

# **Service Users' Perspectives in Child Protection and Adoption Research**

A thesis submitted for the  
degree of PhD by Publication

**Jeanette Cossar**

**School of Social Work  
University of East Anglia**

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## Abstract

This critical commentary is based on four research studies and associated publications. The studies are all concerned with researching service users' perspectives and with service user involvement in the research process. Two of the studies examined adults' perspectives on adoption, focusing on support for birth relatives and on post-adoption contact. Two of the studies focused on the perspectives of children and young people on seeking help with abuse and neglect, and on their experiences of child protection services.

The commentary begins with a literature review which sets the context for the studies. It covers the development of service user participation in social work practice and in research, and existing research on the perspectives of service users on child protection and adoption services. The second chapter explores methods of involving service users as participants in research and as co-researchers in child protection and adoption research.

The final chapter discusses the contribution of the studies, focusing both on the subject matter and the process of research. It is argued that service users' perspectives can address a need identified within relationship-based practice to pay attention to power differentials in social work relationships. Service users' perspectives highlight the value service users accord to the relationships they form with social workers, and suggest ways in which practice could be improved to avoid the experience of child protection and adoption services compounding the effects of a difficult life history.

Involving service users in the research process can allow service users a distinctive platform. It is argued that building collaborative relationships between academic and service user researchers can enable service users' perspectives to contribute to the construction of social work knowledge, in a manner that contrasts with the inevitable constraints in service user involvement in child protection and adoption practice.

# The Research Studies

The four research studies that form the core of this submission are listed below.

**1. Helping Birth Families (2005-2010)** *Part of the DCSF Adoption Research Initiative. My involvement was from 2006-2010 (Helping Birth Families)<sup>1</sup>*

This study was commissioned following the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, to explore the provision of birth relative support services. Groups of birth relative consultants contributed to several stages of the research process.

**2. Supporting Direct Contact after Adoption (2005-2010)** *Part of the DCSF Adoption Research Initiative. My involvement was from 2006-2010 (Supporting Contact)*

This study was commissioned to explore the provision of adoption support services to help birth and adoptive families manage direct post-adoption contact arrangements. Groups of adoptive parents and birth relatives acted as consultants to the research, contributing at several stages of the research process.

**3. Children's and Young People's Views of Child Protection (2010-2011)** *Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (Children's Views of CP)*

A study which explored children's and young people's views of risk within their families, and their experiences of the child protection system (aged 6-17). Young people were consultants to the research at various stages of the research process.

**4. Recognition and Telling: Developing Earlier Routes to Help for Children and Young People (2011-2013)** *Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (Recognition and Telling)*

A Study which used website analysis, interviews and focus groups to explore what counts as abuse and neglect for young people, their approaches to telling and their experiences of services. A group of young researchers were employed and involved at all stages of the research.

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviated forms of the study titles are used throughout this submission.

## The Published Works

1. <sup>2</sup>Cossar, J., Brandon, M. and Jordan, P. (2014) 'You've got to trust her and she's got to trust you' - Children's views on participation in the child protection system, *Child and Family Social Work*, advanced access, doi:10.1111/cfs.12115.

This article discusses participation in child protection, based on findings from *Children's Views on CP*.

2. Cossar, J. and Neil, E. (2013) Service User Involvement in Social Work Research: Learning from an Adoption Research Project, *British Journal of Social Work*, advanced access, doi:10.1093/bjsw/bct108.

This article discusses the process and impact of service user involvement in the research process, focusing on the experience of working with birth relative consultants in *Helping Birth Families*.

3. Cossar, J. and Neil E. (2013) Making sense of siblings: connections and severances in post-adoption contact, *Child and Family Social Work*, 18, 1, 67-76.

This article uses sociological and anthropological studies of kinship to discuss how children make sense of sibling relationships through post-adoption contact.

4. Cossar, J, Brandon, M, Bailey, S, Belderson, P, Biggart, L. & Sharpe D (2013) 'It takes a lot to build trust'. Recognition and Telling: Developing earlier routes to help for children and young people, Report for the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, available at [http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_732](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_732)

This research report presents the findings of *Recognition and Telling*. It includes a framework for understanding recognition, telling and help from a child's point of view.

5. Cossar, J., Brandon, M. and Jordan P (2011) 'Don't Make Assumptions': Children's and young people's views of the Child Protection process, Report for the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, available at [http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_486](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_486)

This report presents the findings of *Children's Views of CP*, which explored children's views of risk within their families, the extent to which they understood and participated in the child protection system, and their experiences of child protection intervention.

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<sup>2</sup> Publications are referenced by number throughout this submission.

6. Neil, E., Cossar, J., Lorgelly, P., Jones, C. & Young, J. (2011) *Supporting Direct Contact After Adoption* London: BAAF.

This book presents the findings of *Supporting Contact*.

7. Neil, E., Cossar, J., Lorgelly, P. & Young J. (2010) *Helping Birth Families: Services, Costs and Outcomes*. BAAF (British Association of Adoption and Fostering).

This book presents the findings of *Helping Birth Families*.

8. Cossar, J., and Neil, E. (2010) 'Supporting the birth relatives of adopted children: How accessible are services?' *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 1368-1386

This article is based on a mapping survey of agencies, and focuses on how birth relatives in England and Wales can access birth relative support services. Seven different models of accessing services are identified and the advantages and disadvantages of each model are discussed.

## Introduction

This is a submission for the degree of PhD by Publication. The submission presents four research studies and related publications concerned with service users' perspectives on child protection and adoption services and with service user involvement in the research process.

The research studies each focused on service users' perspectives on different stages of social work intervention. Two explored children's views and two focused on adults' views. The studies with children and young people were concerned with how young people at risk of abuse recognised this and sought help, and how children and young people experienced child protection services. The studies of adults focused on birth relatives' experiences of adoption and adoption support services and on the experiences of birth relatives and adoptive parents having direct contact after adoption. What unites the four studies is a concern with researching service users' perspectives on the issues that bring them to the attention of services and a focus on their experiences of social work services. In addition all the studies involved service users in the research process. These are the unifying themes of this critical commentary.

There is a three part commentary on the research and publications. Part 1 of the commentary is a literature review which is divided into three sections. The first part traces the development of the concern with service user involvement in social work practice, and the limits of participatory practice in child protection and adoption. This forms the backdrop to a discussion of research on service users' perspectives on child protection and adoption, which forms the second part of the chapter. The final part discusses service users' involvement in the process of conducting research and how this has emerged in policy and been conceptualised in social work literature.

Part 2 of the commentary discusses the studies, which spanned a period of eight years. It describes my role in the research studies and methodological issues, with a focus on involving service users in research, both as research participants and as researchers. The chapter concludes with a section on reflexivity which considers the similarities and differences in engaging with service users as a social worker and as a researcher; and in engaging as a researcher with service users as research participants and as service user researchers.

Part 3 of the commentary covers the contribution that the research and publications have made to social work knowledge. It is premised on a commitment to relationship-based practice in social work. It accepts that relationship-based practice needs to pay attention to

issues of power and that research on service users' perspectives can highlight the extent to which the ideals of relationship-based social work are achieved in practice. It moves on to suggest that the skills of relationship-based social work are essential in involving service users in social work research both as participants and as service user researchers. Using skills derived from relationship-based practice in research rather than a practice context offers the chance to develop collaborative relationships with groups of service users. Building collaborative research relationships enables service users' perspectives to contribute to and challenge the construction of social work knowledge, in a manner that contrasts with the inevitable constraints on service user involvement in child protection and adoption practice.

Appendix A contains a summary of the aims, methods, findings, strengths and limitations of the four studies. At appendix B are statements from Dr E. Neil, principal investigator for two of the studies, and Professor Marian Brandon, co-investigator for two of the studies. Appendix C contains a collection of the published works that represent the studies. The books and research reports are presented separately.

# Chapter One: Literature Review

This critical commentary draws together work on four studies concerned with the experiences of users of childcare social work services. All have sought to analyse service users' experiences of services, as well as their views about whether the intervention was merited. The studies involved considerations of service user involvement both in their substantive content and in their methodology. All the studies involved an element of service user involvement in the research process.

Detailed literature reviews on child protection, children and help seeking, adoption and contact can be found in the publications (1), (5), (6) and (7). This literature review discusses the context for the studies by looking at the place of service user involvement in social work practice and in social work research. The chapter is divided into three sections:

Service user involvement in social work practice

Service users' perspectives on child protection and adoption

Service user involvement in social work research

## **Service user involvement in social work practice**

Service user involvement has been used interchangeably with 'participation' and 'user engagement' to refer to 'any attempt to enable service users to influence social work decision-making processes' Gallagher (2010:4). This can involve day to day practices of listening and taking into account service user views in social work interventions, as well as involvement in more formal processes such as case conferences or mental health tribunals. In addition it can refer to involvement of service users in service planning and development more widely, such as through Children in Care councils.

Competing discourses of service user involvement have been highlighted (Smith et al 2012) including consumerist, which emphasizes people's ability to choose between various service options operating under market forces; techno-rational, where participation is seen as a means to modernise services and make them more efficient and responsive; neo-liberal, where user involvement strategies serve to validate or legitimize government policies; and rights based, where participation is pursued to ensure social justice and empower service users. Beresford and Croft (2001) suggest service user involvement in social work has stemmed largely from a consumerist agenda, promoting little real change, and sometimes

resulting in 'consultation fatigue' as service users' views are canvassed but they are unable to see a resulting change in service provision. They contrast this top-down approach to service user involvement with the emergence of service user movements such as the disability movement (the rights based discourse) exerting pressure for change from below.

These differing discourses draw attention to the terminology by which social workers refer to the people they work with. Whilst throughout this critical commentary the phrase service user is used, it should be recognised that this is not a neutral term (2). The terminology is changing and contested. 'Service user' is sometimes used to refer not only to those who choose to use services, but those who would like to but cannot, and those who would like to refuse to, but cannot. One of the members of the Service User and Carer group at UEA uses the term 'service user' wryly, pointing out that he no longer meets the eligibility criteria for services given recent financial cuts (personal communication, a point also made by Boxall and Beresford (2013)). In individual projects it is helpful to define the parameters of the term (2). Beresford (2005) argues for viewing 'service users' as a political category, attentive to the fact that some groups are likely to have their lives fundamentally affected by their use of services.

The shift from 'client' to 'service user', or even 'customer' has been seen as a shift from an underlying view of social work which considers the professional as expert, towards one which implies some level of consumer choice (Gallagher and Smith 2010). However, this is problematic when applied to involuntary users of services, who have limited or no choice about engaging with services. As McLaughlin (2009) comments, the term 'service user' is problematic since social workers are obliged ultimately to make and act upon their own assessment of the service user's situation, regardless of the service user's own perspective. When social work operates with involuntary service users, tensions between expert and service users' perspectives, care and control, paternalism and empowerment must be negotiated.

The following section discusses this tension in relation to child protection and adoption services.

### **The limits of service user involvement in child protection and adoption**

Child protection takes place against a backdrop of inherent tensions between the state's rights to intervene in family life, and the rights of parents and of children (Fox Harding 1991, Healy 1998). In England and Wales the Children Act 1989 reflects a balancing of these

potentially competing rights. Thoburn et al (1995) suggest that it was the implementation of the Children Act, and the guidelines in Working Together which accelerated family participation in child protection work. Thoburn argues that notions of partnership in child protection must take account of the context of the work, introducing a scale for partnership (adapted from Arnstein 1969) which ranges from participation, involvement, consultation to keeping informed. Working in partnership must be considered in relation to each specific case (Biehal and Sainsbury 1991).

One of the key dimensions to consider is family characteristics. In Thoburn's study there were limitations to participation where abuse was persistent, parents denied responsibility, parents and social workers disagreed about the degree of harm and ways of helping and there was a history of violence towards social workers. In such cases even keeping parents fully informed was viewed as a success (Thoburn et al 1995: 34).

A second factor is the way that the case is categorised. Following a suggestion from the Audit Commission in 1994, in England there was an attempt to shift focus from child protection, to a wider focus on family support services, a shift known as the refocusing debate (Spratt and Callan, 2004, Platt 2008). This shift was partly as a response to the reported damaging impact on families subject to child protection investigations (Cleaver and Freeman 1995), and the assumption was that lower risk families could be usefully served by delivering a service under less coercive child support services. Similar local authorities' rates of care proceedings and formal child protection procedures vary markedly, suggesting the role of professional judgement in deciding how to classify an individual case (Spratt and Callan 2004, Dickens et al 2007). The classification of a case may make a difference in the degree to which the social worker can engage with the family, with child support services perceived as less threatening. Service users may be more open to work under Child in Need procedures rather than when subject to a child protection investigation (Platt 2001).

Thirdly, individual practice skills are important in engaging with service users and maximising the opportunities for service user participation. Research in which social workers were asked to raise concerns with an actor playing a parent in a child protection situation found that the social workers did raise the concerns, but varied in the manner in which they did so. Some were empathic, whilst others were confrontational and the actors reported different reactions based on the social worker style, with high levels of resistance in those actors facing confrontational social workers (Forrester et al 2008). Forrester et al (2012) understand resistance as not solely located within the service user but in the interaction between service user and social worker. Similarly Darlington et al (2010) suggest that a parent's willingness

to engage and understanding of his or her child's needs may be affected by the skills of the worker in building a relationship.

A fourth issue affecting possibilities for involvement is that of economic resources. A focus on engagement goes alongside an understanding of social work based on building relationships with clients. Cooper et al (2003) suggest that this can be facilitated by moving towards preventative working, a view supported by Munro's stress on the offer of an early help for families (Munro 2011). If services only react to crises than a relationship-based model of social work may be threatened. However, a Commission for Social Care Inspection report in 2006 about parents involved with child protection noted concerns about increasingly high thresholds for access to both adults' and children's services (CSCI 2006). Professionals suggested that high thresholds could result in a narrow focus on risk in child protection work (4).

Since the death of Peter Connelly in 2007 there has been an increase in the numbers of children with a child protection plan and the number of care proceedings initiated (Department for Education 2013, Cafcass 2013), which is likely to reflect a change to more risk-averse practice as a reaction to the case. The increase in child protection cases, together with reductions in resources due to the government's approach to austerity are likely to threaten the ability to deliver a service based on a broad conception of family welfare. The recession and subsequent welfare cuts have been linked by the Family Rights Group to an exponential increase in enquiries for advice where domestic violence is an issue (Ashley and Kanow 2014). The authors suggest that cuts in welfare have the effect of increasing stress levels in vulnerable families by reducing income, as well as reducing resources available to vulnerable families because of cuts to specialist non-stigmatising services that help families.

The limits of participation in child protection social work are affected by numerous factors; the characteristics of families, agency policy and practice, social work skills in engaging families, and the resources available for the work. Darlington et al (2010), suggest that Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979) can be usefully applied to child protection to understand the complex interplay between individual and system related factors. Parents may not wish to engage, may lack insight into their children's needs, or motivation to change. System related factors include the lack of time available to build relationships because of high caseloads, as well the inherent imbalance in power between parent and worker. These factors should not be seen as independent but interdependent, coming together at the point of practice. For example the parent may be distrustful due to their life history, this may be compounded by the imbalance of power in the social work

relationship, and the social worker's high caseload may affect the time available to build a relationship.

The limits of participatory work with parents occur in the non-consenting adoption process, which involves an adversarial legal process, which 'strips them of their right to bring up their child on the grounds that they have failed in their role as a parent, and deems that their child would be better off without them' ((7):13). The push to speed up both care proceedings and the adoption process risks placing further pressure on birth parents and other relatives. However, even within such a disempowering process there are opportunities for more or less participatory practice. The National Adoption Standards for England state that birth families 'will be treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process' (Department of Health, 2001:23). Fair treatment should include help to understand the adoption process and their rights, access to an independent worker, access to support services, the opportunity to comment on reports, and involvement in discussion about contact plans. (Department of Health, 2001:23). The extent to which this is achieved will affect the birth relatives' future inclination to engage with birth relative and contact support services.

This section has discussed the development of discourses of participation social work, and the limits of participation in child protection and adoption services. Having outlined the tensions inherent in child protection and adoption social work, the next section outlines the research on service users' experiences of child protection and adoption services.

## **Research on service users' perspectives on child protection and adoption**

### **Parents' experiences of child protection services and adoption services**

There is a growing body of mainly qualitative research exploring parents' views of child protection and broader child welfare services. A common finding is the importance of the relationship with the social worker and the importance of recognising the impact of the investigative process.

Ghaffar et al (2012) interviewed parents of children with a child protection plan and found that some parents experienced child protection services as supportive. However the parents felt that the level of stress caused by the investigation, and indeed at all stages of child protection intervention, was not readily acknowledged by professionals, and they disliked the emphasis on parenting deficits in the assessment process. The necessity of acknowledging the impact of the social work intervention, alongside understanding the parents' views of what is going on in their family was stressed by Dumbrill (2006), who interviewed 18 parents

with experience of child protection. The parents' reactions to social work intervention were classified as fighting, feigning cooperation, or collaborating, with the former strategies linked to the parents' view that power was being exerted over them, rather than shared with them by the social worker. Social workers who were able to demonstrate 'power with' by encouraging words, or by advocating for the parents with other professionals were met with a more collaborative response by parents. The parents' view of the way power worked in the relationship was not related to whether their case was voluntary or involuntary, suggesting that it was partly to do with the practice of individual social workers. However, even parents who had a collaborative relationship with the social worker were still aware and afraid of social work power. A number of authors echo the importance of acknowledging how the social work process feels to the parent from the outset, noting feelings of fear, confusion about rights, stigma, betrayal, shame, anger and powerlessness (Richardson 2003, Palmer et al 2006, Dumbrill 2006, De Boer and Cody 2007, OCC 2010, Davies 2011, Schreiber et al 2013).

Most qualitative research on parents' experiences of child protection underlines the central importance of social workers' relationship building and engagement skills. Various authors have identified the components of a valued relationship between social worker and parent. These include the establishment of trust through respectful communication, listening and accurate understanding, worker sensitivity, a shared goal, understanding the parents' needs, practical assistance, reliability, consistency, honesty, providing adequate information and knowledge about parenting. (Spratt and Callan 2004, Platt 2008, Mason 2012, OCC 2010, Gladstone et al 2011). Trust had to be established over time, sometimes through mundane actions, and had to be established with each worker. Changes in social worker could undermine the establishment of trust (Lalayants 2012, OCC 2010).

There is limited empirical research on parents' experiences of having a child compulsorily adopted. Publications (6) and (7) contribute to this field. Some studies examine the experience of parents who have had their children removed and either adopted or placed in foster care after a contested case. A recent study of fathers found that they worried, were grieving and felt excluded from adoption process (Clifton 2012). Some fought hard to keep their children, and could not engage in adoption support services. Others were resigned and withdrew, whilst a third group could manage complex feelings about their child's connection to two families (see also Neil 2007). Smeeton and Boxall (2011) reported on a small qualitative study of non-relinquishing parents whose children were adopted, and found that parents felt that professional practice had been insensitive to their feelings and loss.

There are few studies of parents who have experienced adoption, but studies of parents whose children have been removed from their care and placed in foster care reveal something of the parental experience of loss. Schofield et al (2010) found that the loss they experience was stigmatised and they felt anger, depression and guilt at the loss of the child. Parents needed respect, information and help to manage involvement with their children's lives. They appreciated support which conveyed care about them as well as their children (Schofield et al 2010, McCann 2006). Other studies found that parents felt that their grief reactions were not acknowledged, that they were seen as undeserving, and that they really needed help with grief at the time the child was placed, yet this was the time when social workers stepped back (Charlton et al 1998, (7)). Studies of parents with children in foster care have drawn attention to the difficulties for services in prioritising scarce resources for birth relative support, once their children are no longer living with them (Schofield et al 2010, McCann 2006). Birth relatives whose children have been adopted may be even less of a priority for pressurised local authorities.

### **Children's experiences of child protection and looked after children's services**

The research on children's perspectives on child protection echoes the findings on research with parents in emphasizing the importance of relationships. Relationships of trust have been found to be key to participation in several studies (Schofield and Thoburn 1996, Thomas 2002, Bell 2011, (1), (4), (5)) Trust was undermined by changes in social worker, since young people tended to confer trust on individuals rather than agencies (Hill 1999). However, many looked after children experienced frequent changes of social worker. (Munro, 2001; Bell, 2002; Cashmore, 2002; McLeod, 2007, 2010).

In a Finnish based study of fostered children and workers Polkii et al (2012) found that children felt more listened to, and better able to influence decisions once placed in a foster home, than earlier in the intervention. There are relatively few studies of children's participation in the child protection process in England that have studied children at the time they were subject to a child protection plan, and it is of note that Polkii et al reported a lesser degree of participation earlier in service involvement. *Children's Views of CP* studied children living at home with a child protection plan and makes a valuable contribution to this field. Subsequent to the Munro Review of Child Protection (2011) the Children's Rights Director carried out a study of children's experiences of child protection (Office of the Children's Rights Director, 2012). They interviewed eleven children and their findings echo those in (1) and (5). Children wanted to know what was happening, and worried about going

into care. They needed time to build up a relationship with a social worker before feeling able to confide in them, and disliked feeling judged. Trust was promoted through being reliable, turning up on time, doing what they said they would do, and not pressurizing the child to talk. Providing clear information pitched appropriately for the child has been argued to be important in reducing anxiety and enabling participation (Schofield and Thoburn 1996, Healy and Darlington 2009, Woolfson et al 2010).

A number of studies in this area have interviewed children in foster care. There are several studies that have looked at the participation of looked after children in care planning and review. Thomas and O’Kane (1998) found tensions between children’s involvement and adults’ determination of a child’s best interests. McLeod (2007) found that young people valued self-determination and autonomy whereas social workers concentrated on empathy, and respect. The importance of not only listening, but acting on children’s views was stressed.

Children can find meetings difficult (Children in Scotland 2006) and this has been linked to poor preparation, a conflict between the child and professional agendas, and procedures that children found boring or confusing (Children in Scotland 2006). Vis and Thomas (2009), in a study in Norway, found that attendance at reviews was vital for children’s meaningful participation, and that it was not sufficient for the child to talk to a social worker. Other studies have found that children in care did not feel listened to, and this was exacerbated when they did not know how they could influence decisions made about them (Timms and Thoburn 2006). In a recent study of independent reviewing officers (IROs) Dickens et al (2014) stressed the importance of preparation before the review, attention to the process including when and where the meeting took place and who attended, and speaking to children after the review. Children thought that the IRO was in charge, but had less understanding of how decisions might be implemented.

The research on service users’ experiences of child protection and adoption services reflects the inherent tensions in this field of work. It underlines the importance that service users accord to the relationships they form with social workers. This dovetails with the renewed interest in relationship-based practice, as a means of redressing the imbalances stemming from a rigid form of managerialism, which concentrates on performance targets and standardised responses (Trevithick 2014).

The research studies which form the basis for this commentary all involved service users’ perspectives as the object of inquiry. They have also involved service users in the research process. Having considered the literature on service users’ perspectives on child protection

and adoption social work, in the final section of this chapter the policy context and justification for service user involvement in research will be discussed.

## **Service user involvement in research**

### **Policy context for service user involvement in research**

Alongside the development of the notion of partnership between users and professionals in practice, there have been policy initiatives developing the involvement of service users in the research process. NHS Research Governance (Department of Health 2000) included the statement that 'participants or their representatives should be involved wherever possible in the design, conduct, analysis and reporting of research' (Department of Health, 2000, cited in Purtell, Baxter and Mitchell 2003:139). In 2003 a national advisory group, INVOLVE, funded by the Department of Health was set up to promote active public involvement in health and social care research. A growing number of statutory and independent funders require a consideration of service user involvement in research in their funding proposals. In addition the code of ethics for social work research of the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee suggests that the *process* of social work research should, where possible, seek to empower service users and increase their social and economic capital, that social work researchers should promote emancipatory research and that, where appropriate, social work researchers should base their work 'on the perspective and lived experiences of the research subject' ([www.juc.ac.uk](http://www.juc.ac.uk) Code of Ethics of JUC SWEC).

Although the code of ethics might suggest that service user involvement in research would be thoroughly embedded in social work research, in practice, Boxall and Beresford (2013) suggest that service user involvement is underdeveloped. They cite the 2008 RAE panel report for Social Work and Social Policy:

'The involvement of service users was weak in a number of submissions. While important steps have been made, there remains a need for further development in methodological approaches to service user and community involvement and in promoting partnerships with service users'. (SWSPA 2009, 10–11, cited in Boxall and Beresford, 2013:588)

The most recent REF panel report notes the development of the involvement of service users in research,

'the involvement of service users in research has increased, and panel members particularly welcomed evidence of innovative approaches to the involvement of groups such as children and young people, and 'hard to reach' groups.' (REF 2014: panel report UOA 22, 2015:89)

## **Social Work Knowledge**

The place of service users' perspectives in research is by no means assured. It is related to the question of what counts as knowledge or evidence in social work. There has been much discussion of the difficulties and desirability of evidence based practice (EBP) within social work. The debate is encapsulated on the one hand by the view that EBP involves a scientific approach to social care with research stemming from quantitative perspectives and the randomised control trial as a gold standard. Critics of this view of EBP argue that such views ignore the complexity involved in exercising judgement in conditions of uncertainty with individual service users, and that it privileges large scale quantitative methodologies over qualitative designs (Trinder 2000). EBP originated in the medical profession. An influential definition of EBP by Sackett reads as follows:

'the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients, based on skills which allow the doctor to evaluate both personal experience and external evidence in a systematic and objective manner.' (Sackett et al 1997:71)

This has been adapted by Sheldon and Chilvers 2002 for social care as follows:

'evidence-based social care is the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions regarding the welfare of those in need.' (Sheldon and Chilvers 2002, cited in Smith 2005:8)

What has been lost from Sackett's conceptualisation is the mention of the relationship between professional and service user (or doctor and patient). In considering each case the social worker draws upon not only research evidence but also skills, and the knowledge and experience of service users (Trevithick 2014). Munro draws upon the fuller conceptualisation of EBP:

'drawing on the best available evidence to inform practice at all stages of the work and of integrating that evidence with the social worker's own understanding of the family's values and preferences. It is not simply a case of taking an intervention off

the shelf and applying it to a family'. (Munro, 2011:92, cited in Cooper and Whittaker 2014).

This wider conception of EBP suggests that there is a place for service users' perspectives in the evidence base for social work. Much research on service users' perspectives is based on qualitative research designs, which may be criticised from a narrow view of what constitutes evidence. However, qualitative approaches are well suited to exploring service users' perspectives, since they pay attention to the question of power relationships between researchers and the researched.

Service user involvement in research also brings to the fore power relationships between the researcher and the researched and can problematize the assumption that Zavříšek and Videmšek (2009:208) refer to, 'that professionals have 'knowledge', whilst users have only 'experiences''. There are various justifications for service user involvement in research that can be made from different epistemological positions. Service user involvement in research can be justified as contributing a distinctive and hitherto lacking perspective to the research base in which any individual contribution is always partial. A more radical position is the epistemological privileging of service users' perspectives and experiences. From this point of view service users' perspectives would be not another perspective but the privileged perspective. Social work academics have used feminist standpoint theory to argue for privileging service users' perspectives in research and in practice (Beresford 2001, Unrau 2007).

Beresford and Croft (2001:300) argue that services users on the receiving end of social work services are better placed to generate criticism and knowledge claims than are social work academics or practitioners, and appeal to a 'unique body of users' knowledges based on first-hand experience'. Similarly Unrau argues that all standpoints offer a partial view, but that the standpoint of the oppressed is more likely to be objective, because they have less investment in the status quo (Unrau: 2007: 123).

The terms of this debate can be somewhat polemical, with service user knowledge opposed to that of practitioners and academics. However the relationship between experience and knowledge claims has been problematised. Scott (1992), in an influential essay, expressed concern about the appeal to authentic experiences of the marginalised, as a privileged epistemic standpoint. Experience is used in such arguments as a way of grounding knowledge that is 'unassailable' (Scott, 1992:25). In contrast, Scott argues that experience is,

'at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested' (Scott 1992: 37).

Scott's position suggests that caution should be exercised in taking experience as somehow self-evident. In fact it can be argued that feminist standpoint theory does not rest on such a simple appeal to experience. Harding (1990:95) describes feminist standpoint theory as follows:

'The experiences arising from the activities assigned to women, understood through feminist theory, provide a starting point for developing potentially more complete and less distorted knowledge claims than do men's experiences.'

This suggests that it is not experience itself, but rather a feminist analysis of women's experiences that has the potential for generating superior (more complete) knowledge. Women's experiences, once understood through a feminist lens, can generate less distorted representations of the world. Thus the argument is that it is important to use the experiences of those who are marginalised as a *basis* for producing knowledge. That process is explicitly political and needs to be developed collectively (through feminism).

This debate is instructive for the question of service user involvement in social work. There is recognition that the translation of experience into knowledge involves an interpretation. There is a suggestion that this is a political process, and that this must be developed collectively. There is a claim that this will result in more objective knowledge. The implications of this for service user involvement in research could suggest that service users should produce their own knowledge, collectively through user-controlled research, and that the resulting knowledge would be superior to other sorts of knowledge claims.

However, the development of feminism has included a recognition that there are dangers in making knowledge claims on behalf of a group, since this can sometimes mean intragroup differences are suppressed, especially the more marginalised voices (the development of black feminism and lesbian feminism attests to this and intersectionality research attempts to address it). This raises the issue of representation, and of how to adjudicate between different standpoints. These questions are important for social work, where in both research and practice there is a need to take into account sometimes competing perspectives, for example those of parents and those of children.

In what follows I shall argue for the contribution of service user involvement in research, involving collaborative relationships between service users and academics, rather than a

position which opposes service users' and academics' interests in research. This position takes seriously the view that service user knowledge is not 'given' in experience but must be produced. It takes seriously the power relationships involved in knowledge production. It draws specifically on social work skills, particularly those associated with relationship-based practice, suggesting that these can be useful in enabling the meaningful involvement of marginalised service users in knowledge production. Rather than suggesting that this guarantees superior or more objective knowledge, it suggests that the knowledge generated can make a valuable contribution to social work knowledge. These possibilities will be further explored in part three of this commentary.

## Part Two: Methods of Researching Service Users' Perspectives

Part two provides a summary of my role in the four studies. The chapter then moves on to discuss the conduct of the studies, including the role of service users in the research process and their impact on the research. It concludes with a section on reflexivity, reflecting on the differences between social work practice and academic research relationships. Summaries of the details of the individual studies, including the aims, methods, findings, strengths and limitations can be found in Appendix one. This chapter draws selectively upon all four studies to discuss methods of researching service users' perspectives and involving service users in the research process.

### My role in the studies

My role in each of the studies was as follows:

1. <i>Helping Birth Families</i>	Co-Investigator
2. <i>Supporting Contact</i>	Co-Investigator
3. <i>Children's Views of CP</i>	Principal Investigator
4. <i>Recognition and Telling</i>	Principal Investigator

Across the studies I took part in a full range of research tasks including the following:

Adoption research (*Helping Birth Families* and *Supporting Contact*)

- Conducting interviews with service user participants face-to-face and by phone.
- Coding and analysis of data, using NVivo
- Working with adult service user consultants on analysis and dissemination phases of research
- Writing research reports and publications
- Presenting findings to a wide range of audiences

Child Protection research (*Children's views of CP* and *Recognition and Telling*)

- Developing bids and securing research funding

- Consideration of ethical issues and writing ethics submissions
- Liaising with local authority and voluntary organisation managers and social workers to identify and gain access to research participants
- Designing leaflets and information sheets for a range of participants including young people, parents and professionals
- Managing a research team in a multi-site project
- Liaising with funders and advisory group
- Designing and piloting activity-based interview schedules for young people
- Recruiting a team of young researchers to be involved at all stages of the research process
- Conducting interviews with service user participants
- Running focus groups/workshops with children, young people, parents, and professionals.
- Carrying out risk assessment of young researchers
- Coding and analysis of data, using NVivo and SPSS software
- Developing content analysis coding of a website.
- Writing reports and publications
- Design and writing of young people's versions of research reports
- Presenting findings to a wide range of audiences
- Supporting young people to participate in dissemination of research

## Methods

### **Working with service users in the research process**

All the research studies involved service users in the research process to differing degrees. In each of the research studies collaborative relationships were formed (Hanley et al, 2003). The academic researchers retained responsibility for the research process, for delivering research outputs on time, for the central decisions about research design, and for management and dissemination of the research. Decision-making responsibilities remained with academic researchers, but in all the studies we tried to ensure that the service user researchers felt that they were valued members of the research team, and could meaningfully affect decisions.

Part of the motivation for involving service users came from funders (Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England).

However, the research teams were keen to embrace this aspect of the research and ensure that it was not tokenistic. McLaughlin (2006) comments that it is important for researchers involving young researchers to be clear about how involvement adds value to the research process.

We wanted to recruit service users with experience of the issues we were researching – in *Helping Birth Families and Supporting Contact*, of having a child adopted and in *Children's Views of CP and Recognition and Telling*, of having experienced or been deemed to be at risk of abuse and neglect. We wanted to avoid recruiting only the most experienced and articulate service users, so there were limits to how much we could expect our birth relative consultants and young researchers to take part in the analysis process. As McLaughlin (2006) comments in relation to research with children, it can be excluding to pitch all the research tasks at graduate level. This also applied in our work with birth relatives. Our aim was not to train them to be able to code the data for example using NVivo, or to provide a rigorous training in research methods. Instead the purpose of their involvement was to deepen our analysis, whilst avoiding treating them as more sources of data (like an additional focus group). We wanted to draw upon their experiences whilst getting them to think beyond their own experiences in order to analyse the data we had collected from participants. The similarities in working with groups of adult and young researcher service users were striking. This commentary supplements the discussion of the process and outcomes of involving service users in research found in (2).

In the adoption research project the initial stages of recruiting birth relatives were problematic as there was some misunderstanding about the purpose of the task (2). Kirby (2004) suggests that when involving young people in research they should be included in discussions early in the research process about the degree of their involvement. In *Recognition and Telling* this was addressed at the outset in the recruitment process, by considering carefully how young people would be involved. We provided a list of tasks that needed to be done, and held an initial discussion with the group, where they could select the tasks individually that they would like to help with. We expected young people to drop out of the research or to come in and out of the research process and allowed for this possibility (Kirby 2004). In order to be as inclusive as possible we adapted our ways of working to try to include all those who had shown an initial interest. For example, we realised that some of the young researchers would not get to a central meeting place, and it was easier for the adult researchers to travel to them, although this meant working with two sub-groups rather than one group for most of the time.

One of the challenges of sustaining service user involvement was the time that research takes. There were lengthy gaps between meetings, and this made it harder to sustain interest. In *Helping Birth Families, Supporting Contact and Recognition and Telling* researchers kept in touch between the times when service users were actively involved in research. Beresford and Croft (2001) suggest that it is important that service users feel that something has happened as a result of involvement. A newsletter was provided which updated service users about the progress of the research, and provided feedback about the alterations made as a result of their input. In addition in *Recognition and Telling* one adult researcher's role was principally to support the young researchers. Each was followed up individually after every session. This was partly to get feedback on the research process. However, equally important was checking on the impact of the work on the young researchers as they were exposed to distressing issues, and also were negotiating their own issues (for example transition to higher education and related negotiations with local authority to maintain support for a young person in foster care, homelessness, poverty, pregnancy). This worker was key in supporting the group both collectively and individually, linking with their other support workers where necessary.

The benefits of service user involvement included increased confidence and self-esteem, and the chance to add to their curriculum vitae. Feedback from birth relatives focused mainly on the benefits they had experienced from taking part in the research with many suggesting it had a positive impact on their well-being (2). All the service users valued the chance to make a difference to a topic that mattered to them. For the academic researchers the experience enriched the research process, improving the research at all stages, as well as developing new skills. The commitment and intensity the service users brought to the work was powerful, and their involvement was enlivening and often fun. The main costs were the amount of time and energy required from the academic researchers. The following sections discuss the conduct of the research, and include a focus on the impact of service user involvement at each stage of the research process.

## **The conduct of the research**

### **Ethics**

When researching service users' perspectives ethical issues are paramount, particularly when the service users have had limited choice about engaging with services. The

involvement of service users in the research process was helpful because of the level of ethical scrutiny they brought to the work. Whilst researchers were concerned about how to collect and analyse the data, the service user consultants were concerned about being on the receiving end of data collection. In the following sections examples are given of how service user involvement enabled us to conduct the research in an ethically sensitive way.

It is also important to consider the ethics of involving service users in the research process. The aim in all the studies was to ensure that service users would experience their involvement positively (2). This was done by working hard to make people feel valued and well looked after, by concrete means such as providing food, sorting out travel and accommodation, and trying to ensure payment was swift. It was also important to try to ensure that everyone felt able to contribute, that their views were taken seriously and made a difference to the research, and that we acknowledged the emotive nature of the topics studied.

### **Recruiting service users as participants**

Service users helped us to think through the notion of whether and how it would be ethical to approach service users for interviews. For example in *Children's Views of CP* we were able to consult with a group of young people prior to commencing the interviews, who helped us consider the balance between protecting children who currently were involved with child protection services and enabling them to participate in the research. They gave us confidence that it was ethically defensible to undertake interviews with this cohort of service users. Indeed they stressed the benefits to children of being given a chance to express their views about services, and felt that children could understand the difference between the research interview and other professionals who were coming to talk to them if it was explained clearly.

Across the studies service users made a number of concrete suggestions about recruitment processes which helped to ensure they were ethically sound and that we were successful in recruiting service user participants to the studies. The terms used in recruitment materials has been argued to be an ethical issue that researchers should consider (Kotch 2000, Jones, 2004). This is particularly so when researching sensitive or stigmatising topics. It has been argued for example, that steering clear of using words such as 'child abuse' might be misleading for children who might agree to participate when otherwise they may not have done so (Kotch, 2000). We thought carefully about this issue. For *Children's Views of CP* the recruitment materials said that we wanted to talk to children who had a social worker and

who had a child protection plan. For *Recognition and Telling* we called the interview study 'Feeling safe and getting help' and we talked about being safe inside and outside the home. These words were chosen in discussion with young people and in recognition of the fact that child abuse and neglect are contested terms for children as well as adults. We did not wish to presume that a child with a child protection plan would consider themselves to have suffered or be at risk of child abuse.

In *Helping Birth Families* birth relatives made a number of suggestions about recruitment materials, including ensuring that our letters did not go through social services franking machine, or they could end up in the bin (2). In *Recognition and Telling* young researchers were actively involved in recruiting young people for the interviews and it is unlikely that we would have been successful in one site without their support.

## **Data collection**

### ***Interviews with service users***

All four research studies had semi-structured interviews as a central method of data collection. Across the four studies both telephone and face-to-face interviews were conducted. For the most part telephone interviews were conducted with adoptive parents and face-to-face interviews were offered as an option to birth relatives and were used with children and young people. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) argue that telephone interviews have some advantages over face-to-face interviewing. They offer relative anonymity which can be advantageous when discussing sensitive topics, are safer for interviewers, and are time and cost effective. They compared outcomes of telephone and face-to-face interviews and found no difference in the number or depth of responses to each question. However, the service user consultants in *Helping Birth Families* specifically recommended that participants be offered a face-to-face interview as they felt it would be easier for birth relatives (2). In fact one third of birth relatives took up this offer. Block and Erskine (2012) suggest that there may be challenges in the formation of trust between interviewer and participant when interviews are conducted over the phone. It is likely that birth relatives, having gone through the experience of compulsory adoption, might find it harder than adoptive parents to trust and confide in a relatively anonymous interviewer about emotive issues.

The experience of conducting phone interviews and face-to-face interviews suggests that there are advantages to holding interviews face-to-face for the most vulnerable service users. Face-to-face interviews offer more means of establishing a rapport, since non-verbal

communication as well as verbal can be used to convey empathy. A particular advantage of face-to-face interviews was when a birth relative struggled to articulate a coherent response. It was easier to interpret a pause or silence face-to-face, than over the phone, and thus to respond sensitively.

The interviews with children were all conducted face-to-face due to the wish to establish rapport and the extensive use of activity based trigger materials. Interviewing children poses particular challenges. We started from a presumption of children's competence, combined with recognition of child development, differences in power between adults and children, and the importance of taking into account situation and context (Thomas 2002).

The majority of children's interviews took place at home, which is a topic of some discussion within social work practice (Ferguson 2011). The setting of an interview may impact on what is said in a social work assessment, and it has been argued that children may not feel free to talk about abuse if interviewed at home (Ferguson 2011). In *Children's Views of CP* most of the interviews took place at home, and one of the youngest children wanted to have his mother present. In *Recognition and Telling* half the interviews took place in the home and half in a voluntary organisation. There were not striking differences in the content of the interviews according to the venue. Arguably this was because the process of accessing the family, the role of the interviewer, the focus on children's experiences of services, and the potential outcome of the interview were markedly different in a research interview as opposed to a social work interview.

In *Children's Views of CP* the researchers were aware of the sensitivities of carrying out the research at a time when the children's families were receiving a lot of attention from services. We did not want to impose too much on children who were currently having a difficult time (Cree et al 2002). It was important to be sure that the child understood we were not part of the services intervening in their family and that they could freely consent (or refuse) to take part. Children may feel obliged to consent to take part, particularly where interviews are arranged via those who provide services for children. We tried to be mindful of this by being careful to explain that we were doing a project for a university, and checking again that they wished to continue after an initial introduction and explanation. We also paid attention to verbal and non-verbal cues that the child or young person was losing interest or wanted to stop.

In addition we did not wish the interview itself to be distressing to the child or young person (Cashmore 2006). It was important to be careful to avoid the child disclosing more than they wanted to say (Kay 2009) whilst at the same time avoiding closing down the interview

because the interviewer was uncomfortable about hearing distressing information (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). In *Children's Views of CP* we asked children about services and about professionals rather than asking them directly about their family lives. In *Recognition and Telling* the topic more directly concerned abuse and neglect but we approached the topic via third person vignettes, and followed the participant's lead in talking about their own experiences of abuse or neglect. We followed the children's cues and allowed them to some extent to lead the interview. At the end of the interview we talked about less emotive topics and gave them links to support if they wished. The interview activities are described in ((5), p25) and ((4), p6-7).

In both studies the interviews yielded rich information both about the children's and young people's experiences within their families and communities, and about their experiences of services. Interviews varied in length and in engagement with particular activities. In only one interview it was evident that the young person was not really engaged with the activities, and appeared bored and distracted. In this instance it was considered ethical to bring the interview to a close within a short time, without suggesting that it had not been successful. (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). The young person received a voucher and certificate to acknowledge their time.

### **Workshops with children**

Both *Children's Views of CP* and *Recognition and Telling* used workshops or focus groups as part of data collection. Mauthner (1997) argues that small group discussions are more suited to younger children and that individual interviews are more appropriate with older children. However group discussions are not appropriate for disclosing intimate information, where it may be unclear how confidentiality can be guaranteed outside the group (Alderson and Morrow 2011). Gallagher (2009) argues that children may value the privacy of individual interviews where the topic is sensitive. There is a delicate balance in choosing a method which is most appropriate to age and also to the sensitivity of the topic. In *Recognition and Telling* workshops were held with children in a primary school (aged ten and eleven) and with sixth form students in a secondary school.

In order to prepare for this work I visited a school where ChildLine were running a programme to educate children about abuse and neglect to observe the session. We adapted some of the materials, with permission, to use in the focus group. A key difference was that whereas ChildLine's purpose was to educate the children about what was or was not acceptable, the research interests were in finding out what the children thought.

Morgan et al (2002) suggest that a key task in facilitating a group with children is the balance between directing the group and letting children discuss issues, particularly if the adult is viewed as a teacher figure. The groups in schools were run by a combination of adult and young researchers, in this way we wanted to disrupt the assumption that adults were authority figures akin to teachers. Much of the interesting discussion occurred when we split the whole group into two sections each working with a young researcher. At the same time we felt that the work was ethically sensitive and needed an adult presence, in case of disclosure by young people during the group.

## **Content analysis**

An innovative aspect of research design in *Recognition and Telling* was the content analysis of a peer support website which focused on abuse and neglect. Naturalistic observation of the internet has been used to investigate sensitive research questions including eating disorders and adolescent sexual health (Sixsmith and Murray, 2001, Harvey et al 2007, Brotsky and Giles 2007). This data differs from that collected in interviews in that an exchange is created with a peer rather than being constructed with an interviewer. It has been argued that the relative anonymity of the internet allows access by those who are relatively socially isolated and that they may use the anonymity to reveal things that would be hard to discuss face-to-face (Sharf, 1999, Adair et al 2006).

Whilst interviews involve a retrospective account constructed through the interaction, internet support sites tend to be oriented towards the immediate future, seeking support for an imminent event (Seale et al 2010:600). The internet analysis complemented the interview studies by offering a different type of data. In particular it deepened the analysis of the issue of recognition and helped to identify barriers to telling. Within the interviews, young people who did not feel they had been abused would talk about recognition in relation to others but not in relation to themselves. On the internet site, a number of the posts were asking precisely whether what the young people were going through was acceptable or constituted abuse. Many in their posts described turning to the website because other forms of telling were too hard. There was much discussion of barriers to telling, ways to overcome them, and the possible costs and benefits of telling.

The orientation towards the present and immediate future in the internet analysis was then complemented by the more retrospective focus in the interviews. The interviews allowed us to construct individual chronologies of recognition and telling over time, showing how past experience of services impacted on the young person's attitude to help seeking in the

present. Both types of analysis then fed into the development of a framework for understanding recognition, telling and help from a child's point of view ((4), chapter 6).

The young researchers were involved in the analysis of both interviews and the peer support website. One unanticipated difference was the degree of concern that they felt about the young people posting on the website. This was possibly related to the orientation of the posts to the present or imminent future and the anonymity of it. There was a concern that some of the posters may not have been safe, and when a thread suddenly stopped, a concern with what had happened next. The young researchers required more emotional support about their engagement with this material, than with the interview material. Some of the young people were tempted to intervene on the website and we had a discussion about their role as young researchers and as young people. We agreed that no one would post on the website for the duration of the research project.

### **Coding and analysis**

The analysis of the qualitative data across all studies was carried out using thematic analysis. Interviews were transcribed, and coded using NVivo. Codes were developed inductively from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). However analysis was also informed by theory as researchers drew upon typologies of participation (*Children's Views of CP*) and the literature review about disclosure (*Recognition and Telling*). In *Helping Birth Families* and *Supporting Contact* some of the coding attempted to build on previously developed models of acceptance of adoption (Neil 2007) and dual connection (the extent to which families recognise and support the child's connection to two families).

One disadvantage of thematic analysis is that it can be said to fragment the data, so that each code is removed from the context of the interview (Mishler 1986: 23). In all the studies the use of cross-sectional coding was supplemented by the construction of detailed case summaries. In this way the data could be analysed in terms of cross-cutting themes, whilst also maintaining the complexity and integrity of individual's situation.

Doucet and Mauthner (2002) argue that involvement of participants in data analysis is crucial in addressing concerns about power imbalances in the construction of knowledge about marginalised groups. (2) describes the process of involving birth relative consultants in adoption research. To make the data more manageable four transcripts were made using excerpts from four interviews and audio recorded with actors speaking the parts. These were played to the group and prompted discussion. During the discussion the academics took on

a facilitative role, taking part alongside the birth relatives but trying to ensure that everyone was able to express their opinion. To stimulate discussion each person was asked to rank the recording as to how well they thought the person was coping, giving a number between one and ten, and then discuss the reasons for it. It was important for the academic researchers to go last in this exercise to avoid closing down discussion. However, we did wish to take part, not from a position as the authoritative experts, but as co-inquirers with a different perspective.

One of the aspects that allowed this process to work was that the group had already established relationships with each other, and with the researchers, over the course of their involvement in the research process. In my opinion this meant that trust had been established, and this allowed a frank exchange of views. I would suggest that the fact that there was a group made it easier for the service users to gain confidence in putting forward their views, especially where they challenged those of the academic researchers.

The birth relative consultants' contribution to the analysis was substantial. Firstly the birth relatives took issue with a conceptual analysis of 'acceptance' of adoption, arguing that acceptance carried a connotation of agreement, which was not realistic, although the academic researchers' intention in using the word 'acceptance' was realising that the adoption had taken place and could not be undone. Secondly the birth relatives downplayed the emphasis on intense anger as a response that meant the loss was not 'resolved'. They suggested instead that we look at the extent to which people were able to re-engage with wider life activities as well as psychological symptoms and problems, a view more akin to the recovery model in mental health (Tew 2011). Since the birth relatives had suggested that we ask more about informal support from friends and family, stigma and rejection arose as a more prominent theme than it might otherwise have done.

In *Recognition and Telling* the young researchers were involved in data analysis of both the website, and of the interviews. For the content analysis a coding sheet was developed alongside the young researchers, and each young researcher was given several threads to code. We then met as a group to discuss common themes from the codes. For the interview analysis we followed a similar method to that used in the adoption study.

The young researchers brought to the fore the ways in which children's views could be marginalised, suggesting that child talk is not taken as seriously as adult talk, and that children themselves could be viewed as the problem, their accounts dismissed as attention seeking, or their behaviour becoming the sole focus. This suggested a sociological awareness of how children are positioned in society.

The young researchers discussed at length the contribution of reason and emotion to the process of telling. They emphasised a view of children as competent social actors who made strategic decisions about who and when to tell, emphasizing a rational process. However, they also talked about the emotional aspects of telling, underlining the fact that emotional factors could be central to telling, acting both as a barrier, but sometimes as a prompt to telling. All agreed that if young people did speak up it was often because they were desperate. When thinking about how young people can recognise abuse they spoke about how younger children might have a sense that something was wrong, before they could articulate it, sometimes expressed through physical sensations. As one young researcher put it, 'things that happen that make you shudder'. These discussions both drew upon their experiences and knowledge, and were based upon the research data. They allowed a rich picture to emerge of children as both competent and vulnerable, and of the importance of relationships in helping children and young people to manage the reasoning and emotional aspects of recognition and telling. These dimensions were reflected in the development of the framework for understanding recognition and telling in the final report (4).

The two examples above demonstrate the value of collaboration with service users in the research process. The service users brought a different perspective to both research projects changing the nature of the analysis. The academic researchers could integrate the service users' analysis with existing theory and research, and with more traditional coding of the data in developing the final analysis in reports and publications.

## **Dissemination**

It was felt that involving service users in dissemination was important in *Helping Birth Families, Supporting Contact and Recognition and Telling*, as stable groups of service users had been involved in the research process throughout these studies. As well as adding impact to the presentations, the launch events were important celebrations of the end of the research process. (2) outlines the involvement of the birth relative consultants in the launch event for the adoption studies. After the conclusion of the study videos were made with the service user consultants and audio clips have been made available (<http://adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html>).

In studies *Children's Views of CP* and *Recognition and Telling* the young researchers worked on a young people's version of reports (4) and (5). For *Recognition and Telling* young researchers were involved in a number of presentations including a conference on Research with Vulnerable Children, and an event to launch the report where two of the

young researchers presented to an audience of key stakeholders alongside the Children's Commissioner for England and the Minister for Children.

These events were planned carefully as dissemination of the research has a different emotional salience for service user and academic researchers. Whilst academic researchers undoubtedly are invested in the research the service users were passionate that the messages from the research should be well received and acted upon. It is important that academic researchers are realistic about the research process and potential impact of research when working with service users.

There was also a difference between service user researchers' and academic researchers' attitudes to questions about the research. Whereas academics are used to constructive criticism and defending their research, questions from the floor were to some extent perceived as hostile by some of the young researchers, who may have felt that it was a sign of weakness to admit to limitations in the research. In future work I would better prepare service user researchers for this aspect of dissemination.

## **Reflexivity**

An important issue across all the studies was my own position as a researcher. At the outset of my involvement in the studies I had recently moved from social work practice into an academic position. In practice I had worked both in child protection and with looked after children and it had struck me that there were more efforts to involve children in social work processes once they were looked after, than earlier in social work interventions.

One benefit to being a social worker was that it eased access to the study participants since professional gatekeepers were reassured by the shared professional status, especially the specific experience I had of the child protection system and of interviewing vulnerable children. Whilst my role as a social worker was useful with professionals it was not something that I chose to divulge in interviews with service users, since I felt it would prevent service users from freely sharing their experiences. They might associate me with either negative or positive experiences of social workers. In a couple of cases, it is likely the interview would not have gone ahead, or would have been terminated if I had been clear that I had been a social worker or was a social work academic. This omission felt like deception when listening to very negative views expressed about social workers.

When working with birth relative consultants it was fairly far into the research process, when relationships had been established, that myself and other members of the research team

'outed' ourselves as social workers. There are parallels between the research situation and practice. For example in *Helping Birth Families* some adoption support services reported that they were better able to engage with service users because they were independent of the local authority who had removed the child from the parent's care. They had social workers working for them but gave them job titles which did not highlight that fact.

Engaging with service users as research participants echoes some of the issues within social work practice, however there are significant differences. When conducting interviews as a researcher it was liberating to be freed from the responsibility of assessment and necessity of judgement that comes with the statutory social work role. This made it easier to concentrate on the child's perspective, as I was not negotiating complex dynamics with the parent too, and was not required to take action. It underlined how complex the task of listening to service users and involving them is in social work practice.

Working with service users in the research process, also stimulated reflection on the similarities and differences between those relationships and relationships in social work practice. There were similarities, and the research teams drew upon practice skills to build and maintain relationships. There are differences in power between academic researchers and service users just as there are between social workers and service users and we had to be mindful of this to enable the service users to gain confidence in participating in research tasks. However there are some elements of the relationships which differ, and which help to distinguish the specific contribution of service user involvement in research. The service users were being paid, which gave them a different status to service users in social work practice. We referred to them as 'birth relative consultants' and as 'young researchers'. Crucially we did not represent an agency with the power to intervene in their lives. They could walk away from the research at any point, in a way which is not always possible in relation to services. Teram et al (2005:1134) argue that the research relationship 'can avoid the constraints of professionally constructed practice relevance', making it possible to remain open to service users' perspectives which may differ markedly from the concerns of practitioners and researchers.

## Conclusion

This chapter has considered the conduct of four studies which researched service users' perspectives. It explored the process of involving service users in research and their impact on different stages of the research process. It considered similarities and differences between relationships with service users in social work practice and in social work research.

In the final chapter I will argue that service users' perspectives are an important source of evidence in social work research and that service user involvement in the research process can deepen our understanding of service users' perspectives and of social work practice.

## Part Three: Discussion

Part three of this commentary is a discussion of the contribution that the research and published works make to the social work knowledge base. The chapter begins with a description of service users' perspectives in the context of relationship-based practice, an approach to social work which underpinned the research studies. It is argued that a focus in research on service users' perspectives is one way to address the need to take account of the power differentials in social work relationships which have been argued to be a shortcoming of relationship-based practice. The chapter goes on to consider how research with vulnerable service users can benefit from practice skills associated with relationship-based practice, considering both service users as research participants and as researchers.

By reflecting on the similarities and differences between working with service users in practice and in research it is argued that service user involvement in research can challenge the primacy of expert knowledge in a way that is not always possible in social work practice.

### **Service users' perspectives in social work research**

Relationship-based practice places the relationship between social worker and service user at the centre of effective practice – arguing that relationship skills are essential to social work and emphasizing the professional relationship as the medium through which the social worker can understand and intervene (Howe and Hinings 1995, Ruch 2005). This perspective builds on the model of psychosocial casework predominant in the UK in the 1960s. Over the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychosocial casework was challenged for ignoring structural issues and power relations (Ruch 2005, Turney 2012, Trevithick 2003). As Trevithick (2003) notes, in the casework tradition the emphasis was on individual change and adaptation to the environment, rather than changing the environment or incorporating a political dimension to the work. Turney and Tanner (2001) argue that casework did not adequately address the impact of issues such as race, gender and class both within social work relationships and in terms of the life opportunities of service users. Furthermore they highlight the need to pay attention to power differentials between service user and social worker and take account of the social worker's role as representative of an agency. Recent advocates of relationship-based approaches stress the need for practice to be 'participatory and emancipatory' (Ruch 2005:115). This view of social work, emphasizing relationship-based practice, enhanced by the acknowledgement of issues of power, is one which informs the research studies and published works.

Service users' perspectives are central to social work practice, since the experience of the service user is the starting point for understanding their support needs.

'The social worker's first task is to establish his own evaluation of the client's meaning; it is this 'meaning' given by the client to his experience which shapes the nature of the problem and of the response of the worker' (England, 1986:28)

The quote stresses that meaning is not simply *given* in experience, but is *constructed* on the basis of experience by the client. Potentially one can interpret the same experience in many different ways. As well as there being a difference between the experience and the meaning given to it, there is a further dimension of meaning construction, as the social worker's role in engaging with the client is to make their *own* evaluation of the service user's interpretation of their experience. This account of social work is also helpful for understanding the research situation, and accords with a social constructionist orientation to research (Berger and Luckman 1967). The researcher tries to elicit an account from the research participant and imposes an interpretation on that account, whilst also recognising that the account is itself a construction occurring in an interview situation at a certain point in the service user's life. An important difference between the practice and research situation is the purpose of the encounter. Whereas the social worker engages in the encounter in order to help the service user, the researcher engages in the encounter to add to the knowledge base for social work.

Although it might seem that postmodern perspectives in social work (Parton 2003) are at odds with the psychodynamic thinking that underpins relationship-based practice, there are several similarities. Firstly both relationship-based practice and postmodern perspectives would oppose technical rationality, which suggests that social work should proceed by the selection and application of replicable techniques derived from scientific knowledge. Both suggest that problems are contextual and attend to service users' situated accounts as a starting point for making sense. Both suggest that the knower cannot be separated from social work knowledge; relationship-based practice through attention to the relationship and processes going on between social worker and service user, postmodern perspectives by viewing understanding as a relational and collaborative process. Parton (2003) stresses that service users use talk to come to terms with difficult and painful experiences, citing Howe (1993), a view which is very much at the heart of psychodynamic thinking.

Where postmodern approaches and relationship-based social work differ perhaps is in the role of expertise. Whereas relationship-based practice views the service user account as a surface description requiring interpretation (using psychodynamically informed expertise), postmodern approaches question the notion of surface/depth and the primacy of social work expertise, and look instead for social workers and service users to construct mutual

understanding (Smith 2001). In Parton's (2003) project of 'constructive social work' this involves a rethinking of authority, 'moving from a hierarchical to a collaborative approach' and 'trying to develop a stance of 'not knowing', and not being seen as the expert on a problem' (Parton 2003: 10), This entails valuing the views and experiences of service users. This is advocated as a stance for professional practice, however in statutory social work it stands in tension with the need to exert authority when it is impossible to reach mutual understanding (for example between a parent and a social worker about the welfare of a child). Arguably there is more room for a collaborative stance in social work research and later sections of the chapter will discuss collaborative approaches to the generation of social work knowledge through involving service users in research.

### **Service users' perspectives on child protection and adoption**

The research studies and publications have in common a concern with the interpretation of service users' experiences. They have drawn attention both to service users' accounts of their family situations, and of professional intervention. They have been concerned to shed light on service user experiences at particular points in their lives; young people who have experienced varying success in getting help with abuse and neglect, children living at home with a child protection plan, birth relatives who have had children removed and adopted and adopters and birth relatives engaged in post-adoption contact. Service users' accounts do not have to be viewed as unproblematically true in order to recognise that they offer a valuable perspective to social work knowledge. The following sections discuss what the studies tell us about service users' views on the problems that bring them to the attention of services, and their experiences of social work intervention.

### **Service user views on the problems that bring them to the attention of services**

The research studies have asked what sense service users make of their lives and the problems which bring them to the attention of services. There are many ways in which this focus can contribute helpfully to knowledge and practice. Firstly, service user accounts can bring to light problems that may not be on the radar of professionals. For example in *Recognition and Telling* the most common type of sexual abuse discussed on the internet forum was peer sexual abuse (4). *Supporting Contact* drew attention to the needs of older siblings who remain in the birth family when a younger child is adopted (3), (6). Secondly, they can draw attention to problems which are constructed entirely differently by adults and

children. In *Children's Views of CP* young people drew attention to being moved on by the police when they were outside the house, and complained that they had nowhere to hang out (a problem that is exacerbated if home is not safe), but that they felt was construed by police and community safety officers as one of anti-social behaviour (5). Thirdly, they can bring to attention similarities in the dilemmas that professionals and service users face in categorising behaviours as abusive. For example in *Recognition and Telling*, children's discussions about the difficulty of recognising emotional abuse and neglect (as opposed to physical abuse and sexual abuse) mirrored academic and practitioner discussions about the difficulties of defining neglect (Turney and Tanner 2001, Daniel 2005).

Finally, service user accounts can highlight differences in social work and service user constructions of the problems in the family. In the study of birth relatives whose children had been adopted, and the study of children who had a current child protection plan there were parallels in how some of the children and adults viewed the problems in the family. Amongst the range of reactions to the social work view of the problem, both studies included disagreement that there was a problem, agreement that there was a problem but disagreement about its resolution (the problem was in the past but the social worker thought it was ongoing), agreement about the problem but disagreement about its impact (the problem is not harming my child/the social worker is exaggerating the impact on me). This is important, not in order to say that the social worker is wrong (although she is not infallible), but also because the service user's view of the problem will influence his or her response to the social worker, and how the social worker works with the disparity in standpoint will influence the service user's view of the problem.

Service users' perspectives also give a detailed insight into their needs in relation to different life events. One of the strengths of the studies is the degree of focus on specific points in social work intervention. For example, in *Helping Birth Families*, it was clear to what extent the removal of the child precipitated a crisis for a group that were already extremely vulnerable (7). They spoke about intense emotions including despair, rage and preoccupation with the lost child (one grandparent experienced this as a phantom limb and said she could sometimes still feel the child cradled in her arms) (7). Birth relatives described being confused and unable to take information. They described a disenfranchised loss (Doka 2002) that was also stigmatised, making it difficult for them to access support through friends or family. Having a high degree of detail about service user needs can help to plan sensitive responsive services (for examples see the implications for practice sections in (6:216-220) and (7:310-314)).

### **Service users' experiences of services:**

A second focus of service users' perspectives is on service users' experiences of services, and this has been a key focus in each of the four research studies, in particular paying attention to how inequalities of power between social workers and service users, and everyday dilemmas about participation play out in social work practices (Biehal 1991). The studies contribute to a tradition of research on service user experiences that started with the work of Mayer and Timms (1970), which suggested that there was sometimes a mismatch between what service users valued and what social workers were doing (Howe 2014). Service users' perspectives can give us an insight into how it feels to be on the receiving end of social work. Such insight is particularly important when social work involves the imposition of services that are unwanted. Service users have complex feelings both about the difficulties within the family, and about having a social worker turn up at the door (Munro 2011, Trevithick 2014).

Where the research questions concern highly sensitive areas of social work in which social workers exert a high degree of control, it is not surprising if service user accounts express a degree of hostility towards social worker intervention. However it would be defensive to think we cannot learn anything from service user accounts (7: 207). In fact across the studies the degree to which service users distinguish between better and worse social workers and experiences of social work is striking. The research studies and related publications contain a wealth of insights into service user perspective on child protection services, birth relative support services and post-adoption contact support. For the purposes of this commentary two central themes are highlighted, which recur across the studies – the importance of trusting relationships and the impact of professional systems.

### ***Importance of trusting relationships***

Across the studies, satisfaction with social work services is linked with forming a trusting relationship with a consistent worker ((1), (2), (4), (5), (6), (7)). These findings add to the literature on service users' views of services outlined in chapter one. Although a rights-based discourse of service user involvement emphasizes rights to advocacy, an independent voice, and means of redress, at the core of the accounts in the four studies is the importance of trust. As Smith comments, 'It is undoubtedly empowering to refer to rights, written agreements, regulatory frameworks and obligations in social relations, but it is equivalently disempowering to be immobilized by a lack of trust' (Smith 2001:297).

Gallagher et al (2010) suggest that service user involvement implies a service user who can articulate clearly what he or she wants, and has the ability and motivation to engage with services. However, this is not always the case in social work, where users might prefer to refuse a service. Participation has to be balanced with the need for social workers to exercise authority and control. The skilled use of relationship building can circumvent the need for social workers to use more controlling strategies. Whilst there are limits to possibilities for participation when social workers are compelled to intervene (Thoburn et al 1995), children and adults in the research studies could identify practice which they felt involved them, and this involved sensitive day to day practice on the part of practitioners.

In *Children's Views of CP* children wanted to get to know their social worker, and appreciated social workers who were good listeners and did not always concentrate on problems. They disliked it when direct work was delegated to another worker, whilst the social worker (whom the child associated with decision-making) remained a remote figure. Some were distrustful of social workers and were strategic about what they said if they felt interrogated, or that their words would be twisted and used against them (1), (5).

With regard to social work services, trust tended to be conferred on individuals rather than agencies ((7), Hill 1999). However, it seems that distrust is easily projected across a whole agency, and indeed the whole profession. When it comes to trust, social workers may start a relationship in negative equity, and have to prove themselves to be reliable and available before trust can be established. It is important to recognise how children and adults may have suffered an erosion of basic trust across the course of their lives (Smith 2001). This can be compounded by their experience of services. Across the studies it has been apparent how much service users' previous experiences of social work services impact on current intervention.

In *Helping Birth Families* one of the central problems faced by birth relative support services was the problem of engaging service users who have inevitably been disempowered by the experience of having a child removed from their care and placed for adoption. Changes to law (Adoption and Children Act 2002) gave birth relatives increased rights to support services when children are adopted. *Helping Birth Families* discusses the difficulties in engaging this service user group from the service provider point of view (8), and from the birth relative point of view (7). This group of service users are highly vulnerable but particularly distrustful of professionals. Several models of referral to birth relative support services were discussed. Problems in uptake of services demonstrate how engagement involves not only the ability to build relationships, but also gateways into the service and referral routes.

In *Recognition and Telling* it was apparent how important previous experiences of help-seeking were in understanding young people's attitude to telling, their trust in services, and their recognition of abuse. A number of the young people interviewed had experienced several episodes in their lives where they had come to the attention of services or had sought help. A negative experience of help-seeking could compound feelings of powerlessness from the abuse and make future attempts to get help less likely. Conversely a sensitive response could lead to a virtuous circle where gradually the young person was able to talk about their experiences and recognise them as abusive.

The following section discusses the impact of professional systems on the way that service users make sense of what is going on in their families.

### ***The impact of professional systems***

Bronfenbrenner asks how intrafamilial processes are affected by extrafamilial conditions. (1986:723). The child is viewed as being at the centre of a system involving other family members, peers and professionals, and the interactions between them must be taken into account. (Bronfenbrenner 1979). These interactions take place in a particular time (political, social and historical context) and unfold over time, making it important to incorporate a chronological element to analysis. Bronfenbrenner and Weiss (1983, pp393-4) ask:

‘How do policies affect the experience of those whom they are intended to serve? To put the issue more succinctly: what is the nature of the interface between policies and people?’

One answer to this question is to see the interface as involving the everyday practice of social workers. Each of the research studies has allowed an analysis of the impact of social work interventions on family processes and how social work affects the sense people make of their experiences. Two examples will demonstrate this, taken from the work on child protection and on contact after adoption.

In *Children's Views of CP* it became apparent that although many children said they had not seen information leaflets or been included in social work processes by their social worker, most children had a sense of social work processes, and often filled in the gaps themselves. They received information from siblings, peers and parents, and sometimes this could be damaging. This was particularly true of children under the age of 12 who were less likely to be included in formal processes. For example one child's father appeared to be using the child protection meetings in order to threaten his child with going into care (a very real

possibility in the child's mind, as an older sibling was already in care). He said that his parents were always more 'shouty' after social work visits and that he did not see the social worker on his own. It seemed possible that the child's vulnerability was compounded by being excluded from social work processes, and that the impact of the intervention was increasing tension within the family (1), (5).

The second example is from *Supporting Contact*. (3) examines family processes in a context where a professional intervention has both created the family (through adoption) and is maintaining relationships (through contact after adoption). Contact after adoption contributes to the sense that people make of their family relationships, indeed one of its central purposes is to contribute to the child's sense of identity and the sense the adopted child can make of his or her connection to two families. The article uses anthropological and sociological theory to understand sibling relationships post-adoption. These focus on family processes and daily practices rather than structure in making sense of family. The challenge for post-adoption contact is how to 'do' family relationships in a situation mediated by professional involvement, both in the construction of the family and the maintenance of relationships – with limited meetings, limited information sharing and complex emotions on all sides. Professional systems in this context impact on the sense people make of their family relationships.

This section has argued that service users' perspectives are an important focus of social work research focusing on the content of the research using examples from the studies. Service users' perspectives on social work practice emphasize the centrality of trust at the heart of relationships between social workers and service users, and the impact of professional systems on the families. The following section goes on to consider service user involvement in the process of research.

## **Service user involvement in social work research**

Service user involvement in social work research will be examined in two ways, focusing on service users as participants in research, and as researchers or consultants to the research (all studies). The analysis attends to the importance of relationships within research and what they can tell us about social work practice.

### **Service users as participants**

All the research studies involved in-depth interviews with vulnerable service users, including children. Research interviews in these contexts can be emotional and emotive for both

participant and interviewer. Interviews are not a neutral transfer of information, especially when the encounter is with people who are vulnerable as a result of their life histories, and of their experiences of services. In relation to practice England (1986: 110) talks of the importance of the social worker communicating empathy, and of

‘the relief and help which can come just from the process of communicating understanding, even without further action’.

The interviews across all the studies often elicited a great deal of detail in the stories told, and of emotion in the telling, particularly birth relative and young people’s narratives, suggesting that an important support need is to have views heard and acknowledged (7). This suggests that it is important to view the research interview as an ethical encounter. Interviewing vulnerable participants draws upon social work practice skills such as the ability to communicate empathy, attunement to the participant’s emotional state, the interviewer’s ability to tolerate emotion, and to prioritise the participant’s emotional well-being over sticking rigidly to a pre-defined schedule, or pursuing answers to the research questions too doggedly. For example one adolescent told me of being raped by a stranger and how she had eventually told professionals and her mum about that rape. She had become pregnant and had miscarried. Whilst she spoke about this she came to a halt, and I felt that there was something else. When I asked ‘Is there anything else you want to say?’ she said, ‘I wanted to keep the baby’ and cried for some minutes. She said it was the first time she had been able to say that, and I wondered if the miscarriage might have come as something of a relief for professionals, and if she had sensed this. Perhaps she was more able to express her grief at that moment because I was a researcher, not a practitioner, and because I sensed she had something else she wanted to say. She wanted to carry on with the interview, and we moved on to talk about other things. At the end she said that it had helped to put things into words, and that each time she spoke about her issues it became a little easier.

Research interviewing can free up the researcher to better hear the child’s perspective, because the researcher is freed from the obligation to make an assessment and take action (beyond passing on information if the child is at risk). Similarly for participants the research encounter may sometimes offer an opportunity to express something difficult because the interviewer is not part of a system intervening in their lives. The main purpose of the research interview is not however, to make a helpful intervention, but to gather data for analysis. I would suggest that the practice skills described above result in good research interviews, and transcripts where the narrative builds rather than a series of disjointed questions and answers.

In *Children's Views of CP and Recognition and Telling* it was apparent that dilemmas in the research process could shed light on the substantive research questions (Thomas and O'Kane, 2000). In *Recognition and Telling* the substantive research questions were about how young people recognise and tell about abuse and neglect. In the example above the process of the young person talking to me was both relating a narrative about how young people tell (she had eventually told about the rape by showing her diary to a worker at school, who had noticed something was amiss and repeatedly but sensitively asked her what was wrong), but the interview was also an example of the process of a young person telling about a difficult issue (her grief about the miscarriage). In *Children's Views of CP* the complexity of accessing children for interviews because of adult gatekeepers stimulated reflection about how adults control children's opportunities to take part in the child protection process. One nine year old boy was initially screened out of the interview sample by his social worker because he had learning difficulties and ADHD, and the social worker suggested he would not be able to understand or engage in the interview. After further discussion between the social worker and the participation worker for the local authority the interview took place successfully.

### **Relationships between academic and service user researchers**

In this section I will focus on involving some of the most marginalised service users in the research process. These were some of the London based young researchers in *Recognition and Telling*. Establishing relationships between the group of young researchers and between young researchers and adult researchers was challenging and reflection upon this aspect of the research methodology also deepened our analysis of the research questions, since in some ways the relationships between the academic researchers and the young researchers echoed some of the issues between young people and practitioners. We ended up running two young researcher groups, one in a shire county and one in London. The former was relatively cohesive, partly because the young researchers we retained in that group were more stable, one was at university and two were in sixth form. In London we worked with three young people who stayed over the course of the research. These were all young men whose lives were less stable than those in the shire county. The relationship between the adult researchers and these three young people developed a cyclical pattern. We would have a good meeting, then there would be a problem that would result in an argument, which was partly resolved, usually not by coming to an agreement, but by the young researchers deciding that they would put it behind them for the sake of the research. The issues that resulted in such disagreements were usually around payments and disagreements about

what had previously been agreed about their involvement in the research. The relationships held together but at times were fraught.

There were some differences between the way that the three young researchers from London could be involved in the research process, compared with those from the shire county. It was usual for three London based researchers to find their way to where we were meeting late, sometimes up to three hours. Two of them had issues on their DBS checks which meant that we could not use them for data collection in the schools. These issues caused tension when they felt they were not getting as much opportunity to take part in the research, and earn money, as the other young researchers. When we met as a whole group there was a danger that the group could be destabilised by these issues and it was very hard to resolve these without a confrontation.

The dynamics were complicated by race, gender and age. One of the adult researchers shared their black Jamaican heritage and this helped to engage and retain these three young people, for example they shared culture (they were impressed to find out one of the researcher's ancestors was a prominent Jamaican figure), language (on one occasion speaking patois together, and switching language when I (white British) joined the group and could not keep up). When they got angry with the adult researchers they often agreed to disagree as a favour to this colleague, and the adult researchers had several discussions about how to avoid splitting within the team. At the end of the research these young researchers spoke about how inspiring it had been for them to have this colleague as a role model.

Despite these cycles of distrust/conflict/partial resolution/working together the team held together throughout the research process. All the young researchers presented a united front to the outside world when we presented the research. Even when explicitly invited by audiences to reflect on the challenges of working in this way, they downplayed any difficulties. I would suggest that this was because of their investment in the research topic, and because we had established a sufficient level of trust despite the tensions. The role of these three young researchers was essential in deepening the analysis. Without them we would have been unable to recruit interview participants from the London based organisation. The process of working with these young people deepened our awareness of how hard it could be for some young black men to avoid being criminalised, and how ethnicity and racism could act as additional barriers for young people to engage with professionals.

The skills needed in these research relationships, to involve service users who are marginalised in a way that was not tokenistic mirrored themes in research findings about the

importance of relationships in the provision of social work services (2). Being non-judgemental, trying to build confidence so that views could be expressed, taking those views seriously, genuinely thinking that the research would be improved by the involvement of service users and approaching the work with a spirit of openness and curiosity all helped to make service user involvement work across the four studies. Service user involvement in social work research is not primarily about developing a helping relationship, but about developing research knowledge. Nevertheless similar skills are needed, although used to different ends.

## **Conclusion**

‘Rather than an ‘either/or’ approach that pits emancipatory and empowerment-focused work against relationship-based thinking and practice, we need a ‘both/and’ response’ (Turney 2012:151)

In this critical commentary I have attempted to make links between four research studies that all focused on service users’ perspectives in social work, both in their research questions and through their involvement of service users in the research process.

By focusing on what it is like to be on the receiving end of social work services researching service users’ perspectives addresses the need identified within relationship-based practice to pay attention to power differentials within social work relationships. A focus on service users’ perspectives in research that looks at statutory social work processes can highlight both how much service users value relationship-based approaches, and the limits to the extent to which these are achieved in practice. Service users’ perspectives on particular points of social work practice (in this case child protection and adoption) can highlight concrete ways in which relationship-based thinking can be embedded in everyday practice. Service users’ perspectives suggest ways in which practice could be improved to avoid the experience of child protection and adoption services compounding the effects of a difficult life history.

The involvement of service users in the research process can help to achieve a more emancipatory approach in the generation of social work knowledge. Boxall and Beresford (2012) suggest that the collective involvement of service users offers more potential for countering established knowledge than involving individual service users. Forming collaborative research relationships between academic researchers and groups of service users allowed service users’ perspectives to challenge the preconceptions (based on

previous research and practice experience) that academic researchers brought to the research. This required a genuine commitment on the part of the academic researchers to learn from service users' perspectives. It was important to try to set up the research process in a way that was 'strategically designed to minimise the obstacles faced by the less powerful group to express its knowledge and have it used in a meaningful way'. (Teram et al 2005: 1134). Using the insights of relationship-based practice to attend to relationships within the research team is one means of ensuring that particularly marginalised service users are able to contribute to research in a meaningful way. At the same time the insights gained through involving service users in the research process suggest possibilities for more collaborative social work practice in child protection and adoption social work.

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## Appendix A: Summaries of the studies

### **Study one: Helping Birth Families (2005-2010, I was involved from 2006)<sup>3</sup>**

Related Publications: 2, 7, 8

Aims:

- To explore birth relatives experiences of adoption and the impact of adoption on them
- To examine referral processes and take up of support services for birth relatives
- To explore birth relatives views of support services and the types of service received
- To examine the impact on birth relatives of support services

Methods

The study was conducted in collaboration with eight agencies: one voluntary adoption agency, three local authorities and four adoption support agencies. Two sources of information are relevant to this submission:

- The service take up survey: Participating agencies provided information about every new birth relative referred to their services over a six month period (the sample size was 495). One year later, agencies reported on whether or not these birth relatives had used their services.
- The intensive study: Seventy three birth relatives (where the adoption was recent or ongoing) were interviewed and asked to complete a mental health questionnaire. These birth relatives were followed up approximately 15 months later, and 57 people took part at the second stage. Eighty-nine percent of the baseline sample was white and 11% of minority ethnicity. The birth relatives were asked about their experiences of adoption and of using (or not using) adoption support services

Key Findings

#### *Access to birth relative support services*

- The two biggest referral sources were children's services (just over half) and the birth relative themselves (just over one third).
- The take up of services varied dramatically between agencies from a minimum of 19% to a maximum of 74%.

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<sup>3</sup> In Helping Birth Families an economic costing of services was also undertaken. I was not involved in any of the tasks relating to this part of the research and the findings relating to this have not been included in this submission.

- Referral routes were significantly associated with take up of services. For example, the take up rate for those referred by children's services was 57%. For those who were referred by other agencies or who self-referred, the take up rate was 80%.
- In the interview sample, one third of the birth relatives in the sample had not used adoption support services, and most of them had unmet needs. Reasons for low take up included feeling hopeless, feelings of depression and passivity, resistance to engaging in work which focused on their emotions and a lack of active follow up from the agency.

*Birth relatives' experiences of adoption*

- Birth relatives described multiple and long standing problems (such as relationship difficulties, mental health problems, and substance misuse) that had contributed to their child's entry into care and adoption.
- The majority of birth relatives described the adoption process as an unfair, hostile and alienating experience and one in which they had very little power to influence events. However, some felt that their children's social workers had been caring, open and honest, and had kept them informed and involved in the adoption process.

*Birth relatives' experiences of support*

- Birth relatives' needs for support changed at different stages of the care and adoption process. The child entering care often precipitated a crisis of anger, stress and confusion suggesting a need for support. As the plan for adoption evolved birth relatives needed advice and information and involvement in key decision-making stages. After placement, they wanted information about their child's welfare and to be helped to participate constructively in contact plans.
- Two thirds of birth relatives used support services, in almost all cases provided by independent agencies. Five types of support activity were identified: emotional support; advice and information and the provision of practical support; help with contact; advocacy and liaison; and group or peer support.
- Three themes were identified relating to satisfaction with services, the personal qualities of the worker, the confidentiality and independence of the service, and services that were flexible and proactive. The model of service delivery that seemed most appropriate was one that was flexible, offering a range of types of support services so that different individual needs could be met. The take-up of services was a problem, suggesting a need for outreach models of delivery. Fathers were less likely than mothers to take up services.

- Three dimensions of coping with adoption were identified. The first was accepting the child's dual connection with two families and understanding that they were no longer the legal or psychological parent for the child. The second was how birth relatives felt about the outcome of adoption for the child. And the third dimension was dealing with the impact of adoption on self. This included coping with negative emotions, and their ability to get on with their lives and take positive actions to help themselves. Scores were combined to give an overall coping with adoption score and birth relatives' scores varied from very high to very low.

### Strengths

- We were able to triangulate information from various sources, gathering information from agencies and practitioners and using qualitative interviews with birth relatives as well as a standardised measure of mental health.
- The target sample of birth relatives was representative of birth relatives generally referred to services.
- The strong focus on birth relatives' perspectives is a key strength of the study. To support birth relatives we need to know about their experiences and reactions to the adoption of a child.
- Birth relative consultants were involved in the planning of data collection, recruitment, data analysis and understanding of implications for practice. Service users have been involved in dissemination of findings.

### Limitations

- The perspectives of adoptive parents and children were not included.
- We were not able to identify and compare different models of birth relative support.

## **Study Two: Supporting Direct Contact (2005-2010, I was involved from 2006)<sup>4</sup>**

Related Publications: 3, 6

### Aims

- To identify the key characteristics of adoptive parents, adopted children and birth relatives who are involved in complex direct contact arrangements.

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<sup>4</sup> The Supporting Direct Contact study also incorporated an economic analysis of the costs of services. As I was not involved in this aspect of the research those findings are not included in this submission.

- To explore the experiences of adoptive parents and birth relatives involved in direct contact arrangements.
- To identify the types of direct contact support services birth relatives and adoptive parents report using.
- To explore adoptive parents' and birth relatives' experiences of using direct contact support services.

## Methods

The study was conducted in collaboration with eight agencies: one adoption support agency; six local authorities; and one consortium of local authorities. I was involved in two strands:

- The adoptive families study. Interviews were carried out with 51 adoptive parents and four long-term foster carers who were involved in direct contact arrangements. The interviews were followed up approximately 16 months later, and 53 people (96%) took part at the second stage.
- The birth relatives study. Thirty-nine birth relatives took part in interviews spanning three generations in the birth family. Ninety per cent took part in the second round of interviews.

## Findings

### *The characteristics of those involved*

- The researchers found that all parties brought to the contact arrangements a range of strengths and also a range of potential risk factors. These can be summarised as follows:

#### *Adopters and their children*

- An important area was felt to be the degree of 'openness' to the birth family that the adopters felt and communicated to their child. Five indicators of 'openness' were measured: communication with the child about adoption; comfort with, and promotion of, dual connection; empathy for the adopted child; communication with the birth family; and empathy for the birth family. The majority of adoptive parents scored highly, suggesting that they were bringing valuable resources to the contact situation.
- Three-quarters of children in the study were two years or older when placed with their adoptive parents. Many were continuing to struggle with the impact of their early histories.

- Over half the children (51%) were having direct contact with a birth relative who had played a significant role as a carer and who had neglected or abused them.

*Birth relatives*

- A measure was taken regarding how far the birth relative could accept the child's dual connection. Over 70% of birth relatives scored mainly highly on this measure indicating that they could support the child as a member of the adoptive family. A minority of birth relatives remained resistant to accepting the adoptive placement, and in these cases contact may be difficult for the child or adoptive parents.
- A measure of 'feelings about the outcomes of adoption for the child' indicated that three-quarters of birth relatives felt that the adoption had worked out well for the child and many commented on how the direct contact had helped them to reach this position.
- In comparison, 60% of birth relatives still had some quite significant problems in managing the negative consequences of adoption for themselves. For example, dealing with difficult feelings and re-engaging with wider life activities remained problematic.
- A combined score was calculated to quantify the strengths and risks that the birth relatives were bringing to contact. Scores were spread across the range with 42% having scores in the top third of the range indicating more strengths than risks.

*Adoptive parents' experiences of contact*

- Contact arrangements were classified by the researchers into two groups using both quantitative and qualitative data. Between 42 and 45% of cases were 'working very well' and between 55 to 58% of cases had 'unresolved issues'. Whether or not contact was working well changed, over time, for about a quarter of families, indicating the dynamic nature of contact arrangements.
- The benefits of contact as perceived by adoptive parents included maintaining relationships for the child, helping the child deal with identity issues and strengthening adoptive family relationships.
- All adoptive parents described challenges related to contact. These included negative reactions from the child, difficult relationships with the birth relatives, confidentiality issues and difficult feelings for the adopters themselves.

*Birth relatives' experiences of contact*

- Adult siblings were mainly very satisfied with contact arrangements, despite many complex issues that had emerged. The satisfaction of birth parents and grandparents was more varied. However, almost all birth relatives expressed great pleasure at being able to see the adopted child. Many would have liked more contact but were reluctant to express this in case their wishes were perceived negatively by others.
- Birth relatives perceived a number of benefits of contact. These included feeling that contact was beneficial to the child as well as to themselves. Many birth relatives felt they could make a positive contribution to their child's life in the adoptive family and some felt it beneficial for the child to see their two families get along together.
- Birth relatives also identified a number of ways in which they found contact could be challenging. These included the loss of parental control and a parental role with the child, an ongoing fear that they might lose the relationship with the child and a sense that they were perceived by the adopters and social workers as a source of risk.

#### *Contact support*

- Just over half the adoptive parents were mainly satisfied with the support offered, and just under half had concerns about it. Satisfaction was associated with: the worker being caring, empathic and approachable, offering consistency in the arrangements, being professionally competent, and experienced in understanding and managing the dynamics of adoption and contact; the right balance between the agency and the adoptive parents controlling the contact; support that addressed everyone's needs (including those of the birth relatives), was well organised, and anticipated challenges and changes.
- Just over half the birth relatives (54%) were very happy with their contact support services; the remainder expressed several anxieties or concerns. Satisfaction was associated with: good relationships with the worker, and workers acting as effective intermediaries between birth relatives and adoptive families; support that was planned and predictable, involved the birth relatives in decision making, and included clear and understandable explanations about the need for rules and boundaries; the inclusion of an element of emotional support.

#### Strengths

- The research involved a number of key informants; adoptive parents, birth relatives and service providers.
- Distinct models of contact support were identified.

- Adoptive parents and birth relatives were successfully involved as consultants to the research process

#### Limitations

- The views of adopted children and young people were not included.
- The research did not include contact support provided by specialist services in the independent sector.
- Given the sample size, it was not possible to evaluate the comparative benefits of the different models of contact support identified in this study.

### **Study Three: Children's and Young People's Views of Child Protection (2010-2011)**

#### Related Publications: 1, 5

#### Aims

- To explore the views and experiences of children and young people currently involved with the child protection system.
- To examine children's perception of risk and protective factors in and outside their families
- To examine children's and young people's understanding of the child protection system
- To examine to what extent children participate in the child protection process
- To explore children and young people's experiences of child protection intervention

#### Methods

- Twenty-six qualitative interviews were undertaken with children aged between 6 and 17 years old. All had a child protection plan at the time of interview. Interviews were activity based, using a 'treasure chest' containing various trigger activities.
- A workshop with a group of participants was undertaken to further develop emergent themes

#### Findings

- Children took a great deal of responsibility for what was happening within their families, often seeing their own behaviour as the problem. Many children worried

about their siblings and some felt burdened by responsibility for them. A minority of children felt physically at risk from siblings and that this was not recognised by professionals.

- Most of the children could identify someone they could confide in and from whom they sought help. The most common source of support was friends or family but nearly all the children could identify a professional who had helped them.
- A minority of the children thought professional concerns were mistaken, or unfounded. Some young people agreed that there were reasons for the professionals to be involved but felt that concerns were exaggerated or were now in the past. Children and young people tended to disagree with professionals' views of their parents, but to acknowledge difficulties with their own behaviour.
- Children's understanding of the child protection system was rated into three categories; minimal, partial and clear understanding. The majority of children were classified as having a partial understanding, aged ten and under. Children often relied upon parents and older siblings for information. Children involved in care proceedings appeared to have a better understanding of the court process than they did of other aspects of child protection.
- The most important factor allowing children to participate was a trusting relationship with their social worker. Some of the children found it difficult to talk to their social workers because they felt pressured, or said the social worker twisted their words.
- Few children saw reports or assessments and it was rare for the young person to discuss reports with their social worker.
- Ten of the children attended a child protection or core group meeting. Most found them difficult. Only two felt even partly listened to and some reported being asked awkward questions in front of their parents.
- Many children could identify something helpful that their social worker had done for them. A few young people talked about advantages of having a child protection plan, linking it with extra help at school or getting priority for services.
- Many children also spoke of negative aspects such as intrusion, increased stress within the family, and stigma.

## Strengths

- The research explored the views of children and young people with a current child protection plan living at home, a group whose views are under-represented in research.

- The research used innovative methods for engaging young children in interviews.

#### Limitations

- The children and young people were interviewed with the consent of their parents, and with the knowledge of their social workers, and are unlikely to be representative of the wider group of children with a child protection plan.
- The majority of the children were interviewed in their own homes which is likely to have had an impact on what they felt able to say.

### **Study Four: Recognition and Telling: Developing Earlier Routes to Help for Children and Young People (2011-2013)**

Related Publications: 4

#### Aims

- To examine young people's perceptions of abuse and neglect,
- To explore young people's experiences of telling and getting help from both informal and formal sources.

#### Methods

- A structured literature review.
- A content analysis of a peer support website focusing on issues of abuse and neglect.
- An interview study was conducted with thirty vulnerable young people aged between eleven and twenty. These activity based interviews allowed exploration of the interaction between recognition, telling and receiving help over the course of each participants childhood and adolescence.
- Six focus groups were conducted with children and young people, parents, and practitioners involved in working in different tiers of services for young people. The focus groups sought the views of children and young people not known to be vulnerable. They focused on how this broader sample of children and young people conceptualise abuse and neglect and how friends might support each other with such issues. In addition the focus groups explored the views of parents and practitioners on the process of getting help to provide some triangulation of the data.

## Findings

### *Recognition*

- Most studies in the literature review were concerned with disclosure of sexual abuse rather than the issues of recognition or of abuse and neglect more widely.
- The analysis of the internet forum found that children were more likely to be confident that they had been abused when discussing sexual abuse or physical abuse than neglect or emotional abuse.
- A number of barriers were identified to young people recognising abuse. These included the young person feeling they deserved it, difficulty in acknowledging a parent could be abusive, episodic abuse when the relationship with the parent was sometimes good, confusion as to the boundaries between discipline and physical abuse, confusion around boundaries relating to touching by family members.
- Recognition was often linked with age, in the interview studies young people talked about having a feeling that something was wrong, before being able to articulate it verbally. Once they could verbalise it, they often did not know who to approach for help and remained vulnerable.
- Young people often emphasised recognition as a product of talking with another person. Recognition was often prompted through conversation, rather than being a precursor to telling.

### *Telling*

- Even where young people recognised their situation was abusive, they faced many barriers to telling: emotional barriers such as shame, embarrassment; concerns about the consequences for their family and family loyalties, wanting to protect family members; not thinking their situation was severe enough to talk about; threats from the abuser and fear of not being believed.
- In the interview analysis young people discussed various motivations for talking – these included stopping the abuse, getting information and advice, emotional support, medical help or acquiring strategies to minimise harm. Some workers were viewed in a more holistic way, such as social workers, teachers and youth workers. Other professionals were seen as having a narrower role, such as police (to stop the abuse) and doctor (to provide medical help).
- A spectrum of telling was developed ranging from remaining hidden; displaying signs and symptoms indicative of the problem; prompted telling where the young person

told in response to sensitive and persistent concern expressed by a professional, and purposeful telling where the young person sought out a professional to tell.

### *Help*

- The personal qualities of helpers were central for young people who conferred trust on individuals rather than agencies.
- Trust was related to the duration of the relationship. Being believed, not being judged and closeness. Other qualities that were valued included being knowledgeable, accessible and effective.
- Some young people were offered help with their presenting problem but not with the underlying issue of abuse or neglect. Alternatively they could be offered a more holistic response which picked upon underlying issues of abuse or neglect. Some responses resulted in additional distress for young people, including feeling overwhelmed and out of control with too many professionals getting involved, being referred to a time-limited service or being put on a waiting list. Some young people's service ended because they reached the upper age limit, rather than because the service was no longer required.
- Confidentiality of services was valued and there were concerns about professionals passing on information. However most young people felt that in some circumstances it was right for professionals to pass on information without the consent of the young person. It was important that this was done in a transparent way and discussed openly with the young person. Professionals feared being blamed if they did not pass on information and felt they had limited discretion to exercise judgement about whether and when to pass on information.
- In contrast to previous research the study found some reticence about confiding in friends. Young people in the internet analysis said that they were not always believed by friends when they did confide, and in the interview sample young people were extremely careful about choosing who and what to tell. Many young people had no friends that they could confide in, and thought that peers were extremely likely to gossip. Young people in the school focus group felt that sometimes it was good to use friends as a distraction rather than to confide in. They did not want to be a burden to their friends.
- Practitioners identified a concern about high thresholds which prevented children from getting specialist help. Practitioners in universal services felt they had to wait for problems to mount up or worsen before a referral would be accepted by children's social care. Strategies to get a referral accepted included sending repeat referrals,

using police or other referral routes. A child's age posed a barrier when they were considered too young to get a service without parental agreement but too old to be considered at high risk of harm.

## Strengths

- The study included multiple viewpoints, seeking the views of vulnerable young people, children and young people not known to be vulnerable, parents and practitioners.
- The study used innovative interview methods to examine how young people recognise and tell about abuse and neglect.
- The study engaged with a group of vulnerable young people whose perspective is seldom heard in research.
- The analysis of an internet forum allowed an insight into peer to peer dialogue about abuse and neglect.
- The framework developed from the research can be applied to particular groups of young people, such as those with disabilities.
- The study employed young researchers, who were involved in design, recruitment, data collection, analysis, writing and dissemination of the research, as well as attending the advisory group.

## Limitations

- The interview sample size was relatively small, making it difficult to generalise from the findings.
- The focus groups offered an interesting comparison between the views of children, young people, parents and practitioners. However, each focus group consisted of around 8 people whose views are unlikely to be representative.

## Appendix B: Statements of Dr E. Neil and Professor Marian Brandon

### Statement of Dr E Neil

Jeanette Cossar joined the team working on the linked “Helping Birth Families” and “Supporting Direct Contact” studies in 2006. Jeanette’s role on these projects is best described as “coinvestigator”, although as the studies began in 2005 this was not her official status. I would argue however that her contribution in terms of high-level planning and management of the project and leading on aspects of data analysis and write up is equivalent to a coinvestigator role. Additionally as one of the research associates on the projects resigned in 2006, this enabled Jeanette to have an active role in data collection as well. So across the two studies Jeanette was involved in interviewing service user participants face-to-face and by telephone. She helped on the analysis of interview data conducting thematic analysis of interviews using N-vivo and producing detailed case summaries of participants’ interviews. Most of the coding for this project was undertaken as a team effort, but there were particular aspects where Jeanette had a leading role as I will outline below. A lengthy final report was produced for each of these studies, and Jeanette was involved in the writing of both reports. These reports were then published as books by BAAF (Neil et al, 2010, 2011).

The first publication that Jeanette worked on from these studies was the paper by Cossar and Neil published in the British Journal of Social Work in 2009. This paper reports findings from the first part of the study where we mapped adoption support services through a national survey. This data was collected and analysed prior to Jeanette’s involvement in the research, so the methods and findings section of the paper were written by me. Jeanette wrote the remainder of the paper - in other words the introduction, literature review, discussion of findings and implications for practice.

In the “Supporting Direct Contact” study Jeanette analysed all data pertaining to sibling contact and sibling relationships. This constituted a chapter in the final report submitted to funders. We omitted this work on siblings from the book (Neil et al, 2011) so that Jeanette could develop it into a journal article (Cossar & Neil, 2013, *Child and Family Social Work*). Jeanette undertook about 90% of the work in producing this article, and the analysis is her own. In the “Helping Birth Families” study she analysed data exploring birth relatives’ views of why their children were adopted and their accounts of the circumstances affecting their parenting (reported in chapter 6 of the “Helping Birth Families” book). Jeanette helped develop our system for coding birth relatives’ “coping with adoption” - something we explored in detail qualitatively, and also use as an outcome measure in both the “Helping Birth

“Families” and “Supporting Direct Contact” studies. Jeanette wrote the literature review chapter for the “Supporting Direct Contact” book and worked extensively with me on drafting the discussion chapters for both projects. I would also highlight her invaluable role in reading, commenting on, and editing both research reports.

Jeanette had a central role in planning and carrying out a programme of involving service users in the research, particularly in relation to designing innovative methods to enable service users to participate in the analysis of qualitative data. She helped plan and implement our involvement of service users in the dissemination of the research findings, including helping in the process of making a film with birth parents describing their experiences of the adoption process. The research reports contained appendices reviewing the literature about service user involvement in research, and describing our approach and its outcomes. These appendices were written by Jeanette and were then drawn on by her in writing the article on service user involvement published in the British Journal of Social Work, a paper on which Jeanette undertook 80% of the work with me contributing 20% as co-author.

Jeanette has planned and delivered presentations outlining findings from the study on a number of occasions, including at launch conference held by UEA in London in 2010 and at two conferences organised by BAAF.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elsbeth Neil".

Dr Elsbeth Neil

Director of the “Helping Birth Families” and “Supporting Direct Contact” studies.

Statement of Professor Marian Brandon

**Research studies:**

Children's and Young People's Views of Child Protection (2010-2011) *Office of the Children's Commissioner for England*

Recognition and Telling: Developing Earlier Routes to Help for Children and Young People (2011-2013) *Office of the Children's Commissioner for England*

I was co-investigator on these research projects. I can confirm that Jeanette Cossar took the lead role in project management, in design of the investigation, conduct of the research, and in the analysis of the data.

**Publications:**

Cossar, J, Brandon, M & Jordan, P (2014) 'You've got to trust her and she's got to trust you' - Children's views on participation in the child protection system *Child and Family Social Work*, advanced access, doi: doi:10.1111/cfs.12115.

I collaborated on this article which was based on research undertaken for the Office of the Children's Commissioner. I confirm that the original contribution to the work in respect of the design, conduct and analysis of the original research and writing of the article was primarily that of Jeanette Cossar as principal Investigator.

Cossar, J, Brandon, M, Bailey, S, Belderson, P & Sharpe D (2013) 'It takes a lot to build trust'. Recognition and Telling: Developing earlier routes to help for children and young people. Report for the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England. Available at [http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_732](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_732)

I collaborated on this report for the Office of the Children's Commissioner. I confirm that the original contribution to the work in respect of the design, conduct and analysis of the original research and writing of the report was primarily that of Jeanette Cossar as principal investigator. I wrote the first draft of chapter five, the focus group study.

Cossar, J, Brandon, M & Jordan P (2011) 'Don't Make Assumptions: Children's and young people's views of the Child Protection process. Report for the Office of the Children's commissioner for England available at [http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_486](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_486)

I collaborated on this report which was based on research undertaken for the Office of the Children's Commissioner. I confirm that the original contribution to the work in respect of the

design, conduct and analysis of the original research and writing of the report was primarily that of Jeanette Cossar as Principal Investigator.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marian Brandon".

Professor Marian Brandon

Date: 24.03.15

## Appendix C: The Published Works