These include search engine optimisation and geotargeting enabling the agency to make their pitch to identified segments of the population by age, gender and postcode. Participants mentioned the following techniques. No agency used all of them. Some of these techniques are cost free; others require investment. All of them require advanced web skills and understanding from the marketers seeking to employ them.

Search engine optimization (SEO) improves the visibility of a website or a web page in a search engine's free search results. When optimisation is in place, the agency link is brought nearer to the top of the list in Google or another search engine when commonly used search terms are entered.

Geotargeting in Google is a paid service showing advertising and links to web users on the basis of data recorded by the search engine regarding their location, age, gender, browsing history and other characteristics.   So, for example, whenever a woman between the ages of 35-45 who shows an interest in family and lives in Hertfordshire types "adoption" in Google as a search term, the ad and link to the VAA website might appear in the right hand column. One VAA is just about to launch a Google ad campaign so that anyone typing in "adoption" and the name of a particular town will be shown an ad for the VAA. Geotargeting is also available in Facebook.

One VAA is exploring the marketing potential of *Google maps* which can highlight the location of the agency to web users viewing a particular location. Another future possibility is to be able to alert Smart phone users to the presence of the agency's office when they are in the vicinity.

One VAA has bought *domain names* such as "want to adopt" for use in particular campaigns. An advertising campaign may prominently feature a chosen slogan/ domain name which may also be a key search phrase for adoption enquirers. Anyone who enters "want to adopt" in a search engine will be directed to the VAA website.

One local authority marketing manager is considering the use of *QR codes* in media ads to connect enquirers with Smart phones to the agency website.

The impression gained is that these techniques are increasingly being tried and adopted but that it is too early to be able to determine relative effectiveness.

"That's how people will consume everything in the future": The beginnings of social media marketing in adoption

Small VAA participants also make greater use of social media.
As mentioned above, Facebook can be used for demographically targeted paid advertising, but it's main use in the context of adopter recruitment is to accompany followers/ enquirers, allowing interaction at a fairly simple (non confidential) level, giving them a feel for the nature of the organisation and promoting a stronger sense of connectedness.

> *Facebook is a really useful tool…It's free. We use it to speak to people–it humanises us.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

Twitter too allows potential enquirers to monitor an agency from a distance and to feel a growing sense of connection. Agencies which use social media as an accompaniment for potential enquirers hope that this will lead on to face to face contact with the agency. The social media model suits small VAAs in two ways. Firstly, they can convey one of their unique selling points to enquirers, depicting themselves as small communities with the feel of an extended family where staff members and regular social and fundraising events are pictured. Secondly, because VAAs are not responsible for children in care needing adoption and do not have the same concern about the possibility of interventions by birth family members, some allow visitors to post comments and ask questions about the assessment process and adoption in general. This can create a better dialogue between the enquirer and the agency.

VAAs have control of their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. Several local authority adoption agencies have to persuade central communications staff to tweet news items on a generic council feed which can be slow and frustrating. A few local authorities have even banned the use of social media.
Currently, some local authority adoption managers, especially those who do not use social media themselves, are tentative and sceptical, unsure of the benefits for the agency and concerned about possible confidentiality breaches.

> *…you're talking to the wrong person. I don't use Twitter…Personally, I struggle to understand the point of Twitter, I have to say.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Other local authorities are keen to exploit social media to the full:
> *"Our enquirers are very savvy on social media. They use social media for everything…so we need to tap into that...In a perfect world, I would prefer to have a personal Facebook and Twitter account…it's just not happening at the moment. It's an ongoing conversation we have with our communications unit.*

> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

One local authority has allowed agency staff their own Facebook and Twitter account and provided them with social media awareness training and clear common sense parameters for use. These media are in the early stages of development and have few followers to date but have already begun to publish news and views including, for example, a contribution from a recently approved adopter about how it felt to go to the adoption panel.

Twitter also represents a new way of planting adoption related stories with the conventional and online press.

Whereas much marketing is characterised by the attempt to focus people's attention on a chosen message, an alternative approach is-

> *…having a conversation [with people] where they are.*
> *(local authority marketing manager)*

Social media achieves this by monitoring online discussions on the pages of sites such as Mumsnet and intervening to point the way to the adoption agency knowing the topic of adoption has already been raised and so is likely to be of interest.

Success factors in using the internet

- **The agency website is an indispensable marketing tool addressing marketing at different levels and fulfilling a number of vital functions. All other marketing media should point the enquirer towards the agency website.**
- **Whatever the overall recruitment plan for an agency, high priority needed to be given to getting the website right and updating it.**
- **It needs to be informal, dynamic, interactive and above all, customer centred. That is, the site must provide the information enquirers want in the way that they want it.**
- **Adoption recruitment websites work better as stand-alone sites rather than being embedded in large sites.**
- **It is not easy to free adoption recruitment websites from corporate constraints but there are now examples to follow of successful cases being made to senior managers, communications departments and leading councillors.**
- **Web design and content needs to be the responsibility of a small number of people within the adoption agency with freedom to edit site content quickly and frequently.**
- **As part of the recruitment plan, adoption agencies, particularly those small VAAs and local authority unitaries who recruit outside of their base area should consider whether to invest in additional measures to optimise the agency's web presence such as web optimisation and geotargeting.**
- **Social media provides a window into the agency for enquirers thinking of making a first approach and has the potential to "accompany" and inform enquirers and adopters in assessment.**

- **Although VAAs are obviously in a good position to use social media to the full, the potential for local authorities to do so is largely untapped. For this to happen, the same issues of freeing from corporate control need to be addressed and training for appropriate and responsible social media use introduced for agency staff.**

"It's a really big step to make a call"- Cherishing enquirers on their journey

This theme draws together participants' ideas about direct practice in working with people enquiring about adoption. The deeply personal and significant nature of the process for adoptive parents was emphasised, and hence the need for a personal and sensitive approach. The wisdom of participants reflected both generally held ideas about best practice in social work (responding to individuals empathically, non-judgementally but also with efficiency) but with the additional element of the need for a deep understanding of particular issues encountered by adoption enquirers. Participants stressed the need for agencies to respect the enquirer's journey towards adoption; to welcome them warmly and answer their concerns first before questioning them or imparting information.

Enquirers' journey towards adoption

> We accept that people are on a journey.
> (VAA marketing manager)

A number of participants likened the enquirer's movement towards contacting an adoption agency to a journey, some drawing parallels to the process of birth in which the pregnancy period allows parents to slowly adjust to the idea of forthcoming parenthood:

> I kind of see it very similar to sort of starting a family–your own birth family. You go through all those stages you know, that's something I would like to do and it's just a gradual process I think.
> (Local authority adoption manager)

The gradual process of contemplation and gestation has to be respected; it is inappropriate to try to hurry the process. Enquirers' growing preoccupation with the possibility of adoption will, it is thought, sensitise them to messages from any source about adoption. One adoption marketing manager therefore felt that strong moral pressure on individuals to adopt was the wrong message:

> People don't want to feel almost bullied into adopting… As a community you should be doing this. I don't go for that kind of approach. I prefer people to feel: 'Do you know what? This is something I can do. I'm not just doing it for the child or I'm not doing it for myself, I'm doing it for both'.
> (Local authority marketing manager)

By the time enquirers act they will usually have done a good deal of research and considerable soul searching. However, the process will have generated

urgent questions and concerns as the enquirer tests out the feasibility of the adoption idea:

> *They are human beings who have come to the point in their lives when they have decided they want to adopt and they are not doing so lightly. They have already for some knowledge, but they need answers to their questions.*
> *(Local authority marketing manager)*

Making contact with an adoption agency is both exciting and fearful, full of anticipation, questioning and anxiety:

> *It's a big step for them to pick up the phone.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

> *People have taken all this time to think about it really seriously plus pluck up the courage to put themselves forward and they're nervous and, like, excited and like, chomping at the bit really wanting to set off going.*
> *(Local authority marketing manager)*

Conscious of the importance of this step for enquirers, one local authority agency undertakes training in customer care to help first line staff to understand and empathise with enquirer perspectives.

What enquirers want from their early contact with the agency

Most agencies stress the importance of giving enquirers a warm welcome

> *They are treated so nicely, they are treated with respect, listened to, they are welcomed …*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

At drop in sessions, one local authority agency tasks a volunteer to welcome enquirers and ensure that there is someone to talk to them.

Participants' described numerous variations in detail concerning their arrangement for taking phone calls and emails and greeting people at drop in meetings. Most agencies have a dedicated recruitment phone line. In some cases this goes to the desk of an administrator with reception skills or a full time receptionist with some knowledge of adoption. In other cases, calls are received by social workers from the adoption team. Some agencies prefer to take contact details and arrange for a social worker to phone the enquirer back at an agreed time. Whatever the details of the arrangement, participants agree that the person taking the first call needs to be welcoming and should understand the significance of the call for the enquirer. Ideally, the person first contacted should be knowledgeable enough about adoption to be able to address the enquirer's issues.

One local authority agency has a dedicated enquiries officer who handles all incoming contacts for fostering and adoption. She is not a social worker but has a counselling background and excellent listening skills. This worker sends out an information pack and books the enquirer into an information meeting/ drop in. This worker also runs the information meetings with help from an

adopter and a social worker. This provides continuity from the very first contact with the agency.

A small VAA marketing officer reports that there is always somebody available to pick up the phone to speak to an enquirer. These calls are generally passed to a duty social worker:

> *It takes so much courage to pick up the phone and speak to someone about adoption that the least we can do is have someone available to talk to you then.*

In another VAA, the reception worker has been provided with a detailed outline script written by the adoption manager. This covers many common queries and is as nurturing and encouraging as possible. The aim is to seek to answer people's queries and concerns first before trying to collect information for the agency.

Whose agenda first? Listening to enquirers

A number of participants emphasised the need not to rush into collecting data from the enquirer and questioning them about factors which were relevant to their possible future application. Instead, they should start where the enquirer was:

> *Lots of times people just want to talk.*
> *(Local authority marketing manager)*

Some participants emphasised the need for enquirers to have the chance at first contact or very early on to have a substantive discussion with a social worker rather than just have outline information taken by an administrator or receptionist. According to one local authority adoption manager, enquirers feel a bit disappointed when they speak to admin people even if they are friendly.

One local authority agency had given up formal presentations at set piece information meetings in favour of informal drop-in sessions at predictable regular times advertised on the website. At these drop-in sessions, enquirers can speak at length with a social worker and/or an adopter at a personal level.

Some agencies set great store by encouraging in depth phone discussions as near as possible to first contact. They use these discussions to judge how best to bring enquirers through the enquiry process or indeed whether they need to be diverted or to deal with personal circumstances or life events before embarking on adoption. This appears to have the advantage of providing the enquirer with some immediate feedback on their situation but could be somewhat at odds with another principle expressed by the participants - flexibility.

Some participants stressed the need to take things at the enquirer's pace rather than press them into a substantive early discussion. Some enquirers just want the answer to a particular question or for a copy of the information pack to be sent to them:

> *We try to work to work with people individually as they would like.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

According to this manager, the agency takes things in the order that enquirers want whether this is a brief chat first, or an in depth phone conversation, or a visit, or just to read the information pack or attend an information meeting. What is important is to "give people options".
Several participants agreed that detailed online expression of interest forms are generally off putting and can delay the enquirer's approach to the agency or put them off altogether.

The importance of avoiding any messages which can be interpreted as excluding enquirers at first contact was also stressed, including agencies temporarily suspending their enquiries processes due to issues of capacity or other reasons. Similarly, messages on websites indicating that the agency is only recruiting adopters for children in certain categories or ages undermines the notion that anyone can be a potential adopter. Such messages seem to rule out the idea of accepting people as they are but wanting them to move on to consider more complex children over a period of time. A VAA adoption manager remarked that enquirers don't always know what they want or what they can do at the beginning of the process and so:
> …we wouldn't want to be in the business of gate keeping at that point.

Getting the core messages right

Participants suggested a number of core messages that they seek to convey to enquirers in their media communications and by their words and actions during initial contact and beyond. These include the following:

- Adoption isn't second best compared to natural birth - it is a genuine alternative way of creating a family.

- Don't rule yourself out as a possible adopter. People like you adopt.

- A wide range of people are eligible to adopt. There are more people who can adopt than can't:
  We just want people to come in. Unless there's an obvious reason, there's no reason why you couldn't parent…you start from the basis of that everybody can parent unless something comes up to proves to be a barrier to that
  (Local authority adoption manager)

- Attempting to convey that the agency is "not looking for what's wrong with people but what is right" (Local authority adoption manager)

- Some agencies make clear that they are prepared to look again at people whom other agencies have rejected on the grounds of age, health or minor criminal convictions:
  We've got people in their 50s going through approval and we don't frown on that…We are an agency that likes to say 'yes'…We try to give people a chance… We look at everybody's circumstances individually.
  (Local authority adoption manager)

- There are children needing families and you could be their family: *Children are at the heart of what we do.*

- Adoption is achievable: It doesn't take too long - assessment has been speeded up.

- You can do it - it's not beyond you.

- You will get a good service and the agency will support you all the way.

Deferring and following up enquirers

During the initial discussions it is common for people who might well be suitable adopters to mention factors in their lives which make this difficult or impossible in the immediate future. Examples of such factors were having unsuitable accommodation, current working patterns, the need to build networks of support, and the need to take some time to recover from the emotional impact of unsuccessful fertility treatment.

> *Things come up as you enter the process - things that you maybe think that…OK we're ready but actually, on further discussion, there needs to be a bit more time for reflection or for closure.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Participants stressed the need to help the enquirer to be clear about the issues they need to work on before being able to invest in the adoption process. They emphasised that, when handled sensitively, the outcome from such discussions is that enquirers make better decisions about the adoption process in the long term and do not feel a sense of rejection because the decision to defer had been mutually arrived at:

> *…it is always a mutual decision.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Participants were divided about the extent to which adoption agencies should follow up enquirers who had attended information events or received information packs but who had not taken the next step in the process. All agencies send out letters and emails in the few weeks immediately after the enquirer had shown interest, but participants differed in whether they followed up enquirers some months or even a year afterward. The rationale for attempting to renew contact is usually to make the agency available again should the enquirer so wish to resume their exploration of the possibility of adoption. A subsidiary aim is to obtain feedback from the enquirer about the effectiveness of the agency's recruitment process and find out whether and why they may have chosen to go to another adoption agency. Some agencies ask enquirers who agreed that they needed to go away and work on identified issues before considering adoption whether they would like to be contacted after an arranged interval.

Those marketing managers who expressed a view tended to argue that it was essential to follow up lapsed enquirers:

> *Your lost enquirers are, so to speak, one of your biggest assets in terms of target market because they're people who expressed an*

> *interest in adoption and for some reason haven't come back to you…*
> *so the desire to adopt is there. You have to ensure you haven't lost*
> *them for the wrong reasons.* (VAA marketing manager)

Some adoption managers are also in favour of following up lapsed enquirers, suggesting that an approach can be managed tactfully by email or phone. One local authority adoption manager said that enquirers may be asked whether they were still considering adoption and whether the agency can assist them in any way. Another local authority agency takes a less direct approach which, it was maintained, is welcomed by enquirers as demonstrating respect for their privacy. This agency writes to enquirers saying that they were reviewing their records and need to decide under data protection regulations whether to delete the enquirer's details. Would the enquirer like their record with the agency to be deleted or was there any other matter with which that the agency could assist the enquirer? Other adoption managers were not opposed to follow up in principle but for various reasons had not yet done so.

Those adoption managers who opposed contacting lapsed enquirers months after the last contact felt that such follow-ups were obtrusive, insensitive to the potential effects on partnerships and disrespectful of enquirers' privacy:

> *It's up to people to decide when they are ready… It's not a marketing*
> *thing–it's a life changing decision… They know where we are. If they*
> *go somewhere else, so be it.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

The quality of information available to enquirers

Most participants felt it was important for enquirers to attend an information event at some stage. There are many variations in the ways information events are arranged and their frequency. Some are open to all comers. Some are by invitation only. Typically, open information meetings are advertised on the agency website. Most information meetings feature a social worker presenting information about the adoption process and one or more adopters telling their stories. Some events feature the showing of a (non confidential) DVD about the children requiring adoption. Following presentation, many agencies offer enquirers the chance to talk to a social worker or an adopter.

A few agencies prefer to run informal open drop-in events in a café setting with no presentations or formalities so that enquirers could:

> *…ask us questions about everything - anything…people told us they*
> *would prefer to talk to us… their reason that they came back to us was*
> *because they like the informal…quite personal talk.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Some agencies, especially small VAAs and unitaries, use these events to introduce enquirers to other members of their adoption team so that they start to feel comfortable with the organisation as a whole.

Considerable effort has been invested in producing information packs, rewriting older versions based upon disparate leaflets from a variety of

sources bundled in a folder and offering glossy colourful brochures badged with the agency logo. These contain the core messages mentioned above as well as a great deal of information about the adoption process. Mostly, these brochures are available both as printed documents and in an electronic format. Some agencies enable them to be downloaded from their website. Others dispatch them to enquirers only after a first contact.

Keeping enquirers engaged

Agencies are fully aware of the need for enquirers to experience continuity in their application with no periods in which they find themselves in a backwater or are unaware of what is happening with their application.

Agencies have various different ways of ensuring that individual enquirers are not lost in the system and move forward in a timely way. Several employ additional staff from Adoption Reform Grant monies to improve their processes. Some used spreadsheets or databases to note enquirer's progress and to diary forthcoming events. This is effective when administrators chase progress and identify potential slippages in timescales which they then draw to the attention of adoption managers. Other agencies appointed a particular member of staff (sometimes a recruiting officer) whose job it is to hold and communicate with enquirers until Stage 1 is underway.

Several agencies mentioned that there could be difficulties in meeting the new timescale requirements but felt that what is important was to explain the agency's actions at every stage:

> *We try to be flexible…under the new system I will have to be saying to people: 'till we can start you and see you all the way through we won't pick up your interest'… I try to give them a time frame as best I can.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Two agencies are planning to offer enquirers contact with an established adopter buddy who can reassure or advise them during the enquiry and assessment process. Other agencies use periods of delay to suggest to enquirers some homework that would speed the process for them later, for example reading about adoption or collecting information to form part of the assessment process.

Speedy or timely service

Following recent government reforms, agencies are acutely aware of the need to meet Stage 1 and Stage 2 requirement regarding time taken for assessments. Most agencies are confident that with additional social work time and administrative and system support, they will be able to achieve the new timescales.

> *We don't let people stop and start really.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

One local authority manager commented that her team are very experienced, do not waste time and "we work our socks off" to bring more adopters through the system within the required timescales. Some teams have introduced greater specialisation to allow speedier assessments to be produced.

There were mixed views about the speed of the process and assessment as an important factor in the minds of enquirers, with some feeling that speed in itself is less important to adopters than the quality of their experience; for some people the process could prove to be too fast to allow them to prepare properly for the adoption task.

> *I don't think I have ever heard anyone say I wish it was faster…I feel that people self regulate…and they will go at the speed that they need to go.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Another local authority adoption manager felt that adopters are not looking for speed but timeliness. She anticipates complaints from adopters attempting to hold together their existing domestic and working lives whilst following a punishing schedule of adopter-led preparation along these lines:

> *'I'm not just jumping through hoops, I'm doing it at the speed of a racehorse'…What people wanted was a reasonable timescale, so, absolutely not two years but seven months would have been fine…*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

One participant felt that once the assessment process begins, the prospective adopters' initial desire for speed shifts to wanting quality:

> *You know when you're out somewhere and you're absolutely starving? You get to the point when you say: I don't care, I'll have a MacDonald's…whatever.. But once you've eaten a MacDonald's its like… urgh…I wish I hadn't, that wasn't terribly satisfying actually. I wish I had waited and had some proper dinner. I think the government is being informed by people who are so desperate that they'll settle for three bags of crisps. But the minute people are in the system they realise that what they need is a proper meal. People think they want fast food and microwave meals but you get to a point when you realise that wasn't actually what I wanted.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Several participants express the view that applicants should be asked what speed they want to proceed at. Some felt that the new arrangements provide "power on both sides" to speed up or slow down the assessment process as appeared appropriate in each adopter's case. In the view of one VAA marketing manager, "people are human" and may need to take a break from the process to explore issues that have come up.

Success factors in facilitating the enquirers' journey

- **Build the empathy of staff by helping people to understand the process by which enquirers reach the point of contacting adoption agencies and their possible feelings.**
- **Take care to listen to enquirers questions and concerns at the point of entry rather than attempting to inform them about adoption.**
- **Avoid asking enquirers to complete long online forms before they have had one to one contact with someone from the agency.**

- **Identify the core messages that the agency needs to communicate to enquirers. These need to feature in all the agency's media but also to inform the agency's culture and the genuineness of its welcome for enquirers.**
- **Timeliness of service is more important than speed *per se*. Consult enquirers/ adopters in assessment about the speed of assessment that is appropriate for them.**
- **If there are delays in starting assessments, communicate with enquirers promptly, keep them in the picture or signpost them to other agency who can assess them more quickly.**
- **Agencies should review the quality of the information they make available to enquirers to ensure that it is welcoming, accessible and informative.**

"We take you as you are but we want you to move on": Encouraging adopters to consider complex children.

This theme explores the insights participants shared about their successes in enabling enquirers to move towards considering parenting children with complex needs. Having successfully communicated the possibility of adoption to potential adopters, agencies are faced with a possible mismatch between the needs of the children requiring adoption and the aspirations of potential adopters. According to the participants in this study, enquirers/ potential adopters are still mainly people who have not been able to have their own birth children and are seeking an alternative route to creating a family. Their original desire was to have a baby of their own. Instead, they are offered the prospect of adopting children who are older, probably have complex needs and/ or are part of a sibling group.

Moreover, the current thinking about recruiting adoption is based upon two broad propositions:
- That most adults should be capable of adopting and therefore should not be turned away by adoption agencies.
- That adopters should be more involved in the whole process of assessment and matching. Agencies should take more notice of their preferences and feelings about individual children.

The question arises as to how some adoption agencies are able create an environment in which potential adopters move from wanting the nearest equivalent to their own baby by birth to choosing to adopt a child or children with complex needs. This was possibly the most important adoption recruitment challenge highlighted by participants in the whole study.

Some participants indicated that their organisations are, as yet, not fully committed to the presumption of accepting all comers. For example, one local authority adoption manager said that there was never any shortage of enquirers but "it's quality we're looking for". There are few people coming forward for hard to place children, particularly older children. The agency therefore focusses on those that did and redirects others. Most participant agencies, however, are open to accept all enquirers who are not obviously unsuitable and to attempt to help these enquirers broaden the scope of what

they are prepared to consider. One local authority adoption manager took issue with those who sift out "poor quality" enquirers at the front door:

> *I think our biggest strength is that we don't expect people to turn up on our doorstep saying I want sibling groups with complex backgrounds… that's so unrealistic. People walk in wanting a baby because that's their dream and I think what we do very well is to help them to move on from their starting point to be more open to accepting the kind of children we have in reality.*

Some agencies share a common approach to creating the environment in which potential adopters could end up choosing to adopt a child whom they would not have considered at first.

The following sections describe three features of such an approach.
1. Enabling enquirers to encounter real children with complex needs.
2. Maximising established adopters as supporters and role models.
3. Providing support, encouragement, training and opportunity for reflection.

Enabling enquirers to encounter real children with complex needs

Participants spoke of various ways in which they enabled enquirers to encounter children as "real". These encounters, they argued, balance the information about the complexity of the needs of children requiring adoption, preventing children being seen as just a repository of problems.

> *One of the barriers is that people think these kids are full of problems or they're complex… When you see them, they're children!... I think it makes things seem possible.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*
>
> *It's key that people don't see a list of problems- that they see a little boy or a little girl…and think: these are my family.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

Practitioners describe how at each stage, the enquirer/ adopter is prompted to ask themselves whether, having met a particular child, they could see themselves parenting him or her, which was what one adoption manager described as "the idea of possibility". Encountering the child provokes this imaginative process. This continues through the linking process in which adopters are engaged.

> *When people envision a family they have a picture in their head…and by being able to show people these are the children in a very positive…a very warm and emotional …you see your family and those children could possibly be the children in your family…when you meet the children you think: this is great. Look at all the things we could achieve*

Social workers pointed out that events such as adoption activity days could help existing adopters to stretch their concept of what they might be able to handle. The experience of the real child moves them from one place to

another. Adopters sometimes "surprise themselves" by realising that they might have something to offer to a child in a different category from that which they originally had in mind. Encountering real children enables enquirers/adopters to explore what they really want. Adoption activity days-

> *…get adopters to open their eyes… Because I don't think you can know what you want. You can have an idea of what you want and think that's what you want. But unless you meet a child, you don't know… it may not be what they thought they wanted but it may be right for them once they find out more about it.*
> *(VAA marketing manager)*

Regarding the related topic of adopter-led links the participants were generally positive:

> *It's very odd, but some of the adopter-led matches have been bizarre but incredibly successful. You think, why did those people pick that child? … It's like a chemical attraction or whatever it is that makes human relationships like that. Like seeing your partner across a crowded room. People explain it in those terms. Just saw this child and there was something. …That alone isn't sufficient… But it's a really good start.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

One consortium manager felt that we need to-

> *…trust them [adoptive enquirers] a little bit more…being less frightened to take risks.*

One local authority adoption manager said that in their agency extensive use is made of children's profiles during preparation groups when adopters were not yet approved. From these shared profiles adopter led matches may emerge. This can lead to an intensive process of assessment centred around a particular child:

> *I think its brilliant- you can't beat chemistry.*
> *(Local authority adoption manager)*

The potential challenges of adopter-led matches were also acknowledged by participants describing how enquirers/adopters vary in their ability to be realistic and in their understanding of their own desires in relation to parenting. Sometimes adopter-led links are felt to result in adopters becoming attracted to children for whom they prove to be unsuitable. However, participants did not necessarily see this possibility as a reason for avoiding the encounter with the child, but as something to be tackled throughout the assessment process in which adopters/ enquirers are invited to reflect upon what they could manage by way of parenting.

Providing prospective adoptive parents with holistic information about real children was being achieved in a variety of ways. Seeing children face-to-face is the most obvious way of achieving this vivid sense of the child-as-person. Box 3 provides an example of how one agency attempts to achieve this at the enquiry stage. Other enquirers had been enabled to volunteer at Sure Start or

other family centres. Once a date has been set for panel, adopters attending adoption activity days may have a similar experience.

> BOX 3
> Enquirers to **Southend Borough Council adoption agency** are not redirected because they live in a particular area or arrive at the enquiry stage wanting a baby or are white or black. The core message communicated to the enquirer is:
> We take you as you are but we want you to move on.
> The key word here is "want" because this contains the acknowledgement that change cannot be forced upon potential adopters. Instead, opportunities to encounter real children with vulnerabilities are presented to the enquirers. The enquirer may be encouraged to sign on as a volunteer at a contact centre where they see real children who are in the care proceedings process. Although these children may exhibit issues and complexities, what tends to strike the potential adopter is that they have met a child who is a particular personality i.e. a real person.

One agency shows a DVD of foster carers talking about the children in their care. Sections of film show non-identifying activities by real children. DVDs of children can portray their characters vividly-
>   *This helps the adopters to get a sense of who the children are.*
>   *(VAA adoption manager)*

A local authority agency, during preparation groups, shares the profiles of real children with prospective adopters. These profiles do not hide complexities but put them in the context of the child-as-person:
>   *The profiles we write of our children are written from their point of view: 'this is Billy–this is what he likes doing. He's frightened by loud noises because mummy and daddy had sometimes shouted at him'. That's how you get those messages across.*
>   *(Local authority adoption manager)*

Another agency in it's profile writing tries to "get behind the label" by putting the profile of the child as a child on the front and descriptive details of their needs and history on the back.

During exchange meetings, prospective adopters may be introduced to profiles and DVDs of children. This is extended to adoption activity days where adopters can engage with real children who are available for adoption playing in real-time.

The challenge seems to be to be able to put over the real personality of the children, something of their reality and also to be able to complement this with a description of their needs and challenges of caring for them.
Agencies who practice in this way seem more open to all comers and less likely to counsel out enquirers who do not show an immediate understanding of the complex needs and characteristics of children needing adoption. These agencies have to grapple with the difficulties in portraying children vividly to

people who might not have yet been DBS checked in a way that honours confidentiality and safeguarding practice.

Agencies that embrace this method are more likely to see adopters as full partners and participants in the enquiry, assessment and linking process. This method brings to the fore the enquirer's/adopter's capacity to recognise their own feelings, to think about their limitations- to acknowledge the power of feelings without being completely swept away by them.

Social workers involved in assessment and linking are therefore called upon to be more willing to work with adopter emotions rather than trying to keep the lid firmly down on expectations, wishes and fantasies. The potential benefits of this approach need to be balanced against possible risks such as the chance of adopters forming strong attachments to children for whom they are unsuitable or who are placed elsewhere or becoming confused by choice.

Maximising established adopters as supporters and role models.

Adoption agencies have for many years brought existing adopters into contact with enquirers and adopters in assessment. However, from the evidence of this study this implicit practice seems to have grown in scope and appears now to constitute an indispensable second dynamic in helping enquirers/ potential adopters to consider and commit to more complex children.

Although this was unusual in any one agency, existing adopters can be found playing important roles at each and every stage of the enquirer's/ adopter's journey into adoption. Word of mouth recommendation during the enquirer's period of contemplating adoption and presumably exposure to an adoptive family's experience has already been noted as a powerful recruitment factor. Contact with a real adoptive family is also likely to begin to help the enquirers to engage their imagination: what has already been described as "the idea of possibility". Already, the enquirer can be enabled to move beyond public information about children in care needing adoption and their web research to see actual adopters with a real child.

At information events and preparation courses, existing adopters tell their stories and share their experiences. As participants pointed out, this enables enquirers to identify with the adoption role. They see before them ordinary people who have successfully negotiated the approval process which the national media may have told them was almost insurmountable, have welcomed children with complexities into their families and are dealing with the complexities and receiving help to do so. What is most important is that they highlighted not just the challenges of adoption but its rewards. They were enjoying a family life with their child and as one participant put it, spoke about their children with "such love and pride".

Participants suggested that another aspect of the growing identification of the enquirer with the adopters is that they perceived that there is nothing exceptional or special about the adopters, the implication being that 'if they can do it, so can we'. Participants also pointed out that because of that shared

identification and empathy, enquirers/ adopters in assessment learn readily from existing adopters. Agencies are beginning to use existing adopters as sources of support for enquirers/ adopters in assessment. One county agency (see Box 4) and another local authority agency are in the process of setting up or in the early stages of planning a "buddy scheme" for each enquirer, in an attempt to allay the enquirer's anxieties surrounding the process and thus reduce the number of enquirers leaking out of the process.

Having had a child placed with them, adopters in some agencies are offered the chance to join support groups consisting of other adopters; this continues to legitimise adoption as a valid way of being a family and sharing issues such as child behaviour problems and contact issues as they arise.

BOX 4
Following a recent consultant's report, **Oxfordshire** was told that self-reliant "pioneers" were prominent among its adopters. "Pioneers" have a marked preference for learning from peers rather than social work professionals. The agency is therefore introducing an 'Adopter Recruitment Mentoring Scheme' using adopter volunteers to be linked up to new applicants during the assessment process. Each enquirer will be given the opportunity of a link with an established adopter during the early stages, from information meeting onwards to approval.
This new scheme will complement Oxfordshire's own Adopter Buddy Scheme' which is staffed by trained adopter mentors who are linked to approved adopters requesting this service.

Participants did offer some qualifications to the wholesale involvement of existing adopters. One participant pointed out that adopters have their own lives to lead, including spending quality time with their adopted child. Therefore, it was sometimes difficult to find adopters to fulfil the above roles. It was also pointed out that the experience of adopters needs to be complemented and balanced by the professional knowledge and skills of social workers if enquirers/ adopters in assessment are to form a balanced view of the rewards and challenges of adoption.

Providing support, encouragement, training and opportunity for reflection

The third dynamic factor that participants pointed to in encouraging enquirers/ adopters in assessment to embrace more complexity is professional input from social workers and others. The emphasis mentioned above upon adopter-led learning and linking by means of encountering real children creates a powerful emotional momentum in adopters, with positive potential but also a number of risks. So, some participants, whilst embracing these adopter-led developments, are keen to stress the need for this energy and emotion to be contained, managed and channeled and to seek to enhance the adopters' knowledge, skills, capacity for reflection and realism and in particular, their appreciation of their own limitations. As one consortium manager put it:

> *Let's open whatever doors there are and just let's make sure that we have good assessment processes, good supervision, make sure*

there's plenty of checks and balances on the way.
(Consortium manager)

Risks include adopters falling in love with children that they are clearly ill equipped to care for and refusing to be deflected. Although their attraction to the child may enable them to tolerate more initially,
Sometimes the love affair doesn't last that long.
(Local authority adoption manager)

Another adoption manager was concerned about some adopter-led links inspired solely by altruism. She felt that these placements were likely to be unsuccessful as sadness and desire to meet the needs of the child could turn to anger when the child misbehaves and rejects the adopter. This was perhaps the downside of advertising which stressed the plight of children in care who would not have a home unless people came forward to look after them.

A VAA adoption manager reflected on the pain that adopters may experience as a result of becoming attached to a child and then find that the local authority changes the plan. She wished to protect families from those kinds of experiences wherever possible. However,
…we don't own these families.

Some adopters could become confused and exhausted by the process of opening themselves up to the possibility of one child after another.
We try to boundary people so that they invest their emotional energy into one child at one time...it gets very emotionally hard for them.
(Local authority adoption manager)

What agencies are able to do is to encourage thinking, learning and reflection in adopters by the content of their preparation course, the quality of assessment work by the social worker and the relationship of trust and honesty which, hopefully, develops between social worker and adopters. Participants pointed out that preparation courses provide adopters with resources for parenting, an appreciation of the adoption dimension and a great deal more (see Box 5).
The message we give is that parenting by adoption is parenting plus extra challenges but also, you can do it and we will support you to do it.
(Local authority adoption manager)

Much depends on the success of social workers and adopters building a relationship of trust and honesty in which adopters learned to use their worker as a reflector and to respect their opinion and judgment. In this context, adopters are more likely to share their interest in particular children and reach a realistic evaluation as to the child's suitability for them. Participants suggested that there is more work of this nature that needs to be done by social workers in the new environment of adopter-led linking.

BOX 5
Leicester City Council's adoption agency includes a range of contributors to their preparation groups for prospective adopters including birth parents. "We have actual birth parents who come to our prep groups- real live talking birth parents. That actually has a huge impact on adopters feeling able to do contact and consider direct contact sometimes". Preparation groups are seen as a time to present the realities of the child's experiences which may help people move on in their willingness to consider complexity. Other contributors include adopters and adopted people. Or instruction by a CAMHS worker who is also an adopter on basic caring; what to do in specific circumstances etc. The aim is to "skill up adopters really… although your child may have been through all of these things actually, they are still children at the end of the day. They still need…to be cared for and you just need to adapt the way that you care…"

Success factors in encouraging enquirers to embrace the needs of complex children

- **Encourage enquirers/ adopters to take opportunities to encounter real children preferably face to face but also through DVDs, profiles, foster carer and adopter accounts.**
- **Do this at each stage from information meeting right through to the linking process**
- **When presenting information about children awaiting adoption, accounts must be honest in respect of children's needs. However, the account or profile must ensure that "the child's personality should be allowed to shine through".**
- **Use encounters with children to foster "the idea of possibility" in the minds of adoptive enquirers/ applicants, i.e. encourage them to imagine what it might be like to parent that particular child.**
- **Enable enquirers to meet, hear from, and be buddied/ supported/ mentored by successful adoptive parents.**
- **In meetings with the assessing social worker, provide opportunities for enquirers/ adopters to reflect in depth about their encounters with real children, encouraging them to think about their feelings and realistically assess their own capacity to parent.**
- **Train and equip adopters to prepare for difficulties they are likely to encounter**

The context for recruitment

Understanding the ecology of the agency

The nature of each adoption agency clearly has enormous influence on their recruitment strategies. Four kinds of adoption agency were represented in the study. The local authorities comprised county councils and unitary authorities whilst voluntary agencies were either national or small and medium sized local/ regional agencies.

Generally, county council adoption agencies are able to place their own

children mainly within their own geographical area. County council adoption agencies in the study do recruit from outside their own geographical borders but to a far lesser extent than other adoption agencies. The unitary authorities, however, cannot generally place their own children with adopters recruited from within their own geographical borders. For the most part, these adoption agencies seek to recruit adopters from the geographical areas immediately outside their own borders, typically from an area within about one hour's travel time. Enquirers who approach them from within their own geographical boundaries can be welcomed and assessed on the understanding that they will be offered (on the basis of an interagency fee) to another adoption agency.

Small and medium voluntary adoption agencies varied in size and scope. Some have sub offices throughout a region. Others operate from one administrative base. Those operating from just one base typically designate an area based on travel time or distance and concentrate their advertising and recruitment on that area. Those voluntary adoption agencies operating throughout a region seek enquirers across several county council or unitary authority geographical boundaries.

In previous sections of this report, attention has been drawn to other differences between types of agency. Council adoption agencies are seeking to place their own children and on that basis might seek to market themselves as a "one shop stop" to adoption. Voluntary agencies, in contrast, suggest to enquirers that they can identify just the right placement from all adoption agencies offering children for adoption. Council adoption agencies tend to receive prominence on Google; voluntary adoption agencies whose name and brand might not be associated with a particular town, have to work harder to come to the attention of enquirers. Council adoption agencies are influenced in style and policy by the larger organisations of which they were a part. Small adoption agencies have more freedom and flexibility but can have conservative approaches to marketing based upon their charitable status and previous religious affiliation.

A crucial factor in the ecologies of adoption agencies is the source of funding for adoptive placements. Where councils cannot place children with their own adopters, they must purchase a placement for their children on the basis of a (recently standardised) interagency fee. Citing the need to reduce costs and to encourage the placement of children closer to their original culture, some local authorities have negotiated discounts for placements "sold" within a consortium. This practice clearly disadvantages VAAs who, perhaps understandably, stress the benefits of placements finely matched to children's needs rather than within a particular locality. Local authority's alleged reluctance to pay interagency fees has been cited as a cause of delay in the placement of children needing adoption, but in this study there was little evidence, either from the VAAs or local authorities, that this continues to be the case.

The attitude of one small unitary agency typifies a new more relaxed stance of local authorities to spending more quickly and readily on interagency fees in

the context of seeking to increase adopter approvals not just for their own use, but for the national pool. The agency has approved a number of adopters from within its own boundaries who have then been purchased by other councils, allowing the authority to recoup (or even exceed) their costs in buying in adopters from elsewhere.

Only one nationwide voluntary adoption agency featured in this study. This agency has numerous outlets in England and beyond and shares with local authority adoption agencies a hierarchical structure. It faces particular issues regarding connecting widely spread geographical outlets with its main office creating a coherent service in which the central marketing messages are congruent with the realities of services at the front line.

The recruitment strategies of each agency are clearly related to factors regarding the agency's ecology. Membership of a local consortium also influences agency recruitment. All but one (VAA) is a member of one or more consortia. Most adoption consortia cooperate on practice, policy and training issues. Some plan one-off recruitment or exchange events such as adoption activity days. Most consortia have an agreement to share profiles of adopters and children within the consortium. A minority of consortia have a much more integrated approach to marketing and the sharing of related activity.
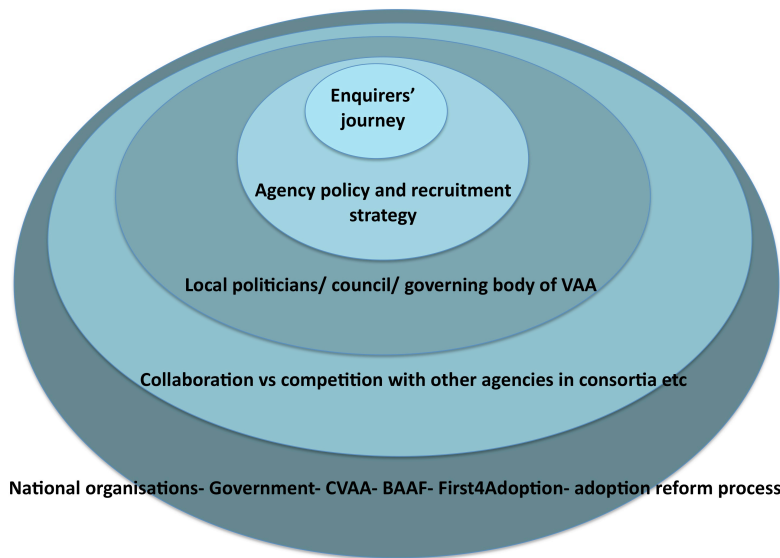
One consortium has a shared recruitment policy and uses a shared website as the main source of recruitment for its three unitary adoption agencies with a shared marketing officer. They also have an agreement by which enquirers from within the borders of one unitary would automatically be assessed by one of the other agencies. Another similar consortium of three unitaries shares an adoption panel and a register of approved adopters.

A large regional consortium consisting of local authorities and VAAs has appointed a consortium manager and agreed to "top slice" Adoption Reform Grant monies to each agency to fund a cross consortium advertising campaign. Plans are in discussion for the sharing of information meetings and preparation groups (to cut down delay for enquirers/ adopters in assessment) within sub regions of the consortium. However, a few consortia seemed to contribute very little to shared recruitment either because the agency managers have invested comparatively little in consortium activity or because the consortium members are geographically and demographically ill matched or because of an undercurrent of competition between agencies heightened by close proximity.

Seeing the big picture

In this study, attention has already been drawn by participants to the ways in which recruitment and in particular, the journey of the enquirer into adoption is shaped by policy and activity at each level (see diagram). Many insights provided by participants have concerned immediate agency policy and practice in recruitment: the degree to which enquirers are cherished, the agency's approach to marketing and internet use; the agency's skills in enabling adopters to consider complexity. Study participants have also commented upon the context of recruitment and the potential for cooperation

within consortia.

Enquirers' journey

Agency policy and recruitment strategy

Local politicians/ council/ governing body of VAA

Collaboration vs competition with other agencies in consortia etc

National organisations- Government- CVAA- BAAF- First4Adoption- adoption reform process

Participants have also suggested that recruitment is influenced by actions, priorities and policies at a national level. Several have pointed out that a significant number of people are prevented from adopting because they have modest incomes and unsuitable accommodation. This is regarded by participants as a national problem which is not easily solved but nonetheless removes otherwise suitable people from becoming successful adopters.

Several participants were concerned that relentlessly negative media stories and narratives concerning supposedly failing adoption services, impossible waiting times and inappropriate political correctness are damaging recruitment at a local level. They wish to see the government taking the initiative to move the media agenda towards good news stories about adoption.

As already indicated in the previous sections of this report, most participants' agencies are actively engaged at a local level in attempting to attract adoption enquirers through their websites, word of mouth and advertising. However, several participants believe that notwithstanding these local efforts, adoption does not figure prominently in the national consciousness: the public is still largely unaware of the need for adoptive homes for many children looked after or that wide categories of people could adopt. They suggest that the government should commission an ongoing national advertising campaign to promote adoption and support the agencies' local advertising, arguing that the budgets of adoption agencies do not allow them to take on this role. They further commented that First4Adoption is not funded to achieve this and that, as a result, has had a negligible effect upon the agencies' levels of recruitment.

Success factors in national and local context

- **Each agency must take account of its own geography and the potential to cooperate with other agencies when devising its recruitment strategy.**
- **Where consortia are geographically and demographically well matched, there are potential benefits for close cooperation in recruitment and related activities such as information and preparation groups.**
- **There are now financial as well as professionally and morally driven incentives for local authorities to "overproduce" adopters to contribute to the national pool.**
- **There is a perceived need for a high level ongoing national advertising campaign to support the work of the adoption agencies in recruitment.**

Conclusions

The study has drawn on the extensive experience of 25 adoption agency professionals, including social workers and those with marketing expertise. It provides an account of how to achieve success in adoption recruitment from the perspective of these participants; as such it can complement research focused on the perspectives of adoption enquirers. It has not evaluated the efficacy of different practices in relation to recruitment, but this would be a fruitful area for further research.

This study has identified four main themes from the interviews.

Each adoption agency needs to consider its own recruitment strategy and the place of marketing within it. The investigation has benefitted from the perspectives of adoption managers and marketing professionals with their complementary insights. Marketers have produced resourceful plans for communicating with the adoption agencies' public, and can bring a sharper focus on the needs of adoption enquirers as customers. Social work expertise also appears as essential to good recruitment outcomes: in particular, their insight into the needs of children and the processes whereby enquirers develop to become successful and confident adopters.

Another important message is the internet's increasing importance in future recruitment and marketing and no agency can afford to be left behind.

It is perhaps not surprising to hear how important it is to cherish enquirers at each stage of their journey into adoption, starting with very first point of contact. It is vital that the core messages identified by the participants are effectively put across to enquirers through the administrative and social work systems which contribute to and reflect the culture of the agency.

The insights regarding ways of harnessing adopter led initiatives and helping enquirers to grow in their understanding by making children real to them could have important implications for practice in future. Some professionals are concerned that opening the door to adoption for many more people may do little to find adoptive homes for our harder to place children and sibling

groups. The initiatives described above offer one possible way in which adopters might be encouraged to stretch their capacity to encompass more complexity in the children they adopt.

There are points of connection between these themes. In order to encourage adopters to extend their range to more complex children, they must be cherished, listened to and treated with respect. Part of listening to enquirers is taking the care to communicate with them in the ways that they favour, if necessary, changing our approach to communication, web design and corporate management to achieve it.

Participants' comments upon the context of adoption recruitment highlight some interesting developments in cooperation and the mutual ceding of control in some consortia to achieve more effective recruitment. These initiatives deserve to be monitored and studied separately. Participants' demonstrated that agencies are working hard in their different ways to market themselves to their public at a local level and their suggestion that this should be supported by a national campaign is worthy of consideration.