The Role of Pre-meets in the Formation of Families Through Adoption: the Perspectives of

Adoption Social Work Managers, Adoptive Parents, and Foster Carers.

JENNIFER ANN BLACKMORE

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Cardiff University

May 2025

Abstract

Pre-meets—interactions between children and prospective adoptive parents prior to formal match approval—represent a growing yet under-researched practice in UK adoption. Traditionally, initial meetings occur after formal approval during an intensive introductions period; pre-meets offer an alternative approach. However, the nature, rationale, and significance of these interactions remain largely unexplored in academic literature.

Utilising semi-structured interviews with adoption social work managers across all five Welsh adoption regions and an interpretive phenomenological approach with adoptive parents and foster carers, the research explored: (1) how pre-meets are conducted, (2) their theoretical underpinnings and contextual development, (3) their perceived benefits and challenges, and (4) the meanings adoptive parents and foster carers attach to pre-meets. Interviews with adoptive parents were conducted at three time points, enabling an exploration of the evolving meanings attributed to pre-meets from prior to the meeting to approximately ten months after the child's placement in their adoptive family.

Key findings revealed that pre-meets are becoming increasingly common and that the practice is diverse and evolving. Participants frequently associate pre-meets with relationship-building, enhancing confidence in a match, and helping prospective parents transition into their role as the child's adoptive parents. Pre-meets also provide an opportunity for prospective adopters to withdraw from a match if necessary, reducing the likelihood of complications later in the process. This practice supports adoptive parents in having agency within the matching process. Additionally, pre-meets reassure foster carers about the match and help them emotionally prepare for the child's transition. However, adoption managers expressed ongoing

concerns regarding children's preparation for adoption, including within the context of pre-meets.

This research offers new insights into the evolving landscape of adoption matching practices. It underscores the complexity and emotional weight of early interactions between prospective adopters and children, advocating for a more consistent and well-supported approach to pre-meets.

Keywords: adoption, matching, transitions, pre-meets, foster carer.

Contents

Index of figures

Index of appendices

In loving memory of my parents, John and June Blackmore.

Thank you for all your unwavering love and support and for the profound

gift of opportunities that you did not have.

Acknowledgements

Glossary

Adoption: a legal procedure in which the parental responsibility for a child is transferred from their birth parent or other person with parental responsibility to their adopter. An adopted child loses all the legal ties with their original parents.

Adoption Activity Days: events that give approved adopters, or prospective adopters at an advanced stage in their adoption assessment, the opportunity to meet a range of children who need adoptive families.

Adoption agencies: organisations that work with prospective parents and children to assess, match, arrange and support adoptive placements. There are two kinds of adoption agency in Wales – local authority adoption agencies and voluntary adoption agencies.

Adoption Exchange Days: events where approved adopters who are not yet matched with a child or children, are invited to attend and have an opportunity to see profiles of children who are waiting for adoptive families nationally.

Adoption order: the final court order which gives approved adopters full and permanent parental responsibility for a child.

Adoption panel: each adoption agency has an adoption panel, made up of social workers alongside independent members including those with personal experience of adoption. Panel members meet to make a recommendation about the prospective adopter's suitability to become an adopter.

Agency Decision Maker (ADM): a senior individual (such as the Director of Children's Services) in a local authority who makes the final decision about a child's adoption plan.

Attachment: the emotional bond between two individuals, specifically in the case of adoption between the child and adoptive parent.

Birth parents: a child's biological mother and father, who may or may not have been involved in the child's early care.

Child's Adoption Report and Annex B (CAR B): a comprehensive document used in the adoption process to provide detailed information about the child being considered for adoption.

CoramBAAF: an independent membership organisation for professionals, foster carers and adopters, and anyone else working with or looking after children in or from care, or adults who have been affected by adoption.

Family finding: the process by which local authorities find the most suitable permanent family for a child.

Foster carer: provides care for a child as a permanent arrangement, or temporary until a permanence plan such as a return to birth family or adoption is made. Foster carers do not have legal or parental responsibility for the children in their care.

Introductions: take place after the match between child and prospective adopters has been decided after matching panel. Introductions are a carefully managed way of supporting the child's move from his or her foster carers to adopters. Typically, they take place at the foster carer's home, and are supervised by the child's social worker. During a period of one or two weeks, adopters will spend more and more time with the child. After the agreed introductions period, the child will move to the adopters' home.

Lead Foster Carer: in Wales is a foster carer who takes on additional responsibilities and provides support to other foster carers within their local authority or fostering agency.

Linking: the process of identifying and investigating prospective adoptive families who might be suitable for a child waiting for an adoptive placement.

Matching: the process of identifying a suitable adoptive family for a specific child (see also *family finding)*. It may involve the child's local authority considering several potentially suitable adoptive families, to identify one that is the best match for the child or children. This one prospective adoptive family will then proceed to *matching panel.*

Matching panel: the formal meeting that recommends a match between approved adopters and a specific child or children. If the panel approves the match, the child's local authority Agency Decision Maker then makes the final decision about whether the match should go ahead.

National Adoption Service (NAS) for Wales: established in 2014, the Service was established to improve adoption services across Wales. It comprises five Regional Adoption Agencies and two Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

Prospective Adopter Report (PAR): a report written by the prospective adopters' social worker which summarises the information collected during the adoption assessment process. The PAR provides evidence about why the social worker considers the prospective adopter suitable to be approved as an adopter.

Regional Adoption Agency (RAA): an organisation that brings together adoption professionals from local authorities across a region to provide expertise and support at every stage of the adoption process.

Understanding the Child Day (UtCD): this brings together a range of individuals who have experience of the child in different contexts. The UtCD is part of a model based on the premise that understanding what has happened in a child's early life will help develop an understanding of the impact that this may have on their understanding of the world. It is rooted in research-based practice of developmental trauma, child development and attachment.

Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA): an independent, non-profit making, organisation which supports people to adopt children. Like Regional Adoption Agencies, VAAs are involved in finding, preparing, training, assessing and supporting prospective adopters and matching them with children.

Dissemination of my research for this thesis:

- Video presentation (June 2023): *The current practice in Wales of 'pre-meets': meetings between children and their prospective adopters.* Exchange Wales 'Reframing Adoption' conference. Available at: <u>Reframing Adoption Conference – ExChange</u>.

- Oral presentation: *Adoption managers' perceptions of the benefits and ethical concerns relating to the practice of 'pre-meets'; meetings that take place between children and their prospective adopters during the matching process.* <u>EuSARF conference: Equity and Social Justice in Child, Youth and Family Welfare conference, September 2023, University of Sussex.</u>

- Presentation (January 2024): *The current practice in Wales of 'pre-meets': meetings between children and their prospective adopters held during the matching process.* South West Adoption Consortium 'open session.'

- Presentation (October 2024): *Experiences of pre-meets – the views of adoptive parents.* South West Adoption Consortium 'open session' (see Appendix 1).

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

> *It's surreal – being introduced to your son – there's no other words to describe it. I felt like I'd pass out with the tension and emotion of it.*

Adoptive parent of a three-year-old (Dunbar, 2000, p.21).

This thesis is about first meetings between children and their parents; their *prospective adoptive* parents. Aside from children adopted by their step-parents, most children in the United Kingdom (UK) are adopted from the public child welfare agencies by people who are entirely unknown by and unrelated to them. The families and children joined by adoption are, in effect, strangers to each other. In this context, first meetings are potentially very significant.

Children and their prospective adoptive parents most often meet for the first time in the child's foster home, on the first day of a stage in the adoption process labelled 'introductions' (Dunbar, 2009; Lewis, 2018; Selwyn et al., 2015). This term is used to describe the meetings which usually take place over a five-to-14-day period between the child and prospective adoptive parents. These introductions take place after their match has been formally approved at an adoption matching panel, that is, when the adoption process is well advanced. After the period of introductions, children move in with their adoptive families (Selwyn et al., 2015).

However, for several decades, there has been a minority practice in which children and their prospective adoptive parents meet at an earlier stage in the adoption process. These are informal meetings which occur before the child-parent match has been formally approved. These meetings take different forms and are referred to in many ways, including 'sightings' 'chemistry meetings' or 'bump-intos.' In this thesis, I refer to them by the term 'pre-meets.' I am interested in how pre-meets take place, their underlying rationale, and their context. Furthermore, I am

interested in the lived experiences of people who take part in pre-meets and the role of pre-meets within the formation of newly adoptive families.

1.2 Chapter overview

This chapter introduces the thesis. Section 1.3 provides an overview of the UK adoption process and the emerging practice of pre-meets. In section 1.4, I present the rationale for this thesis and describe the process of developing my overarching aim and objectives which I go on to set out in section 1.5. Section 1.6 sets out my academic and philosophical position and theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. Section 1.7 outlines the structure of the thesis which follows this chapter.

1.3 The UK adoption context

1.3.1 What is adoption?

Adoption is a legal procedure in which the parental responsibility for a child is transferred from their birth parent or other person with parental responsibility to their adoptive parent (CoramBAAF, 2024). It is a concept which has at its heart the voluntary acceptance of the responsibility to protect, nurture and promote the development of another person's child (MacDonald, 2016). Adoption is underpinned by the notion of permanency planning, which is a core principle of UK child welfare policy and practice. This seeks to either reunify children with their original families or find other permanent families to provide them with stability and well-being. If an alternative family is needed for a child, long-term fostering, kinship care or adoption may be considered (Biehal et al., 2019).

The practice of adoption is socially constructed. From both historical and international perspectives, adoption comes in many forms. Led by the changing motivations of adopters, different societies, and the same society at different times, adoption has evolved in relation to the

needs of wider cultural contexts (see, for example, O'Halloran, 2021; MacDonald, 2016). For example, in some ethnic groups in America, kinship adoption has been seen as a means of strengthening the extended family and society, by weaking the bond between parents and children (O'Halloran, 2021).

In the UK, adoption has become an established means to secure permanence for children who come into the care system because of child protection concerns and has been actively promoted by UK government policy (Featherstone & Gupta, 2020; MacDonald, 2016; Selwyn et al., 2015). Adoption offers enormous advantages for children who cannot live with their birth families. There is a strong evidence base for the benefits of adoption (see, for example, Biehal et al., 2010; Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2013; Quinton & Selwyn, 2011; Grant et al., 2019). Specifically, as an intervention for recovery from pre-adoption adversity trauma, adoption provides children with successful outcomes (Anthony et al., 2022; Brodzinsky, Gunnar, & Palacios, 2022; McSherry & McAnee, 2022; Blake et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2022; Pace et al.; 2021; Román et al., 2022).

However, adoption is not without controversy (Featherstone & Gupta, 2020). The UK is unusual in that most adoptions are made without parental consent, leading to criticism from our European neighbours (Fenton-Glynn, 2016). As others have pointed out, socio-economic policies affect adoption practice. While adoption was promoted by the UK Conservative government (2010 – 2024), scholars have raised ethical concerns and critiqued the use of non-consensual adoption. They have described the impact of austerity policies which reduced financial resources among less well-off families and the available range of support services. These changes disrupted communities and increased the risk of care proceedings, which, in turn, raised the potential for children to be permanently removed from the care of their birth parents through

placement for adoption (Davey, 2020; Hood et al., 2016; Bywaters et al., 2018; Featherstone et al., 2018). Furthermore, a significant number of children placed for adoption in the UK have birth parents who are or were themselves in the care of the state. Roberts et al. (2019) found that approximately one in five children of young parents who have been in or are in state care are placed with foster or adoptive carers. This raises questions about how and whether families are supported effectively and fairly across society.

1.3.2 The UK adoption context

All nations of the UK follow the overarching framework of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 which modernised adoption law to reflect contemporary family structures and gave single individuals and unmarried couples, including same sex couples, the right to adopt (Talbot et al., 2023). In addition to the Adoption and Children Act (2002), each of the four nations of the UK have specific variations to the detail of adoption law, due to devolved powers. In Wales, where data collection for this thesis occurred, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 plays a significant role in shaping adoption laws and practices. It focuses on the assessment of care and support needs for children and adults, aiming to achieve wellbeing outcomes (Coldrick & Doughty, 2017). Furthermore, the Act made provision for a national adoption service in Wales, where on the 31st of March 2024, 7,198 children were in the care of a local authority. Of these children, 69% (4,955) were living with foster carers, of whom 1,012 were family or friends foster carers. Indicative of the infrequency with which adoption is used as a means of securing permanence for children, less than 4% of children (254) were placed for adoption. Of these, 26 children were adopted by their former foster carer (Welsh Assembly Government, 2024).

Since 2015, the number of adoptions has been declining in the UK. The reasons for this are multi-faceted. They include changes in social work practice and court decisions. Under the pre-proceedings protocol of the Public Law Outline, and in accordance with human rights principles, where adoption should be considered as 'a last resort,' all potential options for kinship care must now be explored (Anthony et al., 2016). Other reasons influencing the decline in the number of adoptions include the legacy of closed adoptions and new case law which has made adoption processes more complex; economic factors preventing some potential adopters coming forward, and the need for greater support services for adoptive families (Adoption England, 2024).

1.3.3 The adoption process

Adoption in Wales is managed by five Regional Adoption Agencies, established alongside the National Adoption Service in 2014, and two Voluntary Adoption Agencies. Each adoption agency has an adoption panel, made up of social workers, and a medical advisor working alongside independent members, including those with personal experience of adoption. Adoptive parents can only come into being through a formal process of professional intervention and sanctioning. Those wishing to become parents by adoption cannot independently secure the placement of a child, but are subject to an assessment by an adoption agency and matching process (MacDonald, 2016). This assessment process is conducted by a social worker from an adoption agency and is frequently experienced as uncertain and emotionally complex and may be marked by delays (Dance & Farmer, 2014; Adoption UK, 2019; Kirk, 1964).

At the end of an adoption assessment, panel members are provided with a copy of the Prospective Adopter Report (PAR). The panel meet to consider the content and to make a recommendation about the prospective adopter's suitability to become an adoptive parent

(CoramBAAF, 2024). After approval, their profile is shared with children's social workers, and they can see profiles of children waiting for adoption. The prospective adoptive parent's social worker helps identify a child whose needs are believed to match their capabilities (National Adoption Service, n.d.). The processes by which children are placed for adoption and prospective adoptive parents are approved are shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 below.

Figure 1.1. Preparing to be suitable
Stage 1 of the journey followed by child and prospective adoptive parent

Child	**Prospective adoptive parent**
Child protection investigation	Initial visit
↓	↓
Care proceedings	Preparation Group
↓	↓
Options for reunification and Family & Friends explored	Application
↓	↓
'Should be placed for adoption' decision made by Agency Decision Maker	Assessment
↓	↓
Care Order made	Panel recommendation
↓	↓
Placement Order made	'Suitable to adopt a child' decision made by Agency Decision Maker

Adapted from Coldrick and Doughty (2017) p.9

Figure 1.2. Arranging the adoption
Stage 2 of the journey followed by child and prospective adoptive parent

Child

Placement Order made

Prospective adoptive parent

'Suitable to adopt a child'
decision made by Agency Decision Maker

Family Finding activities

↓

Referral to Regional collaborative

↓

Referral to the Adoption Register Wales

↓

Matching meeting between prospective adopter/s and social workers
Pre-meets may take place at this stage

↓

Matching panel and matching Agency Decision Maker decision

↓

Placement planning meeting

↓

Introductions

↓

Placement

↓

Adoption Order

Adapted from National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, (n.d.) p7.

1.3.4 Introduction to pre-meets

'Pre-meets' is a term that was introduced in 2017 in practice guidance written by Sally Beaumont and Elaine Dibben of CoramBAAF. It is an umbrella term to cover meetings between children and their prospective adopters which take place prior to formal approval of the match at a matching panel. Traditionally, children and their prospective adoptive parents do not meet until after their match has been formally approved. As Beaumont and Dibben note, 'pre-meets' are referred to in various ways, including one-off meetings, chemistry meets, bump-into days or mini-meets; meetings called 'blind viewings,' when the child is unaware and is typically watched from a distance, are not included in their practice guidance. However, in this study I have included all meetings ('encounters' may be a more appropriate term, if the child is unaware) between a child and their prospective adoptive parent/s which take place prior to formal approval of their match at panel.

I have found evidence of pre-meets taking place as a minority practice since the 1990s (Lowe et al., 1999). Typically, they may occur when more certainty about a match is sought, if an adoptive parent is anxious about whether they will connect with a child, or the child has behaviours that it would be useful for the prospective adoptive parents to observe. Decisions to hold a pre-meet may be made on a case-by-case basis; they are not generally considered the 'norm' (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.). Generally, pre-meets take place at a late stage in the matching process, after significant information about a child has been shared with their prospective adopter/s, just before matching panel (see, for example, the National Adoption Service for Wales & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.). A child-friendly, public place is chosen, such as a play centre, outdoor play park or community farm; somewhere that is considered safe,

informal, affords some privacy and is familiar to the child. According to Beaumont and Dibben (2017), the meetings are generally planned to last 30-60 minutes. Pre-meets have developed and are being used with a dearth of underpinning evidence. They are rarely described in the research literature and, to my knowledge, aside from in-house assessments by social worker teams, no specific or in-depth exploration of the process and effects has been undertaken.

1.4 Rationale for this thesis and development of the aims, objectives, and research questions

1.4.1 Research design

My doctorate was funded by the Wales School for Social Care Research (now known as Social Care Wales) to generate evidence which would have relevance for adoption social work. Organisations which comprise the sector, such as the National Adoption Service for Wales, Heads of Adoption Services in Wales and Third Sector Adoption Agencies, were identified as potential stakeholders in the research.

The initial topic of the doctoral award was to examine factors which could help to secure permanence for children in adoptive placements, through an examination of pre-placement and pre-Adoption Order breakdowns and their consequences, contrasting them with more successful matching. This topic was borne out of research which had highlighted the high number of adoptions in Wales which had broken down or were at risk of breaking down (Bell & Kempenaar, 2010; Selwyn et al., 2015; Selwyn et al., 2015a). Early consideration of data published by the National Adoption Service, about matches that do not proceed or which break down after placement, identified just one percent of 307 children placed in 2017-2018 were affected by either outcome (National Adoption Service for Wales, Quarter 4/ End year Performance Report 2017-18.) With my supervisory team, we judged this dataset too small to

present significant insights into the process by which children and prospective adoptive parents are linked and matched successfully. I therefore undertook a scoping process with stakeholders to understand relevant issues and to develop new aims, objectives, and research questions for this doctoral study. In Figure 1.3, I show details of scoping interviews undertaken as part of this process.

Figure 1.3: Summary of scoping interviews

Respondent group	Date	Number of attendees *	Types of roles held by respondents **	Aim of data collection
Adoption and fostering sector professionals	February – May 2018	6-10	National Adoption Service professionals; local authority managers; third sector adoption agency staff	To identify key areas of interest and concern in the ways children and their adoptive families were matched
Managerial, clinical, academic experts and adoptive parents	April 2018 – October 2019	6-10	Clinical psychologists; an Adoption Service Manager; a third sector adoption/fostering manager; adoptive parents	To identify ways of accessing potential participants for study data collection
Regional adoption panel members	2019-2020	3 panels	Adoption panel members	To understand the breadth of matching and

				transitions processes and changes in the practice
Adoption social workers	2019-2020	1-5	Adoption social workers	To understand the breadth of matching and transitions processes and changes in the practice

*Bands of numbers are reported to retain anonymity of meeting attendees

**Job titles are not specified to retain anonymity of meeting attendees

These scoping meetings identified the substantive changes taking place in relation to the practice and frequency of pre-meets in Wales. Members of one adoption panel expected a pre-meet to take place for all matches. However, it was unclear why such changes were occurring, and what difference pre-meets were perceived to make in the formation of newly adoptive families. I also found references to an increasing use of pre-meets in England (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017) and Scotland (Morrison, 2018) which a few years previously had only happened occasionally (Selwyn et al., 2015). I contacted Elaine Dibben, who co-authored practice guidance on meetings prior to matching (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). I provide a summary of findings from this scoping work in Appendix 2.

Through all these discussions, I identified the growing and variable use of pre-meets without substantive evidence informing this emerging practice. In consultation with my supervisory team, I focused my research on current practice of pre-meets in Wales. To my knowledge, no research has sought to explore pre-meets including: establishing current practice; the context for their use and how they have developed; rationale for their development and use; the experiences of prospective adoptive parents and foster carers who have taken part in pre-

meets. I address these research gaps in this doctoral research. I have framed my study to explore positive and negative experiences to gain a comprehensive picture of why and how pre-meets occur and what are the effects.

1.5 Overarching aim, objectives, and research questions

1.5.1 Overarching aim

The overarching aim of this doctoral thesis is to explore the role of pre-meets in the formation of newly adoptive families.

1.5.2 Objectives

The objectives are:

1. To review knowledge and theory about pre-meets.

2. To describe current practice issues across Wales relating to pre-meets, including the underlying rationales, theories, and contexts in which they take place.

3. To explore the experiences of prospective adoptive parents and foster carers in relation to pre-meets within the adoption process.

4. To understand the role that 'chemistry' is perceived to play in the formation of newly adoptive families.

5. To synthesise evidence gathered and make recommendations about good practice and further research to be carried out in this field.

1.5.3 Research questions

I developed research questions to align with the overarching aim and objectives of my doctoral work. These had been informed by initial scoping activities and a review of literature on matching and pre-meets. Draft questions were then refined through collaborative discussions with my supervisory team and two senior professionals in the adoption sector,

both of whom play key roles in shaping policy around matching. The research questions I addressed in interviews with adoption managers in the five Welsh regions were:

1. What is the current practice in Wales relating to pre-meets and how is practice developing?

2. What are the underlying theories, contexts and rationales that relate to the current practice?

3. What are the perceived benefits associated with pre-meets?

4. What are the difficulties associated with pre-meets?

The research questions I addressed with adoptive parents were:

1. What difference do prospective adoptive parents feel pre-meets make to their experience of matching?

2. How do prospective adoptive parents experience pre-meets?

The research questions I addressed with foster carers were:

1. What are foster carers' experiences of pre-meets?

2. What role do they perceive pre-meets play in relation to how children join their adoptive families?

1.5.4 Potential impact of this thesis

This thesis is intended to make a novel contribution to theoretical and applied knowledge about the processes involved in the formation of newly adoptive families. My hope is that it will improve understanding of pre-meets, which are the first meetings between children and their adoptive families that take place *during* the matching process. It will provide knowledge and evidence about the experiences of adoptive parents, foster carers, and adoption social work managers in relation to pre-meets to illuminate how families can best be supported. It will

improve understanding of the views of adoption managers, prospective adoptive parents, and foster carers in relation to perceptions of the role of 'chemistry' and the role this may play in the context of matching children and their prospective adoptive families.

1.6 Academic and philosophical position

This study originated in a desire to explore the current practice of pre-meets in Wales and to help inform future practice. From the outset, I was motivated by a commitment to try and facilitate change (Kidder & Fine, 1997). Scoping interviews with key stakeholders and references in the grey adoption literature suggested that pre-meets were taking place more frequently than in the past. Although an established minority practice for several decades, I knew that children and their prospective adoptive parents meeting prior to formal approval of their match has often been contested (Cousins, 2011) and is a topic that can raise strong emotions. My position was informed by my academic, professional, and personal background. The concept of establishing relational permanence (see, for example, Brodzinsky & Smith, 2019) is significant in this study. I also recognise this thesis is a piece of reflexive research (Braun & Clark, 2021), informed by my own experiences and positions, as I discuss below.

1.6.1 Professional, academic, and personal background

I have varied professional experiences outside my doctoral research which have informed my interest and perspectives and developed my skills and knowledge for this study. I have undertaken adoption and fostering research, both during my time as a doctoral student and previously. For sixteen years, I worked as a freelance researcher for the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University. I contributed to government-funded studies such as *Infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm: a prospective, longitudinal study* (Ward et al., 2010) and the evaluation of the *No Wrong Door* Innovation Programme (Lushey et al.,

2017). My main role was to establish and maintain contact and undertake interviews with parents, children, foster carers, and professionals. I also contributed to publications in relation to these and other studies (see, for example, Brown et al., 2016; McDermid et al., 2016). During my doctoral studies, I collaborated with Caroline Thomas on an independent review of Scotland's Adoption Register (Thomas & Blackmore, 2019). I have professional experience as an Independent Reviewing Officer for Pembrokeshire County Council, where I undertook annual reviews of foster carers for nine years. This involved meetings with individual foster carers and with their Supervising Social Workers. I presented annual reviews I had prepared to a Foster Panel and recommended the suitability or otherwise of foster carers to remain registered. I ceased in this role approximately five years before I started the doctoral programme.

I have tried to take account of experiences of and findings from other research and of my position as an 'insider/outsider' researcher arising from being a practitioner-experienced individual conducting research in a related field (Corbin-Dwyer, 2009; Gair, 2012). The inter-related nature of my past work with foster carers and this study meant their worlds already felt familiar to me. Early on in my studies, my supervisor commented on my confidence, contacting stakeholders to undertake scoping interviews. I knew that my relatively advanced age, gender, and shared language were important factors which impacted my experiences of recruiting participants, and how we related to each other.

1.6.2 Ontological and epistemological approach

Ontological position

Ontology is concerned with how we perceive reality and what we can consider is true or real. Bryman (2012) discusses ontology as whether phenomena can be considered as existing independently of social actors or whether they are constructed from the perceptions and

interactions of social actors. In this thesis, I take a constructionist approach whereby I recognise that observations and meanings are socially constructed by interactions and perceptions of individuals. In that sense, experiences and meanings derive from an experience and take a subjective rather than an objective perspective (Smith, 2003).

Epistemological position

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge: what can be known and how you can know it. There are two main epistemological stances: positivism and interpretivism (Bryman, 2012). A positivist stance argues that knowledge is objective, and hypotheses can be tested by gathering knowledge in a value-free way. An interpretivist stance recognises that knowledge is subjective and generated inductively to understand behaviour and phenomena (Bryman, 2012). I have taken an interpretivist stance (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape, 2014; Mason, 2002; Bryman, 2012) and used qualitative research through conducting semi-structured interviews, to explore participants' experiences and perspectives in-depth while still maintaining a focus on specific research questions (Bryman, 2012). An interpretivist epistemological stance is appropriate since it recognises that these data will include subjective accounts from different stakeholder perspectives. In Chapters 5 and 6, the interpretivist stance I take is phenomenological (Husserl, 2011), which I discuss in Chapter 3.

1.6.3 Reflexivity in the thesis

I don't see the world as it is, I see it as I am.

Anais Nin (in Robinson & Aronica, 2013 p.10).

Reflexivity involves drawing upon the researcher's experiences, pre-existing knowledge, and social position and to critically interrogate how these aspects influence and contribute to the research process and potential insights into qualitative data. This invites the researcher to

explore, understand, bring forth and make explicit their values, ideas about themselves, the world, and their beliefs, then to consider *how*, not *whether,* these influence how they interpret and make sense of the research. Reflexive research demands that knowledge is treated as situational. It is always a consequence of an interaction between the researcher and the qualitative data (Braun & Clark, 2021).

Walsh's (2003) framework for reflexivity provides a comprehensive typology that encompasses four interconnected dimensions: personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual reflexivity, all of which I aim to weave through this thesis. I have kept a reflexive journal (Wright, 2014) in which I made observations on the influences of my background, beliefs, and motivations, and how these have shaped my research questions and my interpretations of the data. For example, from early on in my data collection I became aware that my own position as a recently bereaved daughter sensitised me to themes of grief and loss and I have reflected upon this when collecting and analysing data.

Bracketing or 'epoche' (Tufford & Newman, 2010) is a methodological step rooted in phenomenological enquiry (Husserl, 1931). Here, researchers set aside (or 'bracket out') their own preconceptions, assumptions, and prior knowledge about a phenomenon to study it more objectively. Throughout my research, I have tried to consider my existing knowledge and preconceptions, as a researcher and as an Independent Reviewing Officer for foster carers, for example. Furthermore, I am aware that I have long-wondered how it is that children and prospective parents can be matched with one another, without having met. I have tried to remain alert to how my experiences influenced this study, particularly when undertaking data analysis.

Prior to my first interview with foster carers, I undertook a bracketing interview in which I explored and aimed to make transparent the preconceptions that I had about pre-meets (Thomas

& Sohn, 2023). During this process I realised how anxious I would likely feel, meeting the prospective parents of a child whom I cared for and loved. I wondered how I would respond, if I did not 'take' to the prospective parents. I recorded these thoughts in a journal and was aware of them when I was undertaking the interviews and subsequent analysis. Also, prior to interviewing prospective adoptive parents, I bracketed my prior knowledge gleaned from my reading of the literature, from discussions with stakeholders and from interviews I had already undertaken with adoption social work managers as part of this study, as well as conversations with friends who are adoptive parents.

During the research process and writing of this thesis, in addition to my previous professional roles, I have considered how my own history and experiences relate to my study. Unlike many practitioners and academics involved in adoption-related research, I do not have a direct connection with adoption, such as having been adopted or having an adopted sibling or child. As a stepparent I have, however, experienced a first meeting with a child to whom I am not biologically related, who became part of my family. In what would now likely be classified as a kinship arrangement with state involvement, I have a close family member who was brought up by her grandmother, whom she thought was her mother. I have witnessed and lived the fallout of secrets and lies. I conceptualise my family structure not as defined by blood ties nor legal status but rather informed by and reflected in how I live my life and interact with the people who are important to me.

1.6.4 Overview of research methods

Qualitative research is an approach that describes and explores issues, experiences, and perspectives. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) describe how it involves taking a 'naturalistic' approach to its subject matter, which means studying phenomena in their natural settings and

attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p.3) Barritt writes:

> *It is not the discovery of new elements, as in natural scientific study, but rather the heightening of awareness for experience which has been forgotten and overlooked. By heightening awareness and creating dialogue, it is hoped that research can lead to a better understanding of the ways things appear to someone else and through that insight lead to improvements in practice* (Barritt, 1986).

This quotation encapsulates my approach. My feeling is that others may have turned away from first meetings between children and their prospective families as a topic of practice change or research, perhaps because whether such meetings take place during matching or after formal approval of a match has been viewed as problematic within the sector. The matching process in adoption is an example of the rapid social change which Flick (2009) observes confronts social researchers. Such changes create new social contexts and perspectives and require an open mind in collecting and analysing real-world evidence, rather than relying on preconceived notions or assumptions. Qualitative research was an appropriate methodology for this doctoral research as it provided a means by which complex issues could be investigated with methods which are sufficiently open to develop knowledge in new areas of social research (Flick, 2009).

1.6.5 Study design

In this study, I have collected and analysed qualitative data from three groups. Through interviews with adoption social work managers with responsibility for policy and practice, I aimed to establish the current practice of pre-meets across Wales, explore their context and rationale and professionals' perceptions of their associated benefits and challenges. I

interviewed prospective adoptive parents and foster carers to gain insight into lived experiences of the pre-meet practice and how these two respondent groups attribute meaning to the experience. MacDonald (2016) observes that adoptive parents are central to achieving the aim of current UK adoption policy which is to deliver stable, permanent new families for children who cannot live with their birth families. As MacDonald observes, adoption research has often focused on outcomes for adopted children rather than the experiences of families. Where families' experiences have been researched, this has often explored difficulties and challenges faced by adoptive parents (Selwyn et al., 2015; Selwyn & Meakings, 2015a; Cowan, 2022). My interest was in exploring experiences of the matching process which prospective adoptive parents may find can assist matching and family formation. Farmer et al. (2010) noted the lack of research about adopter-led approaches to linking and matching, which pre-meets are sometimes associated with (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). I therefore considered it important to explore the views and experiences of prospective adoptive parents in this study.

Foster carers play a central role in a child's transition to living with their newly adoptive families (see, for example, Browning, 2015; National Adoption Service for Wales & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.; Neil, Beek & Schofield, 2018; Selwyn et al., 2015). Research which reports on children's transitions is sparse, is generally written from the perspective of adoptive parents and sometimes reports criticisms of the role of foster carers (see, for example, Selwyn et al., 2015; Neil et al., 2018b; Blackmore et al., 2020). There is a dearth of research with foster carers about their experiences of adoption processes, an issue I addressed through my research.

I used semi-structured interviews which are suitable for gathering rich, meaningful material (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I conducted thematic analysis to analyse data from adoption

social work managers (Braun & Clark, 2006). For prospective adoptive parents and foster carers, I used an interpretive, phenomenological approach (IPA) (Smith, 2015) so that I could focus on families, their experiences, and the meanings they attribute to pre-meets. Full details of my methods are set out in Chapter 3 and within each study chapter.

1.6.6 Ethical considerations

In line with the full ethical approval granted by the School of Psychology at Cardiff University, all participant groups received written information via email outlining the study's aims, the complaints procedure, details of ethical approval, and consent forms. This was provided in advance of interviews. Formal ethical approval is only the beginning of an ongoing process, however (Allmark et al., 2009). Ethical practice must be embedded throughout the research journey. It is not merely procedural, but deeply relational (Neale, 2021). Therefore, my responsibilities to participants—privacy, anonymity, protection from harm, sensitivity, and duty of care—were considered at every stage of the study's design and conduct (British Psychological Society, 2021; Social Research Association, 2021). For example, in my reporting, I have omitted personal details which were significant in participants' narratives, where I considered they could lead to the identification of individuals.

Before interviewing, I considered the circumstances of each participant group at the time of interview. Firstly, I recognised that participating in a study about pre-meets could induce anxiety in adoption managers. This was due in part to the oft contentious nature of pre-meets and shifting and diverse practice. Secondly, in respect to prospective adoptive parents, I reflected on how their first and second interviews took place at a time of intense vulnerability and emotion, within a handful of days before and after meeting their child for the first time. For foster carers, I understood from personal and professional experience that the topic of pre-meets is inextricably

linked with the loss of a child from their care. It was likely to bring to the fore difficult emotions for foster carer participants. Guided by social workers, I approached interview timings with sensitivity, especially when foster carers were preparing to support a child's transition to their adoptive family.

Consent was treated not as a one-off event, but as a continuous dialogue—revisited before each interview and, when appropriate, during the interview itself. In the written invitation and again before each interview, I emphasised my interest in adopters' and foster carers' experiences of pre-meets. This was intended to address power dynamics and support participants to feel in control of the conversation. I emphasised all participants' autonomy: they were under no obligation to answer any question, and the recorder could be turned off at any time. Interviews only resumed with their explicit agreement. Throughout, I remained attuned to both verbal and non-verbal cues—tone, pace, gestures, and facial expressions—responding sensitively to signs of discomfort or hesitation. This approach enabled participants to pause, take breaks, or redirect the conversation as needed. Several interviews, including one with a professional, were paused for these reasons, reflecting my commitment to ethical responsiveness and participant wellbeing.

In longitudinal research, the evolving relationship between researcher and participant is particularly significant. (Neale, 2021). Ethical dilemmas including issues of consent, confidentiality and emotional labour can develop over time (Graham, 2008). I was conscious of my need to recruit and maintain a sample and how this might be inadvertently communicated to participants, potentially pressurising them to remain involved against their own preference. I tried to be aware of how I was presenting to them to ensure that the requirements of my study were not impacting on their capacity to withdraw without a need to explain why. There was no

certainty that a child would join their prospective adoptive family after the pre-meet, and I was conscious that this had the potential to impact on an adopter's decision whether to continue to participate in the study.

I was guided by Stake's reminder that 'qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict' (Stake, 1998, p.103). To acknowledge participants' time, family members received a one-off £20 Amazon voucher at the end of the study. I also brought token gifts—such as biscuits or flowers—to prospective adoptive parents to mark the occasion of meeting their child for the first time.

Haynes (2012) links ethical practice in research closely with reflexivity. Appendix 3 outlines ethically important moments (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), explored through reflexive techniques to consider their implications for the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Neale (2021) highlights the importance of thoughtful closure of studies. I shared findings with participants and invited their views on how their data had been represented. I also asked whether the pseudonyms I had selected were acceptable to them. Examples of participants' responses can be found in Appendix 3. I hoped that this process would allow participants to reflect on their involvement and ensure that they felt valued and respected as the study concluded

1.6.7 The child's voice in this thesis

Increasingly, the importance is recognised of valuing children's experiences and perspectives as important areas of study and for developing child-centred policies and practice (Holland, 2009; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008; Alderson & Morrow, 2004). The significance of and difficulties associated with involving adopted children directly in research have been highlighted by academics such as Selwyn et al. (2015), Thomas et al. (1999) and Thomas (2017), and are discussed in Chapter 2. The inclusion of children in this study would have required

significant additional resources to ensure that their participation was well supported and in compliance with the Research Governance Framework for Health and Community Care (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003). In discussion with my supervisory team, we agreed that including children as participants in this study was not possible. I acknowledge that this is a limitation of this study.

1.7 Key concepts and theory in this thesis

This thesis draws upon the concept of relational permanence (see, for example, Brodzinsky & Smith, 2019). It also draws upon David Kirk's *Shared Fate: A Theory and Method of Adoptive Relationships* (1964), attachment theory and the work of psychotherapists Sophie Boswell and Lynne Cudmore. I provide an overview of these key concepts and theories below.

1.7.1 Relational permanence

From a child welfare perspective, achievement of permanency is the primary focus for children in the care system. Permanency has historically referred to achievement of permanent living arrangements through reunification with birth family, adoption, long-term fostering or legal guardianship (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2019; Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Whincup & Grant, 2019). There are different ways of understanding permanence, comprising three key components all of which must be supported and achieved to promote children's long-term well-being and ensure the stability of a child's adoptive placement (Selwyn et al., 2015). In the context of adoption Brodzinsky and Smith write, the first aspect, *legal permanence* affirms the authority and responsibility of a child's adoptive parents, to make all relevant decisions and to take all appropriate actions in raising a child. The second aspect, *residential permanence* emphasises the importance of supporting continued care in a designated home. The third aspect, *relational (or psychological) permanence* prioritises children's connections to significant attachment figures

and '*a sense of connection, continuity, nurturance, security, trust, and safety in relationships with caregivers'* (p.186). Relational permanence can be defined as an enduring and supportive relationship between a young person and a caring adult (McSherry & Fargas Malet, 2018). The concept of relational permanence highlights the importance of emotional and psychological stability and it is this third form of permanence that Brodzinsky and Smith posit is most frequently overlooked in adoption research.

A focus on relational permanency, therefore, prioritises the connections an individual has. This may often be with significant attachment figures, but also with caregivers who promote connection and safety within their relationships (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2019). The view that relational permanence is often overlooked or inadequately valued in adoption policy and practice is shared by Janet Boddy (Boddy, 2013). In The Care Inquiry report (2013), *Making Not Breaking: Building Relationships for Our Most Vulnerable Children*, Boddy asserts that relationships with people who care for and about children are *'the golden thread'* in children's lives. Boddy espouses an approach to child welfare policy and practice that goes beyond seeking legal permanence and focuses on the quality of children's relationships. As she writes: '*The quality of a child's relationships is the lens through which we should view what we do and plan to do'* (p.15). Permanence therefore centers on the maintenance of quality relationships between children and their carers (Boddy, 2013), to help provide children with *'a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity' and 'have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond'* (Department for Education, 2015, p.22).

Approximately a decade after Boddy highlighted the frequently detrimental effect of the care system on relationships in children's lives, a large-scale Review of children's social care in England concluded that too often, policy and practice has not done enough to build or maintain

key relationships in the lives of vulnerable children (MacAlister, 2022). Such concerns were also reflected and addressed in the All-Party Parliamentary Group Adoption and Permanence report '*Strengthening Families: Improving stability for adopted children*' (2021). Based on evidence from around 200 adopted young people and 500 adoptive parents in England, the report concluded that the adoption sector needs a paradigm shift from '*family finding'* to '*family building'* (p.4). As part of this shift *'cultivating relationships'* with children regarding foster carers, social workers and birth family members is a key principle of the report, and it is acknowledged that these relationships may need support over many years, not just in the initial stages (p.42). This principle takes account of the complexity of relationships in the lives of adopted children and their families. These are viewed as dynamic and evolving over time (Grand, 2010; MacDonald, 2016), a network which Grand conceptualises as a 'constellation' (Grand, 2010).

According to Nelsen (2024), greater attention to the concept of relational permanency has begun to shift the conversation about permanence in the United States. It has been integral in developments in the UK adoption sector since around 2020. In Wales, these include *Transitions and Early Support*, a practice model of children's transitions from foster care to adoption, launched by the National Adoption Service for Wales in 2020 (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering and Adoption, Cymru, n.d.). This draws upon the practice model *Moving to Adoption* developed by Mary Beek, Elsbeth Neil and Gillian Schofield at the University of East Anglia (Neil, Beek & Schofield., 2018; Beek et al., 2021). Both practice models emphasise providing opportunities for children and their adoptive parents to build connection more gradually than in the past, prior to and during introductions. Furthermore, they emphasise maintaining the presence of their foster carer in a child's life wherever this is possible.

I write more about *Transitions and Early Support* in Chapter 2, as it provides important context in which I have undertaken this research.

1.7.2 Attachment theory

Attachment theory suggests that the future psychological wellbeing of every child is dependent upon their experiencing an intimate one-to-one relationship with a caring adult for a crucial period during their formative early years. Attachment is considered a critical aspect of modern child development knowledge and, as a theoretical paradigm, it has had a profound effect on childcare policy and practice (Bowlby, 1982; Ainsworth; 1978; Howe, 1995). It was attachment theory, bringing with it an acute awareness of the costs for the emotional wellbeing of each child and for the childcare system, that gave rise to ideas of permanency planning (O'Halloran, 2021).

Attachment theory is embedded in practice guidance which relates to children's transitions (see, for example, Beaumont & Dibben, 2017; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.; Fahlberg, 1994; Schofield & Beek, 2018; Jewett, 1994). Central to attachment theory is the understanding that attachments between a foster carer and child cannot be 'transferred' to an adoptive parent, as has sometimes been thought in the past (Schofield & Beek, 2018). Instead, a secure attachment must be earned by the sensitive care provided by the new parents and will depend on the child's readiness to accept that care. Nevertheless, this process can be facilitated or made more difficult by how the move is managed for the child (Schofield & Beek, 2018). Where once foster carers and adopters had often barely met prior to introductions starting and were discouraged from being in touch after the child had moved in with their adoptive family, the foster carer/adopter relationship is now regarded as the foundation from which children are enabled to move more securely from foster

care to adoption (see, for example, Browning, 2015). Good practice has therefore emphasised the need for a switch in the focus of transitions, so that they take place at a pace which is comfortable for the child (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017; Beek et al., 2021; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.; Browning, 2015) rather than reducing time delays (Neil, Morciano, Young & Hartley, 2020). The need for the child to see their foster carer feeling comfortable and confident in the presence of the adopter and convey to the child that their would-be parent is 'safe' is recognised as a central part of this process (see, for example, Cudmore & Boswell, 2014; Beek et al., 2021; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.).

1.7.3 'The children were fine': the work of Sophie Boswell and Lynne Cudmore

Based within a social work team, the psychotherapists Sophie Boswell and Lynne Cudmore observed that the prevailing belief in social work at the time—that a quick, clean break was best for children—meant children typically moved in with their adoptive families within seven to ten days of their first meeting. Following the move, children usually did not see their foster carers for at least three months, and in many cases, never saw them again. Any deviation from this approach was deemed too risky, potentially undermining the adoptive placement and causing confusion for the child (Boswell & Cudmore, 2015; 2017).

Boswell and Cudmore highlighted that these abrupt transitions and sudden losses often left children feeling bewildered, distressed, and fearful of future separations. Despite this, there was no clear rationale for why the 'clean break' approach was considered optimal, and no one felt confident enough to attempt alternative methods. Within this framework, children were expected to form new and trusting relationships with their adoptive parents. The psychotherapists questioned why this practice remained unchallenged and conducted a small-scale research

project to explore the reasoning behind it (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014). They uncovered what they described as a 'blind spot' in people's understanding, which prevented them from recognising the emotional impact of these transitions on children. Their findings revealed that children often withdrew into a compliant state, which was misinterpreted as an indication that they were 'fine.' Boswell and Cudmore concluded that children's transitions should align more closely with established knowledge about early childhood attachment and loss, emphasising that such moves needed to be more gradual and less distressing to provide a stronger foundation for new relationships to develop. Research by Boswell and Cudmore has underpinned models of children's transitions from foster care to adoption (Neil, Beek & Schofield, 2018; the National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.; Beek et al., 2021). I return to these models in Chapter 2.

1.7.4 Kirk's *Shared Fate: A Theory and Method of Adoptive Relationships*

David Kirk's *Shared Fate* (1964) presents a synthesis of nine adoption-related studies conducted over a decade. The research topics range from societal views on adoption to analysing letters responding to a magazine article, along with multiple surveys and interviews with adoptive parents discussing their attitudes and experiences. From these findings, Kirk formulates a theory of adoption. His main argument is that adoptive parents face a role handicap. He indicates that the cultural script for adoptive parents is limited, riddled with inconsistencies and ambiguities. These issues are further exacerbated by societal attitudes that, although adoption is acceptable, it is often considered a lesser (and potentially somewhat stigmatising) alternative to biological parenthood. These societal views may also be internalised by the adoptive parents themselves. *Shared Fate* was first published in 1964, and presents a world in which prospective adoptive parents are assumed to be heterosexual, married couples. This is in contrast with

modern adoption; for example, in Wales in the year ending 31st March 2023, 22% (55) of all adoptions were by same sex couples (CoramBAAF, n.d.). Kirk's theorising of adoptive relationships occurred in a society which existed before assisted reproductive technologies, before social media and before openness in adoption became more common. Nonetheless, many aspects of his theory remain relevant. A summary of the differences between the route to parenthood of adoptive and non-adoptive parents, adapted from *Shared Fate* by Kirk (1964) can be found in Appendix 4. These may be seen to contribute to the 'role handicap' that Kirk describes.

1.8 Thesis structure

The thesis is structured in the following way: Chapter 2 presents an overview of the literature about pre-meets in adoption processes and related issues concerning matching and 'chemistry'. Chapter 3 presents the methods used to gather and analyse data. In Chapter 4, I report on interviews with adoption social work managers. In Chapter 5, I report on interviews with adoptive parents. In Chapter 6, I report my interviews with foster carers. In each chapter, I also discuss the significance and implications of the findings relating to each participant group. Chapter 7 summarises key findings, the strengths, and limitations of my research as a whole and discusses how this thesis compares to the existing evidence. It also considers implications for practice, future research and draws conclusions from my findings.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Background

In this chapter, I present an overview of the literature in relation to my overarching research aim and objectives. This includes literature relating to matching and 'chemistry' in adoption, and pre-meets.

2.2 Method

Researchers often provide the rationale for their research problem and position their study within the existing literature about the topic (e.g. Creswell, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). However, opinions differ about the extent of literature review needed before a study begins (Creswell, 2003). I undertook a literature review in the early stages of my research, and refined and continued this throughout the development of my thesis.

Initially, I searched databases including Social Care Online, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Scopus, Web of Science, ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts), and PsycINFO. The keywords and search terms I selected included 'adoption *and* transitions,' 'pre-meets,' 'adoption *and* matching,' 'chemistry *and* relationships' and 'chemistry *and* adoption.' Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed studies published in English since 2000.

I needed to broaden my initial approach to reviewing literature, for several reasons. Firstly, there is a general paucity of research which has been undertaken about the activities of linking and matching children and their prospective adoptive parents in the UK (Farmer et al., 2010). Specifically, there is very little literature relating to meetings between children and their prospective adoptive parents held during the matching process, so systematic searches were of limited success. Secondly, references to meetings that do exist are often found in the grey

literature, such as in practice guides for social workers. Finally, the heterogeneity of terms like 'chemistry meets' 'pre-meets' 'viewings' (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017) used to describe pre-meets adds to the complexity of searching and identifying relevant sources using standard terms. I therefore adopted a flexible and reflexive search strategy as my understanding of the topic evolved. I refined search terms and revisited databases—an iterative process that allowed me to respond to emerging themes and gaps (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015). Backward snowballing was used to identify additional sources by following citation trails from key texts and scanning reference lists (Wohlin, 2014). This was particularly useful given the inconsistent terminology surrounding pre-meets.

I supplemented my findings by targeted exploration of grey literature (such as handbooks on social work practice) and policy documents. Significantly, I also consulted with two sector-leading professionals who had professional expertise in relation to children's matching and transitions in adoption. These individuals guided me to further literature.

In the following literature review, I present the results of searches I have made relating to 1) matching in adoption, including the role of 'chemistry' and 2) pre-meets. In 2.3, I explore the literature relating to matching children and their prospective adoptive parents. In 2.4, I explore the literature relating specifically to pre-meets. I present a discussion of my findings in 2.5.

2.3 Matching: an overview of the literature

For much of the twentieth century, adoption agencies focused on matching children and prospective parents based on perceived similarities in appearance, ethnic background, religious affiliations, intellectual achievements, and other background factors (Triseliotis et al., 1997; Quinton, 2012). This approach aimed to promote secrecy in adoption and fit into societal norms by minimising differences (Hanna & McRoy, 2011). Secrecy and a lack of openness in adoptive

family life has been theorised to hinder family adjustment (Kirk, 1964; Brodzinsky, 2005; Brodzinsky, 2006).

The Children Act of 1989 accelerated the general movement towards accommodating more openness in adoption. Alongside this grew the prominence of agencies involved with children to become custodians of information and resources necessary to empower the adoptee to achieve a secure and independent identity (MacDonald, 2016). It introduced the welfare principle, prioritising the child's welfare and requiring matching children with specific needs to parents who could meet those needs (Quinton, 2012). The process became more structured, involving several stages, including judging a child's need for adoption, assessing parents' suitability, and matching them with the child (Thomas, 2013). This professionally managed process involves extensive information sharing about the child with prospective adoptive parents, including written reports, verbal information, and visual media (Lowe et al., 1999). In their study of the placements of 149 children in England, Farmer et al. (2010b) found that careful matching involving the consideration of children's needs, adopters' strengths and long-term compatibility resulted in greater stability and fewer disruptions. However, Dance and Farmer (2016) reported that in their sample, 27% of matches were deemed either 'fair' or 'poor,' meaning there were serious compromises either on matching requirements or adopter preferences.

Cousins (2003) critiques traditional matching, suggesting that it is influenced by social workers' beliefs and attitudes, with practices often focusing on avoiding risk factors from previous disruptions rather than seeking positive characteristics in a match. Sometimes, a focus on finding a 'perfect match' between children and their prospective families - in relation to ethnicity, for example - has led to delays in children being adopted (Dance & Farmer, 2015). Social workers report feeling pressured to make the right decision despite the inherent

uncertainty, as highlighted by the Hadley Centre (2002): *'Professionals often report feeling that they are being asked to 'play God' when it comes to matching.'*

Cousins claims that traditional approaches to matching disadvantaged children with disabilities or from ethnic minority groups. This was due to a tick box section in the prospective adopter's application, where they detailed the 'kind' of child they would consider adopting. In this process, they might inadvertently discount a child with whom they could be well-matched (Cousins, 2003). As an alternative to professional-led linking, in 1980, the British Association of Adoption and Fostering had launched the magazine *Be My Parent* (BAAF, n.d.). The magazine featured profiles of children waiting for adoption, allowing prospective adopters to enquire about a specific child or sibling group. In her article *Are we missing the match? Rethinking adopter assessment and child profiling* (Cousins, 2003), Cousins described this method of linking as 'child-led' because it used the direct appeal of the child (p.12). Cousins suggested profiling children in magazines may provide an effective means of finding homes for children, as they allow for 'chemistry' and an emotional response to a specific child. Children's responses to being advertised (sometimes negative or conflicted) are recorded by Thomas and colleagues (1999). Similarly, some prospective adoptive parents found seeing children's profiles in magazines to be problematic (Lowe et al., 1999).

In her practice guidance *Making Matches* (Cousins, 2011), Cousins notes that methods she had previously described as 'child-led' were now referred to as 'adopter-led,' acknowledging that prospective adopters, rather than social workers, could initiate matches. She advocates for alternative approaches to matching, observing a lack of clear predictors of matching success from traditional methods. In her critique of such methods, she states that long-lasting families cannot be created with Excel spreadsheets, hinting that the process cannot be entirely

rationalised, or its success predicted. In the realm of human relationships, Cousins writes, flexibility is essential to allow for what she describes as the 'magical ingredient: chemistry.' This may be based on similarities, differences, or be *'stubbornly indefinable'* and defy known wisdom (Cousins, 2011, p.2).

The concept of 'chemistry,' as referred to by Cousins, is commonly considered in relationship-forming literature (Campbell, Nelson, Parker, & Johnston, 2018; Campbell, Holderness, & Riggs, 2015). Interpersonal chemistry can be defined as an instant emotional and psychological connection between two individuals (Swann, Sellers, & McClarty, 2006). The connections that lead to relationships are not widely understood (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004), and most research on interpersonal chemistry has focused on ongoing relationships rather than first encounters (Campbell et al., 2018). However, within the friendship formation literature, researchers propose that individuals often decide which relationship type (such as friend or acquaintance) to pursue within minutes of meeting (Berg & Clark, 1986). Research suggests that similar behaviours and attitudes among individuals create 'coordination' in a relationship and are 'symmetrically facilitative,' whereas dissimilar behaviours and attitudes are considered 'symmetrically interfering' (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978, pp. 66-67).

In 2011, Martin Narey was appointed as adoption adviser to the central government. His role was to encourage social workers to see adoption as an option for more children in care and to improve adoption success rates. Referring to the findings of studies by David Quinton and Julie Selwyn (Quinton & Selwyn, 2011), he stated that whilst considerable effort was involved in matching children and families, there was a dearth of evidence of the impact of a good match. Like Cousins, Narey suggested matching could not be an entirely rationale or predictable process. He emphasised the importance of 'chemistry' in matching, and suggested that

prospective adoptive parents should have more opportunities to initiate matches, stating that *'Matching works best not when it is something done to the adoptive parents and child but involves and trusts some of the chemistry in relationships'* (UK Parliament, 2013).

Soon after Martin Narey's pronouncements on the value of 'chemistry' in adoption matching, the UK government published *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* (Department for Education, 2012) which encouraged adopters to take a greater lead in identifying and progressing possible matches with children. In the same year, David Quinton published *Rethinking Matching in Adoptions from Care* (Quinton, 2012). Quinton reflects on assessing the effectiveness of the matching process:

> *The matching process necessarily works on hopes and best guesses as well as on information, simply because it is hard to know how particular adopters and particular children will get on once they are living together* (Quinton, 2012, p.98).

Here, Quinton indicates the difficulties of effective matching, particularly given the uncertainties of aspects of human relationships.

Across the UK, from 2012, government policy led to the promotion of adopter-led approaches to matching such as databases like the Adoption Register Wales, allowing social workers and approved prospective adoptive parents to identify potential matches, and Adoption Activity Days. These events, where prospective adoptive parents can meet children waiting for adoption, were piloted by CoramBAAF in England in 2011 and introduced in Wales in 2017. Evaluations have shown that Adoption Activity Days facilitate matches that might not occur otherwise (Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013; Yap, 2016). However, some critiques view these days as commercialised, with prospective adoptive parents perceived as acting like customers selecting from an array of 'goods' (Garrett, 2018, in Palmer et al., 2023). Some parents have

found adopter-led matching burdensome and competitive, or an emotional roller-coaster (Thomas & Blackmore, 2019). Additionally, seeing many children in need of new families at these events can be highly emotional (Lewis & Selwyn, 2021). Perhaps it is unsurprising, therefore, that Lewis and Selwyn reported that about half of the 41 prospective adoptive parents in their study preferred their social worker to select suitable profiles rather than using adopter-led approaches.

Since the publication of *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* and Martin Narey's emphasis on the importance of 'chemistry' in adoption matching, the concept has received further attention. A government report, authored by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Adoption and Permanence, claims that 'chemistry' is important in forming strong matches between children and families. The report suggests that, to enhance this process, predictive analytics and algorithms could be incorporated as future tools for matching. Specifically, such techniques might be applied to the online database of children awaiting adoption, Link Maker (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Adoption and Permanence, 2021, p.22). However, definitions of what 'chemistry' entails in the context of adoption remain scarce. Farmer et al. (2010a) describe it as *'emotional connectedness with a particular child'* (p. 94), suggesting that the development of this connection, particularly for adoptive families, might be encouraged through adopter-led linking activities. Exploring the activities of Scotland's Adoption Register, Thomas and Blackmore (2019) highlighted differing views among prospective adoptive parents regarding the significance of chemistry. While some emphasised the importance of seeing a child— whether through videos or in person—as an essential aspect of establishing a connection during matching, one adopter expressed unease with language typically associated with romantic relationships. Retrospective interviews conducted with adoptive parents by Farmer et al. revealed

that most often, the moment of truly 'clicking' and perceiving the match as 'right' often occurred only after meeting the child. As one parent noted, adoption remained a 'mental exercise' until that pivotal meeting (Farmer et al., 2010a, p.195).

A few studies focus on literal chemistry and physical appearance rather than emotional or psychological connections. Bick and Dozier (2009) found that adoptive mothers' oxytocin levels rise after close interactions with their child. Selwyn and Meakings (2015b) note that a child's odour can affect early bonding for some mothers, with some parents having to overcome feelings of avoidance due to an acrid smell. They also found that parents at events like Adoption Activity Days described 'falling in love' or a 'click' with the child, possibly influenced by smell. Cousins (2011) noted that skin colour and physical appearance play a role in matching; she observes this is rarely discussed. She suggested placement decisions for children with unknown ethnicity might be based on appearance, as some families prefer a child who looks like them for easier community acceptance. Guidance on and research about matching suggests that in some cases, physical similarity may be one factor which can help a child have a sense of belonging and acceptance in their adoptive family (Adoption England, 2015; Farmer et al., 2010a). However, this is not linked with 'chemistry' per se.

2.4 Pre-meets: an overview of the literature.

Below, I provide historical context and examine current pre-meet practices, including studies on UK matching activities (e.g., Lowe et al., 1999; Farmer et al., 2010a) and related practice guidance (e.g., Triseliotis et al., 1997; Cousins, 2011; Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). Notably, CoramBAAF's publication *The Adoption Process in England* makes no reference to pre-meets (Lord & Lucking, 2018). Unless I refer directly to terminology found in a specific source, for ease I refer to all meetings between children and their prospective adoptive parents as

'pre-meets,' although this term was only introduced in 2017 (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). I report my findings in four parts: 1) Children's experiences and views 2) Early references to pre-meets (before 2000) 3) Pre-meets between 2000 until the publication of CoramBAAF's good practice guidance in 2017; 4) The watershed: CoramBAAF publish practice guidance on pre-meets.

2.4.1. Children's experiences and views

I could not find any children's accounts of taking part in pre-meets. Furthermore, the views of adoptive children about their experiences of transitions from foster care to adoption more generally appear infrequently in literature. Exceptions include research by Selwyn and colleagues. (2015, 2015a); Thomas et al. (1999) and Dance & Rushton (2005). Except for Selwyn and Meakings (2015a), these reports do not relate specifically to adopted children from Wales, and most pre-date the regionalisation of adoption services across England and Wales. Most young people (N=12) who were interviewed by Selwyn and Meakings (2015a) were aged 16 or over and so data gathering took place many years after they had experienced introductions with their adoptive parents. The interviews do not appear to have focused on young people's experiences of transitions in detail.

Adopted Children Speaking (Thomas et al., 1999) stands out as unusual and perhaps unique, in that it is an in-depth study of the views of adopted children. The methodological rigour with which the study was undertaken is clearly presented, including the approaches used to engage the children to ease their comfort, talking about sensitive topics. Although written over a quarter of a century ago, the findings remain pertinent. Thomas and colleagues interviewed 41 children, all of whom had been aged 5 or more when they had joined their adoptive families and were aged between 8 and 15 at the time of the interview. The authors

highlight a limitation of the study; in researching matching, they were hampered by the retrospective nature of the study and the understandable difficulties children had in recalling events which happened some time ago and when some of them were quite young (p.37).

In *Adopted Children Speaking*, Thomas et al. (1999) report that most children recalled feeling excluded from the matching and introduction processes of joining their adoptive families. Twenty-eight children recalled feeling shy and fearful during their first meetings with adoptive families (p.46). They experienced uncertainty about finding a suitable family (p.133) and found moving in to be puzzling and stressful (p.59). Some felt they moved in too soon after meeting their adoptive families without enough time to get to know them (p.64).

Dr. Roger Morgan, as Children's Rights Director for England, wrote two reports based on adopted children's views (Morgan, 2006; 2012). Compared to the study by Thomas et al., Morgan's research included more responses but was limited in depth due to survey data collection. In the *About Adoption* (2006) study, 208 children and young people aged 6 to 22 completed 'question cards.' Data collected from these cards indicated that children found arriving and settling into their new families to be a 'vital and scary time.' Morgan identified five main ways to help children get to know their adoptive families: visiting and staying a few days before moving in, going on days out, spending time talking with future adoptive parents, being given a video or book about the family, and having fun and playing games (Morgan, 2006). Children also suggested their 'top ten' ideas for improving adoption, including letting children make the final decision on their new parents (p.10). Morgan (2012) found that 42% of 428 children aged 5-18 identified moving in with their adoptive parents as the 'most important bit' of getting adopted, compared to 29% who saw finalising the adoption order in court as most important. Responses were chosen from pre-determined options.

Interest in the impact of fostering on foster carers' biological children is growing, with research undertaken by Shelton (2023), Hassett et al. (2019), and Williams (2017). However, as Lewis and Selwyn observe, the views of other affected children, such as birth siblings and children in foster or adoptive families, are largely absent from research (Lewis & Selwyn, 2021).

2.4.2 Pre-meets before 2000

This section explores two key sources of literature from the 1990s, addressing adoption theory, policy, and practice in the UK. The first is *Adoption, Theory, Policy, and Practice* by John Triseliotis, Joan Shireman, and Marion Hundleby (1997). Triseliotis, a pioneer in adoption research and policy, is known for his promotion of the creation of a unified framework for adoption, covering policy, planning, and practice. His work often explored the psychological and social dimensions of adoption, including the importance of maintaining links between adopted children and their birth families. (Parker et al., 2013). Together with his colleagues, Triseliotis suggests the final step of matching should be a meeting between the child and prospective adoptive parents before formal approval. All available information, including photos and videos, should be shared with both parties. The meeting's purpose is to test the response of both adults and the child to the proposed match. Individual meetings should follow to address any doubts. The process should proceed at the child's pace, without rushing, and work through any hesitations. If doubts remain, the authors suggest a different match may be considered, thereby presenting a reduction in the risk of adoption disruption as a clear rationale for pre-meets.

The second publication from the 1990s of interest is *Supporting Adoption: Reframing the Approach* (1999). The latter publication was authored by Nigel Lowe and a team of researchers based in the Law School at Cardiff University. It reports the findings of their research with adoption professionals and adoptive parents, with the authors' examination of implications for

policy and practice. It was designed to throw light on aspects of policy and practice concerning the support available to 'older' children (aged 5 and above) as they moved from being looked after by the local authority to living with their adoptive families. One strength of the study is that it drew on extensive data collected between 1994 and 1997: survey and interview data were gathered across all statutory and Voluntary Adoption Agencies in England and Wales (115 of the 160 agencies operating at that time responded) and surveys from an estimated 515 adoptive families, together with interviews with 48 families (p.15-16). Therefore, it provides a comprehensive picture of practice at that time.

It is interesting to compare the practice guidance written by Triseliotis and his colleagues with findings from this contemporaneous UK-based study conducted by Lowe et al. (1999). Lowe and colleagues' findings include the use of '*blind sightings*' defined as '*when prospective adoptive parents see the child with whom they are linked from a distance and unbeknown to the child,*' typically in a public place, such as a park. They noted that the practice varied between agencies, or perhaps even cases (Lowe et al., 1999, p.172). Such meetings were found to be standard practice in some areas and took place at an early stage in the linking and matching processes, perhaps even when other individuals were being considered as a match with the child. Their purpose appears to have been, as one adoptive mother observed, to establish whether the match felt 'wrong' upon seeing the child, based on 'instinct.' Matches may not proceed after the pre-meet has taken place, depending on the prospective adoptive parent's response to first meeting the child. One social worker is quoted as saying that she agreed with the practice, implying it could help prevent adoptions disrupting in the future '*Better a broken engagement than a divorce*' (Lowe et al., 1999, p.172).

Lowe et al. also described prospective adoptive parents being introduced to the child as foster carers' 'friends' to see the child closely. These meetings tested adoptive parents' responses but did not consider children's responses. The research noted issues of honesty with children, acknowledging that sometimes children understood the purpose of adults' visits without being told. A few participants noted that such meetings allowed adoptive parents to withdraw from a match, which became harder after they had been introduced to the child. One parent said being in person with the child marked her point of '*commitment*,' and that the match felt '*make believe*' on paper. Lowe and colleagues concluded that '*blind sightings*' or '*viewings*' should be an individual choice.

2.4.3. Pre-meets between 2000 until the publication of good practice guidance in 2017

Between 2000 and 2017, pre-meets in the UK remained inconsistent and fluctuated in popularity. Farmer et al. (2010a) conducted a large-scale survey in 2006, gathering data from 76 local authorities and 16 voluntary agencies, providing a comprehensive picture of practice. They describe 'blind' or 'unseen viewings' where prospective adoptive parents see a child without the child's knowledge. While rare, one adoption social worker defended the practice, arguing it added emotional chemistry to the linking process. Despite criticism from other agencies and the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI), the agency continued the practice due to positive feedback from adoptive parents and the belief that it reduced the number of disrupted adoptions.

Cousins (2011) describes a model of pre-meets called *'unseen viewings'* in which prospective adopters see the child during a visit to the foster home or school on the pre-text of making a social visit. Whilst this provides an opportunity for the adopters to test their own immediate reaction to the child, Cousins notes the practice remained contentious, and considered

dishonest and secretive. Similarly, Farmer et al. (2010a) noted mixed opinions on 'blind viewings,' with some finding them helpful and others seeing them as dishonest. Burnell, Castell, and Cousins (2009) argued that 'blind viewings' (in which a child is seen from a distance) could reassure and enlighten prospective adoptive parents, potentially preventing unsuccessful matches before raising a child's expectations.

Around 2016, Bradford's local authority adoption team developed 'bump-into' meetings (Beynon, n.d.). These meetings faced resistance from other agencies, prompting an in-house evaluation by the adoption team. The study, based on 50% questionnaire responses from 14 matches (the total number of matches where a pre-meet had been arranged, at that time), provides insights into the views of prospective adopters, social workers, and foster carers. Beynon linked 'bump-into' meetings with the work of psychotherapists at the adoption agency Family Futures, who suggest a naturalistic approach to introductions. They suggest that after formal matching, children should meet prospective adoptive parents in person before being told about them, with the intention of reducing a child's anxieties about meeting their prospective parents and associating them with positive experiences.

In Bradford 'bump-into' meetings occurred before the matching panel, and were influenced but not devised by Family Futures. Beynon states that 'bump-into' meetings are conducted within the context of direct work with the child, helping to contextualise the meeting and subsequent introductions. These meetings aim to distinguish them from future accidental encounters with known individuals. Questionnaire responses in Beynon's study indicated that 'bump-into' meetings reduced children's anxieties about meeting their adoptive families, as they did not see them as strangers. Prospective adoptive parents and foster carers reported that these meetings helped them become more confident in their match and understand their child better.

The meetings were described as 'organic', 'natural,' and 'un-staged' relieving anxieties for both children and parents. The location was familiar to the child, activities were planned, and organic interactions encouraged. Meetings lasted 30-60 minutes.

2.4.4. The watershed: CoramBAAF publish practice guidance on pre-meets (2017)

In 2017, CoramBAAF published Practice Note 64, providing the first guidance on meetings between prospective adoptive parents and children prior to matching (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). The term 'pre-meets' was introduced to create a shared, neutral terminology. The primary function of pre-meets as cited in the guidance is to support a child's emotional transition from foster care to adoption, aligning with key practice models (e.g. National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.).

Beaumont and Dibben observed that many adoption panels had embraced pre-meets as a positive development within 'adopter-led' matching. They noted that Adoption Activity Days increased expectations of meeting children before formal approval and suggested that pre-meets may help address the issue of 'chemistry' between adoptive parents and children, contributing to match success. However, they emphasised that the original match quality should remain the basis for progression to the panel, focusing on meeting the child's needs. The guidance highlights good practice examples from Peterborough and Portsmouth, characterised by careful planning tailored to individual children's needs. It is organised under headings such as direct introductions, benefits of pre-meets, talking to children, preparation of children, foster carers, and prospective adoptive parents, and managing a pre-meet. It draws on good practice from Adoption Activity Days, emphasising transparency and openness with children about pre-meets. Beaumont and Dibben do not support 'sightings' where the child is unaware of being observed, noting concerns about explaining this to the child later. The authors suggest that pre-meets may help children

play a role in their own family-finding and provide observational evidence of the match's strength and information about the child's needs.

Between 2016 and 2018, Mary Beek, Elsbeth Neil, and Gillian Schofield developed the *Moving to Adoption* practice model at the University of East Anglia (UEA), UK. In 2020, the National Adoption Service and the Association of Adoption and Fostering Cymru published a practice model, *Transitions and Early Support*, aimed at a pan-Wales approach to children's transitions. This model intertwined the UEA model, rooted in attachment theory, with *By Your Side: Foster Carer and Adopter Guide*, (Norris, 2012), an attachment and trauma-informed approach developed by The Family Place, a therapeutic adoption support service (The Family Place, n.d.) which had been involved in the development the innovative *Adopting Together* model of matching and transitions, for children who have waited longer for adoption (Shelton et al., 2020).

The *Transitions and Early Support* Guide (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.) suggests that a 'chemistry meeting' or 'child viewing' may be included in the matching planning process on a case-by-case basis. They suggest the decision is made when a prospective adoptive parent is anxious about connecting with the child or when observing the child's behaviour would be useful (p.23). Similarly, in the University of East Anglia's *Moving to Adoption* model (Beek et al., 2021), the authors note that a 'one-off' meeting (referred to as a 'pre-meet' 'chemistry meet,' or 'mini-meet') may help prospective adoptive parents decide if the child is right for them. They emphasise that preparation for a pre-meet should reflect principles of openness and consultation, engaging children who are of appropriate age and understanding in their family-finding process (p.63). In both practice models, pre-meets are firmly identified as part of the matching process to be incorporated into

direct work with the child, led by the adoption social worker. Pre-meets are described as distinct and set apart from the transition process. Beek et al. (2021) explain that once a match is decided, both prospective adoptive parents and foster carers will view the child as part of the adoptive family, affecting their relationships and feelings. Thus, neither model of transitions incorporates pre-meets into the children's transition process, or describes how they may take place.

Lewis and Selwyn (2021) reported on the views and experiences of 20 prospective adoptive parents whose adoptive child had joined their family. Participants were from five English Regional Adoption Agencies, having completed their preparation training between November 2018 and March 2020. The sample is small (N=20), and experiences of pre-meets were one of many topics covered. Nonetheless, it is interesting that the study reveals that almost half (N=9) of the prospective adoptive parents had met their child prior to formal matching (p.21). Unlike previous studies, Lewis and Selwyn use the term 'pre-meets.' Examples of pre-meets included observing the child in a nursery or park, as a one-off or as part of a series of visits. A novel example reported by the authors is that of a prospective adoptive parent attending the child's health assessment with the foster carer. Lewis and Selwyn also note that video calls and messages between adoptive parents and foster carers were common, and link pre-meets with activities to build the foster carer/adoptive parent relationship. Lewis and Selwyn found that pre-meets helped prepare all participants for introductions and built prospective adoptive parents' confidence in a match.

For her doctoral research, *Forever Home? The Complexity of Adoption Breakdown in Scotland* (2022), Polly Cowan conducted interviews with 15 families who had experienced their adopted child leaving home prematurely. Out of the 13 families who were not previously known to the child, 12 had not met their child prior to introductions. One had participated in a 'bump-

into' meeting, where they visited a place where the child was and viewed him from a distance. This seems to have been a hybrid of the 'bump-into' and 'sighting' or 'viewing' models. Unlike Beynon's 'bump-into' meetings, interaction between the child and the prospective adoptive parent was not intended. Although this is only one example, it may indicate wider confusion and inconsistency in the UK regarding pre-meets.

2.5 Discussion

This review explores findings from academic studies and grey literature regarding pre-meets—initial meetings between children and their prospective adoptive parents prior to formal matching. I am unaware of evidence reflecting children's views on pre-meets. However, insights from interviews with 41 children in the *Adopted Children Speaking* study (Thomas et al., 1999) highlight key aspects of their experiences when meeting their adoptive families. Many children reported feelings of exclusion during the matching and introduction processes, long waits between learning about adoption and being matched, as well as experiencing shyness and fear when meeting their new families. Additionally, a study involving 208 adopted children revealed their desire to have the 'final say' in choosing their adoptive parents (Morgan, 2006). Both Thomas et al. and Morgan underscore the significance of incorporating children's views in the decision-making process for prospective adoptive family matches.

While references to the perspectives of professionals and prospective adoptive parents on pre-meets date back to the late 1990s, there is little mention of foster carers' views in the literature. Decision-making about whether to hold a pre-meet has traditionally been approached on a case-by-case basis. Triseliotis and colleagues suggest that pre-meets offer an opportunity for children to evaluate their responses to prospective adoptive parents, emphasising the importance of seeking children's perspectives after these meetings. More commonly, pre-meets are viewed as

a chance for prospective adoptive parents to assess their own feelings about a child before proceeding with their match. However, there is scant evidence to illustrate how children's responses to their potential adoptive parents are gathered.

The benefits of pre-meets are often framed in terms of 'building confidence in the match' and alleviating prospective adoptive parents' 'anxieties' about forming a connection with a child (National Adoption Service & Association for Adoption and Fostering Cymru, n.d.; Lewis & Selwyn, 2021; Beynon, n.d.). By attending pre-meets, prospective adoptive parents may withdraw from matches they perceive as unsuitable, earlier than they might otherwise. Lowe et al. (1999) note that withdrawing is easier before formal approval of the match and before the child becomes aware. Pre-meets are sometimes thought to help prevent some adoption disruptions, therefore, and this is viewed as benefiting all involved parties (Triseliotis et al., 1997; Lowe et al., 1999; Farmer et al., 2010a; Beek et al., 2021).

Lowe et al. (1999) highlight how pre-meets may help adopters' psychological adjustment to parenting their child (Lowe et al., p.172). Lewis and Selwyn (2021) found that they may help adoptive parents prepare for introductions. Others suggest they help develop a sense of comfort with the adoption process, which ultimately benefits the child (Farmer et al., 2010a).

Findings of this literature review indicate that in the 1990s, there were differences in practice and terminology around pre-meets, which continued between 2000 and around 2015, with evidence of tensions among practitioners. This may have related to issues of 'openness' and 'honesty' with children. There was a subsequent decline in the frequency of pre-meets (Lowe et al., 1999). Beaumont and Dibben (2017) suggest the central, underlying function of pre-meets is to support children in their emotional transition from foster care to adoptive families. This aligns with underlying principles of the *Moving to Adoption* and *Transitions and Early Support* good

practice models of children's transitions. However, while these models briefly acknowledge the possibility of 'chemistry meetings' or 'viewings' occurring prior to formal match approval, they position pre-meets as distinctly separate from their frameworks.

In summary, the history of pre-meets in the UK has been diverse and sometimes contentious. Indications are that pre-meets are occurring more frequently (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017; Lewis & Selwyn, 2021). However, little is known about how practice is developing in Wales or across the UK; its underlying rationale, the context of changes, or the current nature of practice. Furthermore, little is known about the views and experiences of prospective adoptive parents and foster carers who have participated in pre-meets. I address these issues in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the study design and research methods used in this doctoral study. I present the characteristics of a qualitative methodology and how it is suitable for this study. I then describe how I collected and analysed my data and consider the strength and limitations.

3.1.1 What is qualitative research?

Qualitative research is intended to generate knowledge grounded in human experience (Sandelowski, 2004). It is concerned with exploring phenomena 'from the interior' (Flick, 2009). It is frequently described as a naturalistic, interpretive approach, which takes the accounts and perspectives of participants as a starting point. It is distinguished by the fact that hypotheses are generated from analysis of the data rather than stated at the outset (Silverman, 2011). As such, qualitative research involves an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research, whereby the former is generated out of the latter and comes from the perspective that knowledge is '*situated and contextual;*' '*reconstructed*' during the interview process (Bryman, 2012, p.380). Rather than being a series of facts to be excavated, or simply transferred from the interviewee to the researcher, meaning is co-produced between them (Mason, 2002, p.62). Post-modern theorists have refuted the idea of the existence of an individual self that can be interviewed, postulating instead that we have many different selves; that the interview is a performance and data ephemeral, a representation of that single interaction. However, a pragmatic approach is often taken in which the interview is nevertheless seen as '*meaningful beyond its immediate context*' (Yeo et al., 2013, p.179). This raises concerns about assessing how qualitative research meets the criteria of 'soundness' (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.11). Presenting clear and comprehensive methods and results allow the reader to judge the study rationale and ethical

standards, assess risk of bias, data quality and management and see how interpretations are formed from those data. How a study builds on and relates to previous research is important to understand. Limitations should be clearly and honestly presented and findings considered in the context of history, policy and practice (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

3.1.2 Study design

This study followed a qualitative methodology. I used semi-structured interviews to collect data from adoption social work managers which I analysed using thematic analysis. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with prospective adoptive parents and foster carers at multiple timepoints, using an interpretive phenomenological approach. A qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to collect views from participants in their own words. My analysis methods allowed me to interpret, understand and reflect on their descriptions and opinions within the context of their experiences and over time.

3.1.3 Study setting

The three groups of participants in this study were all drawn from the five adoption regions in Wales (Map 1). These are shown in Figure 3.1 below, together with the two Welsh Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

Figure 3.1

Figure 3.1. **Map showing the
five adoption Regions and two Voluntary Adoption Agencies in Wales**

3.2 Data collection

Informed by the literature, I developed semi-structured interview schedules to address the study aim and objectives described in Chapter 1. I structured these so that the 'major questions' are asked in the same way, but the interviewer is free to alter their sequence, in response to the natural flow of conversation, and probe for more information (Fielding & Thomas, 2001). My intention was to provide a space for participants to discuss their experiences and explore themes and concerns which I had not anticipated. Semi-structured interviews are suitable for gathering rich, meaningful material (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

I developed and piloted different schedules for each participant group. I amended draft schedules following feedback from piloting, discussion with expert advisors and comments by the supervisory team, including academic and clinical psychology input. The final versions of these, together with related study information sheets and invitations and consent forms can be found in the Appendices.

3.2.1 Adoption social work managers

I piloted the interview schedule for adoption managers with one former social worker. The schedule was further developed with input from two colleagues, one of whom is a sector-leading professional working outside Wales. I then reviewed the schedule following the first interview, which resulted in revision to question order. My supervisory team (including two clinical psychologists) provided feedback on the interview schedules.

The interview schedule began with an introductory question about the participant's role within the adoption team, to help me contextualise their responses. Probes were used to explore a topic which the respondent seemed to raise (rather than prompt new answers) and prompts were used if a respondent appeared to struggle to answer a question.

3.2.2 Prospective adoptive parents

I was unable to pilot the three interview schedules (one for each of the three interview timepoints) with a parent who had taken part in a pre-meet. Instead, I discussed my approach with two adoptive parents, one of whom was also an adoption panel member. Through this discussion I was reminded how vulnerable and sensitive a prospective parent may feel, days before meeting their child for the first time, and of the privilege of speaking to them. I reviewed the interview schedule after interviewing the first participant and made changes. These softened and shortened the questions and reduced the number of questions, in line with the interpretative phenomenological approach I used.

Interviews with prospective adoptive parents began with a broad, introducing question (Kvale, 1996) inviting a *'tell me about your experience of …'* type response (Edwards & Holland, 2013) which allows the participant to 'talk at length' (Rapley, 2004). I subsequently asked questions and listened to the respondent's answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) whilst utilising a range of types of question including 'interpreting' and 'probing' (Kvale, 1994), remembering, and referring to the respondent's earlier comments (Bryman, 2012; Mason, 2002). Topics were arranged in the sequence which appeared most logical and appropriate to me, taking account of the chronology of events, and leaving a potentially sensitive or difficult topic (such as perceptions of 'chemistry') until towards the end of the interview. I confirmed this approach in my discussions with adoptive parents, prior to data collection.

3.2.3 Foster carers

I developed a semi-structured interview schedule, designed to elicit an exploration of foster carers' understandings of why pre-meets took place; their thoughts, feelings and experiences relating to them, and the foster carer's experiences of the impact of pre-meets on

children and prospective adoptive parents. The interview schedule also included a question about the foster carer's perceptions of the role of 'chemistry' in matching. I discussed the foster carer schedule with a fostering social worker who reminded me of the sensitivity of the timing of pre-meets for foster carers. This was helpful in my subsequent discussions with fostering social workers who contacted me with details of prospective participants during recruitment. As with the schedule for prospective parents, I used a questioning approach which moved from broad opening questions to more focused questions which included probes and prompts to gently draw out the respondent's experiences and opinions.

3.3 Approach to sampling, contacting participants and conducting interviews

3.3.1 Adoption social work managers

An objective of this research was to establish an overview of current policy and practice relating to pre-meets in Wales and to seek adoption professionals' views of the benefits and difficulties they associated with pre-meets. Elite interviewing was therefore used to access the views of influential and well-informed individuals in each regional adoption organisation (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In November 2021, I sent letters of invitation to each of the Regional Adoption Managers of the five Welsh regions, which between them represented a diverse range of communities: urban and rural; Welsh and English speaking. I included a study information sheet and consent form. I asked Regional Adoption Managers in all five regions either to take part in an interview alone, or to nominate a colleague to represent or accompany them. Managers responded positively to this invitation. Two Regional Managers nominated other senior managers in their teams to participate, whilst three Regional Managers took part in interviews alongside senior colleagues. Participants in each interview included at least one participant with management responsibilities for family finding activities.

3.3.2 Prospective adoptive parents

I used purposive sampling to identify participants strategically who could provide in-depth, case-oriented information about the central phenomenon; namely, their experiences of being a prospective adoptive parent meeting their child in a pre-meet (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Onwuegbuzie & Collins 2007). Pre-meets are a recent innovation in adoption practice, so my potential sample was already very small. My selection criterion was any prospective adoptive parent whom adoption workers had planned would take part in a pre-meet.

This approach enabled me to collect data in line with my study aim and theoretical orientation (Ritchie et al., 2013). The purpose of sampling in qualitative studies is not to generalise from the sample (as in quantitative research) but to develop an in-depth understanding. The larger the sample, the less detail that can typically emerge from one individual. A key feature of studies using interpretative phenomenological analysis is a commitment to a detailed, interpretive account which is acknowledged to only be achievable on a small sample. In simple terms, breadth is sacrificed for depth (Hefferon & Gil-Rodrigues, 2011). Smith and Osborn (2015) note that a small sample has potential to generate enough data of sufficient quality to allow a detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence, and divergence. They highlight the risk of not being able to produce a sufficiently penetrating analysis if the sample size is too large (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Bromley (1986) draws parallels with the development of case law. He describes how small samples tend to yield highly circumscribed accounts of individuals within specific contexts, leading to limited generalisations that apply only to narrowly defined areas of scientific and professional study (Bromley, 1986). IPA studies can be based on a sample size of one (e.g. Eatough & Smith, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2021) and Ritchie et al. (2013) suggest that both size and selection of a sample is a pragmatic practice. Morse (2001) highlighted use of shadowed data (when participants speak of others' experiences as well as their own). In this study, I recognised, for example, that adoptive parents sometimes speak of their perceptions of their children's experiences (birth and adoptive), as well as those of the adopted child's foster carers.

I contacted potential participants through a gatekeeper (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). These were adoption social work managers in two of the five Welsh adoptionr, all of whom I had already interviewed for this study. The two regions were selected because I had already learnt that the practice of pre-meets had been established for two or more years. In late 2021, I sent these managers information requesting their assistance in recruiting participants. I provided an electronic copy of an information sheet explaining the study purpose and my research approach.

Adoption managers circulated the information sheet amongst their social work teams, who shared it with potential participants. Therefore, recruitment included two layers of gatekeepers. The information sheet asked interested parents to provide their contact details to the gatekeeper, who then passed their contact details to me. I stated that I planned to interview participants at three timepoints: 1) in the week or two before they took part in a pre-meet; 2) in the weeks after; 3) 6-12 months after their child had moved in with them. Given the sensitive and delicate timing of the data collection, the information sheet acknowledged that interviews were likely to take place at emotional times and included reassurance that participants would be free to withdraw from the research at any time, without giving a reason. I invited parents who were adopting on their own or in a partnership. Couples were invited to participate separately or together.

I contacted adoption managers for a second time in the autumn of 2022, with a further request to circulate the information sheet amongst potential participants. I subsequently also approached managers in a third adoption region, where pre-meets had only been introduced as a regular part of practice within the previous year. Managers were willing to help identify possible participants but unfortunately were unsuccessful.

I recruited one individual after my first recruitment round and one couple in the second recruitment round. In both recruited families, the prospective adoptive parents wanted to progress the match with their child after the pre-meet, and proceed to formal approval of their match. Professionals agreed and the children moved in with the families and were still living with their adoptive families after approximately ten months. Thus, the third interviews took place after the children joined their new families.

3.3.3 Foster carers

I adopted purposive sampling to recruit foster carers. My approach was as with adoptive parents, described above. As my potential sample was already very small, my selection criterion was any foster carer who had taken part in one or more pre-meet.

In this participant group, the gatekeepers comprised an adoption manager in one of the five Welsh adoption regions and a Head of Children's Services in the second region. In Region 1, the adoption manager shared an information sheet and consent form with her team, who then shared this with foster carers' supervising social workers. Two supervising social workers contacted me for more details about the study, before discussing it with foster carers they supported. Subsequently, they asked the foster carers' permission to give me their contact details. After this had been agreed, I contacted the foster carers and arranged a visit. In Region 1, I recruited and interviewed four participants from three families.

In Region 2, I contacted the Head of Children's Services as they were already known to me. They put me in touch with the Head of the Family Placement Team. A member of their administrative team then emailed foster carers who had cared for children subsequently adopted. The email included the same information about the study and consent form shared in Region 1. Foster carers from three families contacted me to discuss their potential participation in the study. Three foster carers from two of these families consented to participate. The foster carer from the third family felt she did not meet the criteria to participate.

3.3.4 The participants

I conducted semi-structured interviews with:

a) Eleven adoption social work managers from the 5 Welsh adoption regions between December 2021 and March 2022.

b) Three prospective adoptive parents in two families from 2 Welsh adoption regions between December 2021 and September 2023. Each participant was interviewed three times. The couple were interviewed together.

c) Seven foster carers in 5 families from 2 Welsh adoption regions. The interviews took place between May and August 2023

Figure 3.2 below shows a summary of the approaches used in the recruitment of participants, location of interviews and numbers of participants. Further details of the interviews and participants can be found within the relevant chapters.

Figure 3.2: Table showing summary of recruitment approaches, participants and interviews

Participant group	Regional Adoption Managers	Prospective adoptive parents	Foster carers
Sampling approach	Elite	Purposive	Purposive
Selection criteria	Self-selected or nominated by a colleague	Any prospective adoptive parent whom adoption workers had planned would take part in a pre-meet	Any foster carers with experience of taking part in a pre-meet
Gatekeepers - 1st level	None	Adoption social work managers	Region 1: Adoption social work managers Region 2: Head of Children's Services
Gatekeepers - 2nd level	None	Adoption social workers	Region 1: Fostering social workers Region 1: Family Placement Administration Team
N (participants)	11	3 (in two families)	7 (in 5 families)
N (interviews)	5 single, paired or group interviews (one timepoint)	6 (2 single or paired interviews at three timepoints each)	5 single or paired interviews (one timepoint)

Location of interviews	On-line	Adoptive parent's home (5) On-line (1)	Foster carer's home
Dates interviews took place	December 2021 – February 2022	December 2021 – September 2023	May – August 2023

3.3.5 Data collection

I recorded all interviews on a digital voice recorder, thereby ensuring that all the verbal dialogue was captured. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim, noting significant pauses, false starts, and other significant features, such as laughter and tonal changes. I transcribed all the interviews with adoption managers, and five of the six interviews with adoptive parents; one interview was transcribed professionally. Interviews with foster carers were all transcribed professionally. This reflected available resources, including time. Transcription is one important part of familiarisation with data (Riessman, 1993). It is not a mechanical act; it is the start of the interpretive process (Bird, 2005). I kept jottings of my thoughts as I transcribed the interviews, which therefore formed part of the analytic process. I listened back to voice recordings and checked them alongside all transcriptions to ensure accuracy. This included checking punctuation, to ensure that this was true to its original nature.

3.4 Analysis

3.4.1 Thematic analysis

I used thematic analysis (TA) to analyse data from interviews with adoption social work managers. TA provides a flexible, robust approach to analysing complex, nuanced data whilst enabling the experiences and perspectives of participants to be highlighted (Braun & Clarke 2006).

A step-by-step approach to using thematic analysis

I analysed the data thematically following the six-phase process below. Progress through the phases was not linear, but recursive. I drew upon Braun and Clarke's concept of *reflexivity* in thematic analysis (2019). This acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity, their reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation, as analytic resources, as discussed in Chapter 1.

PHASE 1: Familiarisation: I read, re-read, and listened to the audio recordings of interviews with adoption managers, and wrote initial notes of analytic observations, to facilitate my familiarisation with the dataset.

PHASE 2: Coding: I applied codes, both semantic (surface, obvious, overt) and latent (implicit, underlying, 'hidden') to sections of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020) as they related to my research questions. This helped me identify the salient information relevant to the views and experiences of adoption managers. I entered all transcripts into Delve software (Delve Team, 2021) and used the software to assist in the coding stage of data analysis. I developed codes predominantly inductively (e.g. managers' rejection of their own past practice) with some exceptions (e.g. 'chemistry'). Some coding reflected my prior knowledge (e.g. identifying managers' use of Secure Base principles in respect to change management). I kept excerpts of data inclusively, with a small amount of surrounding data, to ensure its meaning and context was not lost (see Appendix 9).

PHASE 3: 'Searching' for themes: reflexively, using my knowledge and with a focus on research questions, I identified initial themes from the adoption managers' coded and collated interview data. I clustered codes together to create a plausible mapping of key patterns in the data.

PHASE 4: Reviewing themes: I reviewed the data set to check whether the initial themes were a good 'fit'. I created approximately ten tables and mind maps at this stage. I collapsed and regrouped themes as appeared appropriate during the review stage and created a charting template (Ritchie et al., 2013) (see Appendix 10).

PHASE 5: I attributed illustrative quotations to themes and charted them to enable analysis between and within each interview. Through this charting process, I further refined and defined themes (Ritchie et al., 2013). I found this to be a helpful, visual means by which I could organise and store relevant quotations. The chart also enabled me to secure a link between my account of the research and the original data (see Appendix 11).

PHASE 6: I wrote the findings for this study.

This analytic approach facilitates and displays ordering and permits within-and between-case searches; allows flexibility and transparency to others; and allows emergent ideas, concepts, and patterns to remain rooted within the original transcripts. It can therefore be described as substantive and cross-sectional (Ritchie et al., 2013).

Thematic analysis rejects the universal relevance of concepts such as 'reliability checking' and 'data saturation' to qualitative research, embracing Morse's (1997) criticism of a coding approach that prioritises consistency and consensus over situated, reflexive interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020, 2021). Claims of having achieved 'data saturation' in small numbers of interviews are likely to have been facilitated using a semantic, rather than a latent (or conceptual) focus in coding, combined with coding at a simplistic level of detail (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Whilst the codes that I identified were not checked for 'reliability,' key themes were discussed with a member of my supervisory team who had read the transcripts, and these discussions influenced my interpretation of the data. In March 2023 I shared detailed tables of

the characteristics of pre-meets with adoption social work managers and invited their

amendments or comments (see Appendix 12). An abridged version of the table is shown in

Figure 4.2 in the following chapter, which reports my findings from interviews with the adoption

managers.

3.4.2 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse interviews with

prospective adoptive parents and foster carers. IPA is an approach which was developed for

psychological experiential research by Jonathan Smith in the 1990s (e.g. Smith, 1996; Smith,

2007; Smith, 2011). IPA is used in a wide range of experiential research both in psychology and

in related disciplines, including adoption-related research (e.g. MacDonald, 2016; Boswell &

Cudmore, 2014, Tasker & Wood, 2016). The main currency for an IPA study can be described as

the meanings that events and states hold for participants (Smith & Osborn, 2015). It is informed

by key concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge:

phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, which I discuss below.

Phenomenology

IPA is part of a small family of methods informed by phenomenological philosophy,

which draw heavily upon the writings of the German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-

1938) and those who expanded on his views. These include Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-

Ponty (Spiegelberg, 1982). Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of

experience. Whilst there are many variations in the emphases and interests of phenomenologists,

they have all tended to share an interest in thinking about what the experience of being human is

like, especially in terms of the things that matter to us, and which constitute our lived world. One

key value of phenomenology is that it provides a rich source of ideas about how to examine and

comprehend lived experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The underlying philosophical perspectives in phenomenology include:

- *A return to the traditional tasks of philosophy* that existed before the limitations of the 19th century of exploring the world by empirical means ('scientism').

- *A return to the Greek conception of philosophy* as a search for wisdom.

- *The intentionality of consciousness*; the idea that the reality of an object is inextricably related to one's consciousness of it.

- *The refusal of the subject-object dichotomy*: the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990).

Phenomenologists focus on describing what participants have in common. The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. To this end, the researcher identifies a human experience, the phenomenon, and then collects data from people who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals (Creswell, 2007). This description consists of 'what' they experienced and 'how' they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). In Chapter 5, I draw upon the experiences of adoptive parents. In this instance, the phenomenon for adoptive parents is the shared experience of children (with whom the participating adoptive parents take part in a pre-meet) joining their adoptive family. In Chapter 6, I draw upon the experiences of foster carers. In this instance, the shared experience that the participants have is taking part in a pre-meet with a child or children for whom they have cared.

In phenomenological studies, reality is understood through embodied experience. The truth of the event, as an abstract entity, is subjective and knowable only through embodied

perception. Meaning is understood to be created through the experience of moving through space and across time (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Therefore, phenomenological studies attempt to explore personal experience and are concerned with an individual's personal account or perception of an object or event. This contrasts with other methodologies, which may attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

For Husserl, phenomenological inquiry focuses on that which is experienced in the consciousness of the individual (Husserl, 1931). In phenomenological terms, experience or consciousness is always consciousness *of* something – seeing is seeing of something, remembering is remembering of something, judging is judging of something. To achieve a phenomenological attitude, Husserl developed a phenomenological method which was intended to identify the core structures and features of human experience. Firstly, he suggested that we need to 'bracket,' or put to one side, the taken-for-granted world to concentrate on our perception of that world (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.13). This phase of the enquiry is described by Husserl as *epoche.* The purpose of this self-examination is for the researcher to gain clarity from her own preconceptions without becoming over-absorbed in detail and risk neglecting the focus of study.

The self-examination is part of an on-going process rather than a single fixed event (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). It frequently involves the researcher keeping a journal in which she records, for example, data which are *'booming clangs and whispering ghosts'* (Goldspink & Engward, 2018*)* - or 'reflexive echoes' (Engward & Goldspink, 2020) - data which particularly resonate with the researcher for whatever reason. In this research, prior to interviewing prospective adopters and foster carers, I kept a journal of my own experiences of children joining their adoptive families, in both my personal and professional lives. This included jottings of the

key themes that I had identified from my interviews with adoption social workers, adoption panel members and social work managers that I had undertaken as part of the doctoral studies.

Hermeneutics

The second major theoretical underpinning of IPA comes from hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA emphasises that the research process is dynamic, with an active role for the researcher. Smith and Osborn (2015) note that a theoretical commitment to the individual as a cognitive, linguistic, affective, and physical being is implicit within IPA. IPA assumes a connection between people's thinking and their emotional state. However, as Smith observes (Smith, 2015), there may be reasons why an individual may not want to self-disclose and may struggle to express what they are thinking and feeling. Part of the researcher's role is to interpret the participant's mental and emotional state from what they say. In their analysis of interviews with foster carers, adopters, and professionals, Boswell and Cudmore (2014; 2017) examined what was not said, as well as what was, and the way participants described their experiences. This enabled them to highlight how the grief and losses experienced by children transitioning to adoption may be overlooked, as adults' attention is often focused on their own needs.

Smith and Osborn (2015) note that IPA is intellectually connected to hermeneutics and theories of interpretation. IPA requires the researcher to get close to the participant's personal world, to take an 'insider's perspective,' but this cannot be done directly or completely (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.26). A central tenet of IPA is that access depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher's own conceptions. It is only through a process of interpretive activity that the researcher can make sense of the participant's personal world. Therefore, IPA involves a two-stage interpretation process, or double hermeneutic. The participants are trying to make sense of

their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their world.

IPA combines an 'empathic' with a 'questioning' hermeneutics (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.26). IPA is concerned with understanding the phenomenon from the participant's point of view while simultaneously asking critical questions of the participants' texts. These may include questions relating to whether the participant is 'leaking out' something that was not intended; whether there is a sense that something may be going on that the participant themselves is unaware of; and what the participant is trying to achieve. Smith and Osborn (2015) note that when applied to the interpretation process in IPA, the term 'understanding' is particularly helpful as it is relevant to identifying or empathising with and trying to make sense of. Both aspects of understanding are pursued in this study, with the intention of providing a richer analysis than would otherwise be the case (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The hermeneutic circle is concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, at a series of levels. Hence, to understand any given part, there is a requirement to look at the whole; to understand the whole, you look at the parts. This inherent circularity describes the processes of interpretation and speaks to a dynamic, non-linear style of thinking. The 'part' may be the single word, the single extract, the specific text, the interview, or the single episode, and the 'whole' may be the sentence in which the word is embedded, the complete text, the complete oeuvre, the research project, or the complete life (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

The meaning of the word only becomes clear when seen in the context of the whole sentence. The meaning of the sentence also depends upon the cumulative meanings of the individual words. The way in which a reader interprets a text relates to what they have read previously. In common with other qualitative approaches, analysis in IPA is partly linear, step by

step. However, it is also iterative and involves moving back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data, perhaps thinking of one's relationship to the data as shifting according to the hermeneutic circle (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Idiography

The third key influence upon IPA is idiography, which is concerned with the particular. This contrasts with most psychology, which is 'nomothetic', and concerned with making claims at the group or population level, and with establishing general laws of human behaviour (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith, Harre & Van Langenhove, 1995; Robson, 1993). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) emphasise that the primary value of an IPA study lies in its offer of a detailed, nuanced analysis of *particular* instances of lived experience. The aim is to produce a good case study, with an insightful analysis of data from a sensitively conducted interview, on a topic of considerable importance to the participant. Underpinning this is the authors' belief that only through producing painstakingly detailed cases of this sort can psychological research be produced which matches and does justice to the complexity of human psychology itself (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

The emphasis of IPA on the particular cannot by conflated exactly with a focus on the individual, although a concern for grasping the meaning of something for a given person is key. This is due to the complexity of the phenomenological view of experience. On the one hand, experience is uniquely embodied, situated, and perspectival. On the other, it is a worldly and relational phenomenon; an understanding of the individual as thoroughly embedded and immersed in a world of things and relationships. Hence, this concept of the person is not as typically understood as discrete and contained as an individual (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

IPA analysis

The analytic process of IPA begins with the detailed examination of each case and progresses cautiously to an examination of the similarities and differences across the cases, thereby producing fine-grained accounts of patterns of meanings for participants reflecting on a shared experience. It is suggested that it should be possible to parse the account both for shared themes, and for the distinctive voices and variations on those themes. Detailed analyses of cases of actual life and lived experience remains the priority at this time. In the future, it is anticipated that such case studies may contribute to larger corpuses of cases. This may lead to the ability to consider the essential features of a particular phenomenon (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

In this research, prior to interviewing prospective adopters and foster carers, I wrote a description of my own experiences of children joining their adoptive families. This included journalling and jottings of the key themes that I had identified from my interviews with adoption social workers, adoption panel members and managers that I had undertaken as part of the doctoral studies. Prior to starting my doctoral research, I had spent a decade working as an Independent Reviewing Officer for foster carers. This role had taken me into foster carers' homes and sometimes plunged me straight into intense atmospheres of grief and loss connected to children's departures, planned or unplanned, from the foster carers' lives. My partner interviewed and audio recorded me, following the draft interview schedule that I had written for this study. In this recording I brought to the surface some of my own memories connected with the formation of adoptive families, and some of the responses which I anticipated I may hear from individuals participating in my research. The process of 'bracketing' or putting to one side also included recollecting memories of rupture and change in my personal history.

Finally, I was aware of the stories that friends who are adoptive parents or adoptees had told me of their experiences of meeting their new family members for the first time.

I followed the 7 stages of analysis described by Charlick et al. (2016), adapted from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). These are shown in Figure 3.3, below.

Figure 3.3: The seven stages of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Charlick et al., 2016)

I listened to each of the recordings several times, both with and without the transcript in front of me. I then read the transcript multiple times and made exploratory notes on anything that appeared significant and of interest. I then returned to the transcript afresh and transformed my initial notes and ideas into more specific themes or phrases, calling upon psychological concepts

and abstractions. I was careful to ensure that the connection between the participants' own words and my own interpretations were not lost. Then, I reduced the data by establishing connections between the preliminary themes and clustering them appropriately. I gave these clusters a descriptive label to convey the conceptual nature of the themes therein. I went through each of these stages with each interview, before moving on to the next (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Finally, I produced visual representations of super-ordinate themes for the group and themes that comprise it (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Smith (1996) notes that such representations are the outcome of an iterative process in which the researcher has moved back and forth between the various analytic stages ensuring that the integrity of what the participant said has been preserved as far as possible. Visual representations of the super-ordinate themes and themes are integrated into the relevant text in chapters. Examples of super-ordinate themes and themes together with illustrative quotations from each participant are found in Appendices 19 and 24.

3.5 Reporting

I have considered four quality indicators of good IPA in my approach to writing. These are: 1) constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative; 2) developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account; 3) close analytic readings of participants' words; 4) attendance to convergence and divergence (Nizza et al., 2021, p.371). I have used female names and pronouns for all the adoption manager respondents to protect the anonymity of the minority of males in the sample. I have use quotations to illustrate the themes I identified in the data. Quotations are selected to evidence my interpretation and demonstrate the nuanced way in which respondents considered the issues discussed (Yardley, 2000). All words contained within speech marks are direct quotations from participants' accounts. I identify quotations as follows: I have allocated a

number to each of the five adoption regions. Quotations from adoption social work managers are linked with one of the five regions. Participating adoptive parents and foster carers are from two regions, to which I allocate numbers. To help preserve confidentiality, the numbers I have allocated to the participant groups do not correspond. I refer to adoptive parents and foster carers by their pseudonyms. Prospective adoptive parents were interviewed at three timepoints, which I refer to as T1, T2 and T3.

3.6 Strengths and limitations of the study design

3.6.1 Interviews with adoption social work managers

I used sampling approaches appropriate to the context and characteristics of the participants I recruited. Elite interviewing enabled me to access adoption managers with the status and knowledge to answer my interview questions. Interviews with adoption managers took place online. This was the first time I had interviewed participants via online video calls and presented new challenges. Firstly, I realised how much I usually depend on participants' body language to interpret and contextualise their speech. I also became conscious of how much I rely on my body language to communicate when I want to move on to a different topic or question. The possibility of technical problems was ever-present, and I found even momentary delays in audio and video distracting, as were background sounds such as pets (including my own). Bailenson argues that difficulties related to non-verbal overload characterise what is often referred to as 'Zoom fatigue' (Bailenson, 2021). I am also aware that some data may be less nuanced, than if gathered from in-person interviews. Nonetheless, video-calling may have facilitated these interviews taking place at all. With hindsight, some data (such as the key characteristics of practice) could have been collected by survey, ahead of the interviews with adoption managers.

3.6.2 Family interviews with prospective adopters and foster carers

Purposive sampling allowed me to identify prospective adoptive parents and foster carers with experience in the novel pre-meet practice. The ambitious nature of my approach—recruiting prospective adoptive parents from three or four families and interviewing them at three distinct time points—may have contributed to limitations in response rates. Firstly, the period when prospective adoptive parents were about to meet their child for the first time was likely emotionally charged and anxiety-inducing. Secondly, the prospect of committing to three interviews may have seemed daunting. Thirdly, I recognised that adoption social workers needed to place considerable trust in me to facilitate interviews with the prospective adoptive parents they supported, especially during such a sensitive time.

The practice of pre-meets has been regarded as contentious by some (Cousins, 2011), and individual workers' support for this practice may have varied significantly both between and within adoption regions. This variation may have affected the willingness of social workers to encourage prospective adoptive parents to participate. Lastly, the longitudinal nature of my proposed research further restricted the already small pool of potential participants who could partake within the study's timeframe. My sample of prospective adoptive parents and foster carers was small and came from just two of the five adoption regions in Wales. These were the areas where pre-meets were occurring before my data collection, providing me with rare insight into the phenomenon. However, this numerical and geographic restriction is a limitation to my data.

3.6.3 Member checking

I have shared my findings with and invited comments from participants in each of the three participant groups. For example, in March 2023, I shared tables of the characteristics of

pre-meet practice in each of the adoption regions with managers of that region. In February 2025, I shared tables of group themes and illustrative quotations for each participant together with the related chapter with one adoptive parent and foster carers from four families. As well as reminding them that I would remove any quotation that they did not wish to be included, I invited their comments on the extent to which I had reflected the themes of the shared narratives. They were unanimous in their agreement that my findings accurately reflected the data I had collected. Selected quotations from their comments can be found in Appendix 5.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the methodological framework and research methods I used to collect and analyse data for this study. In the following three chapters, I present the results of this study. Chapter 4 presents an overview of current policy and practice relating to pre-meets in Wales and adoption managers' views of the approach. In Chapter 5 I describe the experiences of prospective adoptive parents and in Chapter 6, those of foster carers who had experiences of pre-meets.

Chapter 4: Adoption social work managers' perspectives on pre-meets

4.1 Introduction

As I described in Chapter 2, references to the practice of pre-meets are sparse in the adoption literature. Early, brief descriptions include those made by Triseliotis and colleagues in their handbook of adoption practice (1997) and research by Lowe et al., (1999). The latter, which reported the views of social workers and adopters, suggests that the practice of pre-meets varied considerably between agencies and between cases. In their large-scale study of matching, Farmer et al. (2010a) found that the practice had become rare. Throughout its history, the practice of 'sightings,' or 'unseen' or 'blind viewings' has been considered *'contentious,'* with some agencies finding them helpful and others believing them to be secretive and dishonest (Cousins, 2011, p.80).

Diversity in approach to the practice of pre-meets is long-standing, therefore. Recent literature suggests that pre-meets may be taking place with increasing frequency in parts of England (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017) and in Scotland (Morrison, 2018). However, I am unaware of any recent research which has sought to explore the nature of the practice of pre-meets, their context and how they have been developed in Wales, including their rationale, or explored perceptions of benefits and difficulties associated with them. These are areas of interest that will be addressed in this chapter. Drawing upon five in-depth interviews with eleven adoption social work managers, I seek to explore the current role of pre-meets in relation to the formation of newly adoptive families in Wales.

4.2 Chapter aims

The four key questions this chapter aims to address are:

1. What is the current practice in Wales relating to pre-meets and how is it developing?

2. What are the underlying theories, contexts and rationales that relate to the current practice?

3. What are the perceived benefits associated with pre-meets?

4. What are the difficulties associated with pre-meets?

I address the first two of these questions in Part 1 of this chapter, and questions 3 and 4 in Part 2.

4.3 Method

I was interested in the views and experiences of adoption social work managers in relation to pre-meets. I used thematic analysis in the design of the study and analysis of data. My approaches to methodologies in this thesis are described fully in Chapter 3.

4.3.1 The interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with adoption managers between December 2021 and March 2022. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. All participants were given the option of an in-person, telephone, or on-line interview. Most participants were working from home at this time, due to the social distancing restrictions enforced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and all opted to be interviewed on-line. One interview was conducted in each of the five regions. In two regions, two participants took part in an interview together; in two other regions, three managers participated; in the other region, a single participant was interviewed. In total, I interviewed 11 participants in the five Welsh regions. The interview schedule, study information sheet and consent form can be found in Appendices 6, 7 and 8.

4.3.2 Characteristics of the sample

The sample comprised eleven participants, including three Regional Adoption Managers. All the participants had management responsibilities and at least one manager with responsibility for family finding activities was interviewed from each region. All participants had at least 10 years' experience of working within adoption services. Ten of the eleven participants were women. Participants were not asked whether they had any personal experience of adoption, but two managers in the sample disclosed that they were adoptive parents. I had not met any of the participants prior to their interview or corresponded with them prior to this study. Participants' levels of experience and involvement in the practice of pre-meets were diverse. Two of the three Regional Adoption Managers who were interviewed stated at the outset of the interview that the family finding manager (also interviewed) was responsible for the practice of pre-meets in that region and would be the main contributor to the interview.

4.3.3 Analysis

Careful analysis of the transcripts revealed that there were no significant differences of opinion expressed between participants from a region. I decided to take a flexible approach to adherence to the interview schedule, responsive to the participants' developing accounts of their practice rather than sticking strictly to a pre-determined interview guide. This approach resulted in messy, rich, situated data, suited to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I have included a chart template developed during the analysis in Appendix 11 and an example of the completed template in Appendix 12).

4.4 Part 1: Findings – Adoption social work managers' views of the nature of the current practice of pre-meets and their underlying contexts and rationales

I identified three key themes in relation to participants' views and experiences of the nature of pre-meets, and their underlying contexts and rationales, which are shown in Figure 4.1, together with their themes.

Figure 4.1: Adoption managers. Part 1: Key themes and sub-themes

Key theme	Sub-theme
1. Part of a landscape of change	• The impact of good practice guidance and research • Adopter-led developments • Providing a multi-perspective view of a child • Videos and virtual contact • Regional differences
2. A varied and evolving practice	• Variations in practice across the Regions • Regions developing new practice • Regions considering new practice
3. Implementing and managing change	• Planning on a case-by-case basis • Creating a supportive culture • Developing a whole service approach • Involving foster carers • A desire for more guidance in respect to pre-meets

4.4.1 Theme 1: Part of a landscape of change

In this theme I explore how adoption social work managers across the adoption regions described significant developments related to the linking, matching and transitions processes and the formation of newly adoptive families. These have taken place since the formation of the National Adoption Service in 2014 and provide context in which the practice of pre-meets has developed and is developing.

The impact of good practice guidance and research

Managers in each of the adoption regions made frequent reference to the *Getting to Know You* stage of the *Transitions and Early Support* Guide published by the National Adoption Service and the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru in 2020. The focus of the Guide on supporting relationships in children's transitions from living with their foster carer to moving in with their adoptive families had been pivotal in both reflecting and shaping practice changes and thinking across the sector. Instigating changes informed by the guidance and related research, it was striking that managers were often critical of their own past practice, some of which they found problematic and perplexing. For example, some now considered removing a child from their foster carer to live with a new, unknown family within days of first meeting to have been misguided, or even harmful. *'Immoral,' 'bizarre,' 'outdated,' 'pre-historic'* and *'too risk averse'* were emotive words they used to reveal their strength of feeling about past practice, aspects of which they felt had ignored the value of relationships, embedded in all good social work practice.

Expressions of empathy towards foster carers and references to the grief they experience when a child leaves them were common. In every region, managers referred to losses experienced by children when they moved in with their new family, and their desire to develop practice which

recognised these losses. In the following extract, a manager emphasises the impact on a child of their removal from, and subsequent lack of contact with, the foster carer whom they describe, tellingly, as the child's 'parent':

> *Not so long ago, … the child move[d] possessions from foster placement into adoptive placement and then, foster carer, 'right [raised voice] DO NOT see the child now for a good six months, because this child now needs to form a secure attachment to the adoptive parent.' Where …we're so fully informed now by research, by training you know, those children grieved for that parent who cared for them …. We [raised voice] REMOVED that secure person from his life, and then expected them to feel secure with a new person who they had potentially met for 7-10 days, possibly 14 days and feel safe and secure in a completely new environment, new people, new smells, no support network. And we thought that that was ok!* (Manager, Region 2).

Reflecting on her own changes in thinking around children's transitions to living with their adoptive families, another manager described how she felt there had been a disconnect between the significance she had afforded to relationships in her professional life contrasted with that of her own family life:

> *The more time you reflect on it, the crazier it seems that we … just used to move children in with a family that none of them had ever met before. You wouldn't do that with anyone else in your life, ever* (Manager, Region 4).

Adopter-led developments

Managers described the ways in which adoptive parents could play a more active role in identifying potential links and matches with children than had been possible in the past. For example, the Adoption Register Wales database enabled approved adoptive parents to access

profiles of children waiting for adoption. These profiles include photographs and moving images of children, which professionals had previously often chosen to withhold until very late on in the matching process, in case a prospective adoptive parent was unduly influenced by a child's appearance.

In addition to the Adoption Register Wales database, the introduction of Adoption Activity Days marked a significant shift in thinking and practice. These events helped normalise the possibility of children and their prospective families meeting before a match was formally approved. Initially met with caution, the days were ultimately viewed positively and were believed to have facilitated some successful matches that might not have occurred otherwise. Perhaps because of the influence of Adoption Activity Days, some managers observed that requests for a pre-meet sometimes came directly from prospective adoptive parents themselves.

Providing a multi-perspective view of the child

Traditionally, information about a child shared with their prospective adoptive parent during the matching process relied on written reports, such as the CAR B, alongside verbal information provided by social workers. Managers reflected that children's reports were written for court purposes and for those of permanency planning. Inevitably, with detailed inclusion of children's histories, contents could make difficult reading. Children's personalities and their carers' experiences of what it was like to provide their day-to-day care could become lost. Similarly, verbal reports provided by social workers may have been lacking, particularly if the child was not well-known to the worker, due to staff changes, for example.

Whilst children's written records and conversations with their social workers remain central to the matching process, significant changes in the timing and material ways in which information about children is now shared with their prospective parents were reported across the

five regions. A conscious shift in approach has been taken to enable prospective adoptive parents to increasingly access a more rounded and multi-perspective view of their would-be child. Photographs and videos of children are shared more consistently and earlier on in the matching process compared with just a few years ago, before the pandemic. Participants welcomed this development, noting that visual images provided powerful information about a child which could not be conveyed through the written or spoken word.

Good practice guidance on children's transitions to adoption emphasises the importance of valuing foster carers as the experts in a child's care (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.). It promotes the development of a positive relationship between a child's foster carer and their prospective adoptive parent at an earlier stage than in the past when it had often been actively discouraged. In this context, some managers described encouraging foster carers to be directly involved in sharing information about a child with their prospective adoptive parents. Consequently, in these regions, foster carers were increasingly invited to take part in open discussions and have informal contact with a child's prospective adoptive parents before a match had been formally approved, although the timing, nature and frequency of informal contact and meetings, particularly in person, varied between regions. Such direct contact between a child's foster carer and their prospective adoptive parent/s was greatly valued by managers. One commented that foster carers were able to bring the child into focus, by sharing information about the child's personality, favourite toys and activities that brought them joy, for example. This provided a helpful balance with written information, which managers indicated could sometimes be very focused on a child's identified needs. Individual meetings with medical advisors were also highlighted as a significant source of information about a child and their needs. Such meetings gave prospective adoptive parents the

opportunity to discuss a child's current and potential medical and developmental needs. Training programmes for both staff and adoptive parents were reported to have included more of a focus on developmental trauma than they had done in the past and trauma-informed approaches such as Understanding the Child Days and trauma/ nurture timelines had been introduced in some regions. A wide range of people contributed to Understanding the Child Days, including nursery workers, health visitors and contact supervisors; individuals who knew the child and could describe their experiences of that child in a range of contexts, relationships, and dynamics. The timing of Understanding the Child Days varied between and sometimes within regions, with some taking place just before formal approval of a match, and some just after. They were widely considered to be a beneficial development. Managers also described a growing emphasis on the impact of developmental trauma on children in the preparation and training of prospective adoptive parents, a move they had welcomed.

Videos and virtual contact

Managers described how videos and virtual contact during the pre-placement phase, before formal introductions began, were integrated into the *'Getting to know you'* stage outlined in the good practice guidance (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.). The primary aim of these tools was to develop familiarity and connection between the child and their prospective adoptive parents, while also helping to develop a relationship between the foster carer and adoptive parent. This approach supported a more gradual transition for children as they moved into their adoptive family. Although adoption teams had already been actively promoting the use of technologies for these purposes, the pandemic had further normalised and accelerated their adoption.

Children's foster carers and their prospective adoptive parents chatted with one another on-line, prior to, or soon after meeting in person, and children and their prospective adoptive parents also interacted online. Sometimes, adults liaised to plan on-line activities, such as parallel play using play dough, or hide and seek. At other times, they chatted on-line, whilst the child played in the background. The prospective adoptive parent could then see the child engaged in everyday activities, such as eating or playing. Virtual contact was generally planned to take place after a match had been formally approved. However, one instance was given in which a child had arrived home unexpectedly early and found her foster carers and prospective parents chatting on-line. Naturally inquisitive, the child had decided to say 'hello' to her foster carer's 'friends.' This interaction had delighted the adoptive parent and served to confirm in her mind that the match was right.

Plans involving virtual contact were made according to the child's individual needs and the circumstances of the match. In one region, if introductions were delayed, for example due to a late appeal to the courts by a child's birth parents, virtual contact could be extended over a period of weeks, or longer, sometimes alongside several 'bump-into' type meetings. Developments in the use of videos and virtual contact had been widely welcomed and were considered powerful tools that could help familiarisation and relationship-building between children, foster carers, and prospective adoptive parents.

Sharing photographs of prospective adoptive parents with a child during the pre-placement phase was described as a long-standing practice, primarily facilitated by the child's foster carer. However, in some regions, families also shared videos of themselves shortly before meeting their child for the first time. This practice, enabled by smartphones and apps such as

WhatsApp, pre-dated the pandemic but had increasingly evolved into a more common, dynamic, and reciprocal activity.

Regional differences

Although managers across all the regions discussed the ways in which information about children is shared with their prospective adoptive parents have developed in recent years, interviews revealed significant inconsistencies as practice continues to develop. For example, the quality, timing, and frequency with which images of children were made available for a child's prospective adoptive parents remain variable, dependent on the individual worker or foster carer. A minority of social workers still refused to share photographs of children until very late in the matching process. Consideration was being given in one region to the use of professional services to provide videos of children, particularly those described as 'harder to place,' due to the variable nature of videos otherwise available.

Examples were given of the impact of resource issues on how information was shared about a child. For example, some regions reported being unable to hold an Understanding the Child Day or develop trauma/nurture timelines for children, due to capacity issues. In one region where trauma/nurture timelines were used for older children or those with particularly complex histories, the manager wanted to introduce them for all children. This, she felt, would help adoptive parents understand the histories of their child's birth families and epigenetic factors that could affect the child.

4.4.2 Theme 2: A varied and evolving practice

In this theme I explore the current practice of pre-meets in Wales and highlight the diversity within it, as well as how current practice is evolving.

Variations in practice

As Figure 4.2 shows, variations in practice cross a range of domains, including the terminology used to describe pre-meets; the frequency with which they take place; the rationale behind them and the position and role of individuals involved. Variations also include whether a child is told the identity, or is aware of the presence of, their prospective adoptive parents. A more detailed version of the Table can be found in Appendix 12.

Figure 4.2: Table showing the range of key characteristics of the current practice of pre-meets across the five Welsh regions (abridged version)

Characteristic	Notes
Terminology	R1: 'Sighting' R2: 'Bump-into' or 'bump-in' meeting R3: 'Bump-into meeting' or (less frequently) 'chemistry meets, 'pre-meets' R4: 'Chemistry meets' or 'pre-meets' R5: Not applicable
Frequency of use	R1: Every match R2: Working towards a 'bump-into' for every match, either as part of the matching or transitions process R3: Approximately 2/3 of all matches, usually during the matching process. Less often, a similar meeting may take place after formal approval of the match R4: 'Occasional' (2022); approx. 1 in 10 matches (2023) R5: Never
Who instigates a pre-meet?	R1: Adoption/ family finding team R2: Adoption/family finding team, usually. Sometimes, prospective adoptive parents themselves R3: Adoption/family finding team R4: Other agencies and/or prospective adoptive parents (2022); predominantly the child's social worker (2023) R5: Not applicable

When was current practice introduced?	R1: Increasingly established over the last 5 years (part of occasional practice before that)
	R2: 2021
	R3: 2020
	R4: Occasional pre-meets had taken place for 10+ years (2022). They are now part of a range of options to explore and strengthen matches for children (2023)
	R5: Not applicable
Professionals who attend a pre-meet	R1: Family finding social worker, with childcare social workers actively encouraged to attend, primarily to help enforce boundaries are in place
	R2: Family finding social worker is usually in the vicinity, at a discrete distance, to offer support if needed
	R3: Family finding social worker (from a discrete distance)
	R4: Social worker from either the adoption or childcare team, by negotiation
	R5: Not applicable
Primary rationale(s)	R1: Help adoptive parents gain a better understanding of the child and their needs, bring the child 'alive'
	R2: Building and strengthening relationships; help foster carer communicate to the child that their prospective adoptive parents are 'safe' people
	R3: As R2
	R4: Varied rationale depending on match and the needs of the child
	R5: Not applicable
What happens at a pre-meet?	R1: Prospective adoptive parents observe a child with their foster carers from a distance in a public place (interaction is not intended but sometimes takes place)
	R2: Prospective adoptive parents 'bump-into' foster carer and child in a public place such as a park
	R3: As R2
	R4: Takes place in a neutral place e.g. a park. Interaction between child and prospective parent may or may not take place. This is agreed in advance
	R5: Not applicable

Are children told the identity of their prospective adoptive parents?	R1: No
	R2: Children are introduced to their prospective parents by their first names, as 'friends' of the foster carers
	R3: Children may be told the identity of their adoptive parents, depending on their age and stage
	R4: Children are always aware of the presence of their adoptive parents but are never told their identity before a match is formally approved
	R5: Not applicable

The table includes updates to practice provided by a manager in Region 4 (2023).

Regions developing new practice

Managers in four regions stated that no, or very few, pre-meets had taken place in their areas until the past few years. When pre-meets had occurred, they had often been referred to as 'blind sightings' or 'chemistry meets' and were typically held in situations where greater certainty about a match was desired. These meetings generally involved 'older' children, sibling groups, or children with specific medical, emotional, or behavioural challenges. Concerns about allowing children and their prospective adoptive parents to meet before formal approval of a match contributed to a somewhat clandestine feel around this minority practice. In such cases, children were passive participants, often unaware of their prospective adoptive parents' presence. One manager recalled:

> *Scenarios where adoptive parents ... would see the children at a distance ... it was done in very few cases because ... it was mainly older children, and maybe children with very complex needs. ... there was no interaction. I remember doing some scenarios where you'd have adoptive parents looking through the window of the school, across a yard—those type of scenarios* (Manager, Region 2).

Managers in Regions 2 and 3 reported recent, significant changes in the practice of pre-meets, accompanied by a shift in terminology, from 'blind sightings' and 'chemistry meets' to 'bump-ins' or 'bump-into' meetings. In Region 3, these changes had occurred over the previous two years, while in Region 2, they had been introduced within the previous three months. The models of pre-meets in these regions, described by a manager as *'very new and evolving,'* resembled the 'bump-into' meetings developed in Bradford, as detailed in Chapter 2. Generally, they were intended to enable the child to meet their prospective adoptive parent/s in a low-key way, without the pressure of anticipating meeting their adopter/s informal introductions.

In Region 2, bump-into meetings were planned to occur either shortly before or soon after a match was formally approved, whereas in Region 3, they almost always took place before formal approval. These meetings were often conceptualised as bridging the late stages of the matching process with the early stages of a child's transition to living with their adoptive family. Regardless of timing, they were framed within the *Getting to Know You* stage of the practice guidance, *Transitions and Early Support*, and focused on gradually building relationships within adoptive families. This development was introduced alongside other practice changes embedded in the new good practice guidance on children's transitions, which were also evident in the other three regions, as discussed in Theme 1. In these two regions, pre-meets were increasingly instigated by the adoption team. In Region 3, the team aimed to include a bump-into meeting in every match and viewed these meetings as integral to the matching process, provided that 'matching is a little bit fluid,' as one manager explained. Occasionally, bump-into meetings occurred after a match had been approved. Although not technically a pre-meet, such meetings were regarded similarly to bump-into meetings held prior to formal approval. In Region 2, the adoption team planned bump-into meetings for children either shortly before or just after formal

approval of a match. The desire for a more gradual transition into adoptive families was the driving force behind the development of bump-into meetings, as one manager explained:

> *We wanted the child* [to have] *a much more gradual introduction to those adoptive parents than the traditional 'we hit everything after Panel.' And that's where it started. So, Panel, I think, came round to accepting there was a good purpose for that* (Manager, Region 2).

Managers in Regions 2 and 3 encouraged the presence of professionals at pre-meets to be minimised, as they considered this unconducive to enabling relaxed, unselfconscious interactions between foster carers, prospective adoptive parents, and children to take place. Whilst an adoption social worker could keep a discrete distance, if a child's social worker was present, they would be known by the child, and this was thought to impact unhelpfully on the child's behaviour.

Regions considering practice change

Managers in Regions 4 and 5 referred to the Practice Note about pre-meets that had been published by CoramBAAF in 2017 (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). They had also been sent information about 'bump-into' meetings by other agencies in England and were aware that practice was developing elsewhere. In these regions, managers reported that other agencies sometimes requested a pre-meet. One manager said that she had been told that in some parts of the United Kingdom, prospective adoptive parents were being prepared and trained to take part in a pre-meet. She indicated that her team sometimes felt required to justify why they were unwilling to hold a pre-meet for all matches, including those with infants:

There was one adoption agency in England, that said they do them as 'standard' now.

And more 'give us the reasons why not if you don't want to … go ahead with it'

(Manager, Region 4).

Managers in these regions stated that they may consider significant changes to their practice of pre-meets, but felt they needed more information and time to consider any possible developments. In Region 4, the manager suggested that if there was evidence that the more widespread introduction of pre-meets could help with building early attachment, involving a prospective adoptive parent *'claiming and bonding'* with their child, this could be a primary motivation to extend the practice in her region.

In Region 5, where pre-meets do not currently take place at all, managers appeared wary of the practice and had rejected all requests from other agencies to organise them. However, late in the interview they indicated, cautiously, that they would welcome a practice rooted in a more *'natural'* approach to developing connection between children and their prospective parents. They anticipated that a 'low key' approach to a first meeting could help reduce children's anxieties, as one manager explained:

I think that's the better way, … that that's a more natural, normal - you know? Yeah,

having people coming in and then eventually saying, you know, 'Oh gosh, they've met you

and … they actually would like to be your Mummy or your Mummy or Daddy or Daddy

or Mummies or whatever. Yeah. I certainly wouldn't be opposed to something like that

happening (Manager, Region 5).

Although written information shared before the interview and verbal information at the start of interviews emphasised that the research concerned meetings which took place before formal approval of the match, with hindsight it cannot be ascertained with certainty whether, in the

quotation above, the manager referred to first meetings before or after a match had been formally approved at an adoption panel.

In Region 1, the practice of pre-meets had evolved over the last decade, during which time they had become standard for every match. Here, no interaction between the child and their prospective adoptive parents was planned, and it was intended that the child was unaware of the presence of their prospective parents. Whilst managers had instigated practice changes to support a more gradual approach to building relationships, the region's practice of pre-meets had not developed in this context. Their primary rationale appeared to be to develop prospective adoptive parents' understanding of their would-be children and build their confidence in a match before introductions started.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Implementing and managing change

In this theme I explore the experiences of managers in implementing and managing change in relation to pre-meets, particularly those in Regions 2 and 3, in which significant changes had been instigated during the previous two years. In these regions, managers described adoption and childcare workers having embraced changes in practice which involved 'bump-into' meetings.

A case-by-case approach

Managers in the four regions where pre-meets currently take place described the need for careful, case-by-case, child-led planning for each pre-meet. Planning considered factors such as the child's age and stage of development. In at least one region, any therapist supporting the child worked alongside social workers to plan the pre-meet. While pre-meets usually occurred in public spaces, such as parks or soft-play centres, one example was given of a pre-meet held in a foster carer's home, as it was considered the environment where the child would feel most

comfortable. Some pre-meets lasted as little as 15 minutes, if that was deemed all the child could manage. Interactions, where they occurred, were intended to be child-led and naturalistic. For instance, they might involve a prospective adoptive parent kicking a ball towards the child or pushing them on a swing. In some cases, the foster carer had a loose plan in mind for these interactions before the pre-meet took place.

In Region 3, one manager described the success of each pre-meet as contingent upon *'the willingness, the vision of all … involved to see the benefit of it.'* For this reason, the purpose and mechanics of each pre-meet needed to be clearly understood by all adult participants beforehand. The manager noted that a pre-meet could become uncomfortable if any individual did not agree with the process. Often, individual discussions with foster carers and social workers were required to address key aspects of the pre-meet. Issues needing resolution in advance included: who would attend, what the child would be told, the duration of the meeting, whether and how the adoptive parent and child would interact, and whether (and how) the adoptive parents would be introduced to the child.

Creating a supportive culture

Managers across the regions acknowledged that historical anxieties existed around introducing children and their prospective adoptive parents during the matching process. Indeed, the word 'anxiety' used in the context of pre-meets peppered many interviews and often related to ethical concerns which will be discussed in Part 2. Implementing change required commitment and belief, and in the two regions that had made the most significant changes to the practice of pre-meets, the enthusiasm and passion of managers was palpable. These managers also reflected on how their own position and understanding of the practice had changed. The extract below reveals one manager's past fears of the possibility of adoptive parents being unduly drawn to a

child because of their physical appearance and subsequently matched with a child for the wrong

reasons. Consequently, she had been resistant to the idea of pre-meets in the past, a position she

now considered 'naïve:'

> *Prior to this … blind viewings, I very much would enquire of staff, 'you tell me why you*
>
> *need it.' And there's always a worry from my naïve perspective, really, at that point … I*
>
> *didn't want an adoptive parent to fall in love with the aesthetic qualities of a child …*
>
> *without really understanding the child's needs* (Manager, Region 2).

The reflections of highly experienced managers on their own journey of change were integral to

developing the practice of pre-meets in their team and beyond. Managers implementing, or

considering implementing, practice change commonly reflected Secure Base principles in their

descriptions of their approach to managing their team (Biggart, Ward, Cook & Schofield, 2017).

They were open and accepting of others' viewpoints and observed the need to respect

practitioners' and foster carers' different belief systems, whilst simultaneously developing

practice as a team. They indicated that informal, individual conversations were sometimes

needed to help unpick any concerns that colleagues, including foster carers, might have about

pre-meets. Support, reassurance, empathy, and clear guidance with individuals during the

planning stages and certainly before a pre-meet took place had helped facilitate change, as

revealed in the following extract:

> *When you do something for 10 years one way, you know it like the back of your hand.*
>
> *You can do it in your sleep. When I'm telling you then … change, do this, do… it's like*
>
> *'oooh, what exactly do I need to do now?' so it's more - not a lack of acceptance or want*
>
> *to change, it's more about thinking 'am I doing this right?'* (Manager, Region 2).

In Region 4, where pre-meets were infrequent, the manager commented that the more regular use of pre-meets would significantly challenge some '*traditional thinking*' about '*what should and should not happen in adoption.*' She acknowledged that there would be challenges in implementing any potential change, but remained focused on the common values shared by professionals, rather than their differences:

> *It always comes back to that a genuine feeling I think of all practitioners, whether it's the childcare practitioner, or whether it's the adoption practitioner, of that 'protecting the child' bit* (Manager, Region 4).

A whole service approach

Participants who had either initiated or were considering initiating significant practice changes in their region highlighted the importance of developing a shared understanding of the value, purpose, and mechanics of holding pre-meets at an organisational level, across the entire adoption service and beyond. While the family finding teams primarily generated ideas about matching and pre-meets, input from assessment and adoption support teams was also incorporated into the new practices. Rather than implementing these practices wholesale from the outset, managers described adopting a cautious, case-by-case approach. This allowed lessons learned from the team's experiences to be integrated into ongoing developments.

Managers noted that 'buy in' from children's social workers was essential. As local authorities hold Parental Responsibility for children placed for adoption, ultimately, a child's social worker could veto a decision to hold a pre-meet. In one region, a manager commented that children's social workers were generally happy to accept any changes proposed by the adoption team, acknowledging their expertise and experience in this area. Not all children's social workers had

accepted the practice of pre-meets, however, and managers identified differences both within and across local authority teams.

Managers felt difficulties had been compounded, in some instances, by the act of regionalisation of the adoption teams. For example, the number of different local authorities that each region worked with had resulted in a greater variation in practice between teams and individual social workers experienced by each region. Managers in rural regions reported that the distances travelled by the adoption team had created an additional challenge. Also, individual foster carers were less known to the adoption team than they had been in the past. In the summer of 2021, Region 3 had delivered workshops for children's social workers on 'more modern ways' of approaching matching, including the use of pre-meets. These had emphasised the need to develop an early connection between a prospective adoptive parent and their child, prior to introductions starting. The family finding team were in the process of developing guidance specifically on their practice of pre-meets for multiple interested parties, including children's social workers.

While many workers had welcomed changes in practice where they had taken place, long-standing professionals were more likely to be resistant to or question change. Additionally, those workers who were more risk averse (reluctant to share photographs of children and adoptive parents until late on in the matching process, for example) were also less likely than others to agree to a pre-meet. Managers were sometimes unsure why a particular childcare social worker had been unwilling for a pre-meet to take place. One felt that an attitude of 'adoptive parents should be grateful to have a child at all' expressed by a minority of children's social workers was sometimes present and a barrier to co-operative working. Managers underlined the importance of involving Adoption Panel members, Agency Decision Makers, and members of

the local Partnership Board in any practice change relating to pre-meets. One manager described how Panel members had initially been guarded about pre-meets, judging them to pre-empt the Panel's decision about a match, but had since embraced them.

Involving foster carers

In the two regions where managers had recently instigated a 'bump-into' model of pre-meets, adoption managers emphasised the importance of both foster carers and their supervising social workers understanding the rationale behind pre-meets, and how they would work. One of these regions had provided written guidelines on pre-meets specifically for foster carers. Whilst most foster carers had embraced practice changes around children's transitions in general and pre-meets, some, particularly those who had fostered for many decades, had struggled significantly with the change. Personalities, tensions, preconceptions, and differences of approach could cause significant difficulties, as one frustrated manager explained:

> *They couldn't see it was the right thing to be doing, they struggled with the notion of meeting [the adopter] and the relationship-building before the children* [met the adopter] [… they had their] *own preconceived idea of what should work, so that can sometimes be a challenge* (Manager, Region 2).

One manager noted that some foster carers held strong beliefs that children would be *'fine'* without direct work being undertaken in preparation for their move to their adoptive family, echoing concerns made by Boswell and Cudmore (2014; 2017). However, in a change that she attributed to the *Transitions and Early Support* guidance, she noted that both adoption social workers and foster carers were more likely than in the past to highlight when they felt a child had not been adequately prepared for adoption.

Whilst significant progress in supporting positive relationships between a child's foster carer and their prospective adoptive parent had been made, managers across the regions commented that this remained an area of development. Comments reflected empathy towards foster carers and echoed recent research about the disenfranchised grief often experienced by foster carers when a child leaves their family (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019; Hebert, Kulkin & McLean, 2013). It was suggested that pre-meets may help foster carers by easing them, as well as the child, into the child's transition to their new parents' care. Managers in two regions indicated that Lead Foster Carers were well-positioned to offer support for other foster carers through the challenges of the transition process.

A desire for more guidance in respect to pre-meets

Whilst teams in regions 2 and 3 had begun developing their own protocols around pre-meets, managers across all five regions expressed a desire for further discussions, and potentially the establishment of a framework and guidance for the adoption sector. In Region 1, where pre-meets have been widely practiced for several years, managers highlighted that additional guidance on specific aspects of pre-meets would be welcome. Their main concerns centered on interactions between children and their prospective parents during pre-meets, as well as the involvement of other children in the adoptive family.

The following extract is from a manager in a region where pre-meets occur infrequently. It reflects their belief that the practice is on the brink of further change and would benefit from national-level attention:

We have regular discussions about these issues as a team ... I think could we do with a policy on it as an agency, probably - as to what our position is. ... it would be helpful if it's an all-Wales thing because ... NAS is our central governance. ... And certainly, when

we look at placing children between regions, if everybody's got the same sort of policies

in place about when they consider these happening [it could assist us to change our

thinking and practice]. At the moment, [our] *position is 'they don't happen'* (Manager,

Region 4).

In private correspondence in March 2023, this manager communicated that practice had shifted,

with pre-meets occurring more regularly than they had been at the time of the interview.

4.5 Summary

In Part 1, I have identified three key themes: 1) pre-meets as part of a landscape of

change; 2) as a varied and evolving practice and 3) issues relating to implementing and

managing change.

Where practice is new and evolving, this was occurring within wider practice changes.

These include a more gradual approach to building relationships, as outlined in the *Getting to*

Know You stage of the good practice guidance launched in 2020 by the National Adoption

Service and the Association for Fostering and Adoption, Cymru, *Transitions and Early Support.*

Related changes also include the normalising of children and prospective adoptive parents

meeting during matching, through the introduction of Adoption Activity Days, and the sharing of

a greater range of information about a child from more diverse sources, through the introduction

of Understanding the Child Days, for example.

There are significant differences in the practice of pre-meets between the five adoption

regions in Wales. At the time of the interviews, two regions had implemented recent, significant

change; two regions were considering change, and one region had an established practice.

Significant differences between practice in the regions crossed a range of domains. This included

terminology used to describe pre-meets, what happened at a pre-meet and the frequency with

which a meeting took place. Pre-meets may traverse conceptualisation as either the matching or transitions process and involve case-by-case, child-led planning of each pre-meet.

Managers regard the success of each pre-meet as dependent on the full engagement and cooperation of all participants. Some view the establishment of a whole-service approach—encompassing foster carers, their supervising social workers, children's social workers, agency decision-makers, and adoption panel members—as a vital prerequisite for implementing practice changes in this area. They emphasise the importance of nurturing a supportive and inclusive culture, which allows individuals to voice any concerns or anxieties they may have. By creating this environment, it is hoped that a shared understanding of the mechanics, purpose, and value of pre-meets can be cultivated within the adoption sector and beyond. Additionally, there is a recognised need for greater discussion, clearer guidance, and possibly a national framework to facilitate these changes effectively.

In Part 2, I explore adoption social work managers' views of perceived benefits and difficulties associated with pre-meets.

4.6 Part 2: Findings - Adoption social work managers' perceptions of benefits and difficulties associated with pre-meets

As I described in Part 1 of this study, following scoping interviews and a review of the relevant academic and grey literature, I identified five key questions which had not previously been explored. Drawing upon data from 5 interviews conducted with 11 adoption social work managers across five adoption regions in Wales, in Part 1 I addressed two questions:

1. What is the current practice in Wales relating to pre-meets and how is it developing?

2. What are the underlying theories, contexts and rationales that relate to the current practice?

In Part 2, using the same interview data, I address the remaining questions:

3. What are the perceived benefits associated with pre-meets?

4. What are the difficulties associated with pre-meets?

I identified three key themes in relation to managers' views and experiences of the benefits and challenges associated with the practice of pre-meets. Together with their sub-themes, these are shown in Figure 4.3 below:

Figure 4.3: Adoption managers. Part 2: Key themes and sub-themes

Key theme	Sub-theme
1. Building relationships and connection	• A naturalistic and low-key approach to building connection • Supporting an adoptive parent's psychological adjustment to parenting their child
2. Building confidence in a match	• Developing an adoptive parent's understanding of their child • Consolidating an adoptive parent's feelings about a match; testing their response • Providing an early opportunity to raise any concerns or for the match to 'go wrong'
3. Ethical and other concerns	• The need for boundaries • Children's preparation for pre-meets • Unease about adoptive parents 'viewing' children

	• The child's future understanding of how they joined their adoptive family

4.6.1 Theme 1: Building relationships and connection

In this theme I explore how adoption managers indicated that pre-meets could help children and their prospective adoptive parents build relationships and connection.

A naturalistic and low-key approach to building connection

As I described in Part 1, in Regions 2 and 3, the emergent practice of first meetings between prospective adoptive parents and their would-be children comprised 'bump-into' meetings. The primary intention behind such meetings was to help build relationships, and they were planned to create opportunities for interactions between children (including infants) and their prospective parents in a manner which was 'low key.' However, in Regions 4 and 5, where pre-meets took place rarely or not at all at the time of the interviews, managers also felt that building connection was, or could be, a key benefit of holding a pre-meet.

Managers in Regions 2 and 3 observed that, as planned, 'bump-into' meetings enabled first meetings between children and their prospective adoptive parents to take place without the pressure of a more formal first meeting. Aided by their neutral setting, such as a park, the seed of a relationship between a child and their prospective adoptive parents could be planted. Prospective adoptive parents and children could engage in a more naturalistic, low-key way than would be possible during a first meeting which was part of formal introductions, in the foster carer's home. This could enable prospective adoptive parents to develop a deeper understanding of their child's personality before starting introductions.

Managers spoke about the importance of reducing anxieties prior to introductions starting, to help facilitate relationships starting to build. 'Bump-into' meetings gave children the

opportunity to see their foster carer and prospective parent talking and behaving 'naturally' with each other, in a public place. This helped the foster carer to convey to the child that their adoptive parents were safe people who, when introductions started, were welcome in her home, with the intention of reducing the child's anxiety at the start of introductions.

Reducing adoptive parents' and foster carers' anxieties prior to introductions starting was considered both a key aim and benefit of the 'bump-into' model of pre-meets. One manager stated that in the past, anxieties could be *'through the roof'* at the start of introductions, at which the adoptive parents, foster carers and child had often met for the first time on the same day. Preparations for 'bump-into' meetings enabled foster carers and prospective parents to feel more at ease with one another, prior to the intense period of introductions. In the planning of and taking part in pre-meets, prospective parents and foster carers had been able to tentatively prepare themselves to undertake parenting tasks together. Even simple tasks, such as liaising about who would bring snacks to the pre-meet, were opportunities to start to build connection and trust. Together with other recent practice aimed at building relationships prior to introductions, managers in Regions 2 and 3 thought that 'bump-into' meetings had played an important role in the success of children's transitions to living with their adoptive families.

Building connection was also considered a benefit associated with pre-meets by managers in Region 1. Although the model used here did not involve children and their prospective parents interacting, managers felt that being able to see the child with their foster carer at an early stage was helpful in building the adoptive parent/foster carer relationship.

Supporting a prospective adoptive parent's psychological adjustment to parenting their child

Most managers suggested that pre-meets helped, or could help, develop a prospective parent's feelings of connection with their child. This early, tentative connection was thought to sometimes start when a prospective parent had read basic information about a child. It could be developed further through the sharing of photographs and videos, at which time prospective parents often looked for physical similarities between their family and the child. However, some managers felt that this process of 'ownership' or 'claiming' could be greatly enhanced once a prospective parent and child had met in person, and could visualise them, enabling psychological adjustment to parenting that child to start earlier than would otherwise have happened, as a manager from Region 4 explained:

> *Seeing the child I think, is much easier for people to imagine themselves, living with that child, having that child in their life, parenting that child* (Manager, Region 4).

Similarly, a manager from Region 2 emphasised how prospective adoptive parents' anxieties could be heightened, if they had not met their child, prior to formal approval of their match:

> *'I just can't picture them in my head' 'what if they're nothing like I envisage?'* (Manager, Region 2).

How a child walked or looked at a toy; how they climbed a slide, or what they smelt like were all potential factors which could develop prospective parents' insights into a child and their needs. This could help them imagine parenting this child: the physicality of the child, hugging them, having them in their life, sharing their home and the intimacies of family life with them. Being able to visualise their would-be child was therefore thought to help ease prospective adopters' adjustment to parenting that child, to make an emotional connection with them and to build resilience in their family, as illustrated in the following quotation:

[We need] *adopters who … have made an emotional connection, to this child being part of their family. And I think that's where the chemistry meets are actually really helpful, because once they've met that child in person they become even more cemented into them that 'this is going to be my child' and …' I am in this now.' … That will see you through an awful lot.* (Manager, Region 3).

In Region 1, where prospective parents only saw their child from a distance, a manager suggested that pre-meets gave professionals a valuable opportunity to help manage adoptive parents' expectations about meeting their child for the first time. She noted that often, adopters felt there should be a moment when they just 'clicked' with their child, but that the reality was about starting to establish a relationship:

Love will come eventually. You're not going to look at them and think 'that's my son or my daughter' (Manager, Region 1).

This manager emphasised how discussions before and following the pre-meet could provide a space in which prospective parents could be reminded that they were *'building a relationship with a stranger.'*

4.6.2 Theme 2: Building confidence in a match

In this theme I explore how managers felt that pre-meets could help develop an adoptive parent's understanding of their child, test their response to meeting them (sometimes considered 'chemistry') and consolidate their feelings about the match. They could provide an opportunity for all parties to raise any concerns they may have and stop the match if this needed to happen.

Developing an adoptive parent's understanding of their child

Perceptions that past practices of matching had relied too heavily on written sources of information, such as CAR B reports, were shared by some managers. Completed for court

purposes as well as those of matching, CAR B reports could make difficult reading and were not always an effective vehicle by which the child's personality could be conveyed. Recent changes in ways in which information about a child is shared with their prospective adoptive parents were widely felt to have significantly enhanced the matching and transitions processes. Developments such as Understanding the Child Days and Trauma/Nurture timelines were valued as means by which prospective adoptive parents could develop a more rounded picture of their child. However, meeting in-person was generally thought to give prospective parents insights into the child which were qualitatively different from those gleaned from other sources. They could meet the child in more *'naturalistic'* way than through formal introductions, and the child could be brought *'alive'* as a manager explained:

> *For me, the sightings should be just about bringing that child alive, you know, this is what they sound like when they laugh, you know, this is what they look like when they run, you know, that sort of thing* (Manager, Region 1).

Seeing a child's gait, hearing what they sounded like, witnessing how the child responded to and interacted with people and their environment were all considered important sources of information about a child which gave prospective parents new insights. Seeing and interacting with a child could be particularly significant where they had specific medical or developmental needs. However, most managers considered it significant in understanding *any* child. Alongside understanding a child's background experiences and genetic make-up, meeting in person might help a prospective adoptive parent really understand *'what the child was like.'*

The view that meeting a child in-person was an important part of the matching process was not one that was held unequivocally, however. Managers in two regions considered whether an in-person meeting was necessarily of great value, especially when videos of the child had

already been shared. They commented that a pre-meet could merely provide a snapshot of the child; an *'Insta'* or distorted impression of a child, who may be choreographed by their foster carer to be on *'best behaviour.'* However, this was a minority view.

Consolidating prospective adoptive parents' feelings about a match, testing their response.

Managers in the four regions where pre-meets took place felt that they helped adoptive parents consolidate their feelings and decisions about a match. Even in situations where an adopter's confidence in their match was already high, pre-meets could provide peace of mind and enable them to start introductions more calmly than they might otherwise have done. Perceptions that pre-meets could help relieve adoptive parents' anxieties by providing an opportunity to test their response to a child were sometimes linked with ideas of chemistry:

> *I think chemistry is a big part of how you [approach] the child – you know, do they look like me? Are they going to share the same interests, hobbies as me? You know. And 'what if I don't like this child?' and that's a massive fear for lots of our adopters. 'What if I don't fall in love with this child at first sight?'* (Manager, Region 2).

Managers in three regions used the term 'chemistry meet' interchangeably with other terms, such as 'bump-in,' However, managers in two regions actively rejected notions of 'chemistry,' although they recognised it was often used by other professionals. Sometimes, managers referred to 'chemistry meets' with a tone and expression of unease. Nevertheless, the desire for an adoptive parent to test how they responded to meeting a child prior to formal introductions was a recurring theme, and one that participants found relatable, as one explained:

> *We're asking an awful lot of these people to ... go to a panel to commit to being parents to, to a child that they've never seen before ... I'm thinking, I'm not sure I could do that* (Manager, Region 4).

Although an adopter's initial response to a child was considered important, managers also described how 'chemistry' between a child and their adoptive family could develop gradually, over time.

Providing an early opportunity to raise any concerns or for the match to 'go wrong'

Pre-meets were valued by families and professionals as a chance to address concerns before introductions. After introductions, children knew they were meeting prospective parents, increasing pressure. Managers saw pre-meets as a unique opportunity to see the hypothetical match in action and gain confidence. In one region, they noted that matches broke down when the child differed from expectations.

In all four regions in which pre-meets took place, social workers sought adoptive parents' feelings and thoughts about their responses in person and by phone. Trust and understanding between parents and social workers made it easier to raise concerns. After a pre-meet, managers also actively sought the views of foster carers and children's social workers about a match. There were no specific discussions about how children's views were gathered. Sometimes, pre-meets provided an opportunity for prospective adoptive parents to talk candidly to foster carers about concerns or enabled foster carers to notice difficulties that others were unaware of. One example was given of prospective parents withdrawing from a match as they felt they would be unable to meet the child's future developmental needs. Whilst such instances were rare, managers who supported the practice considered pre-meets a useful opportunity for a match to be stopped. They deemed this less damaging for all, particularly the child, than at a later stage. Pre-meets had the potential to provide early reassurance for both adoptive parents and foster carers and embark on introductions with more confidence, with all parties feeling more relaxed and happier.

Furthermore, prospective parents could discuss their response to their child when they attended the matching panel.

4.6.3 Theme 3: Ethical and other concerns and challenges

In this theme I explore the challenges and ethical concerns that adoption managers raised about pre-meets. Fewer concerns arose when young children were unaware of the meeting's purpose. Issues included the need for boundaries, children's preparation, openness and honesty, discomfort with 'viewing' children, and how pre-meets fit into children's adoption narratives. I explore managers' perceptions of these issues below.

The need for boundaries

While most pre-meets were successful, managers shared instances where adult participants acted unpredictably with negative effects. A manager in Region 1 noted that Adoption Activity Days had encouraged adoptive parents to expect interaction on first meeting. The temptation to *'scoop up'* a child, especially infants, was a concern:

> *Clear boundaries* [are needed] *so that everyone is aware of how it's going to happen so that, yes, … if interaction happens everyone knows how to respond. A bit of respect, the child, the foster carer, if they're playing, just to watch and see, not to go forward and interact, because it's quite difficult then, children remember then as well - 'I saw you in the park!' Especially if it's an older child, they might remember, or if adoptive parents say 'oh yes, we're thinking of adopting you' … it's what the interactions might bring out, especially if links don't go ahead* (Manager, Region 1).

Foster carers sometimes found it hard to resist encouraging more interaction between adoptive parents and their would-be child, even if professionals felt this was not in the child's best interest. If a pre-meet was going well, both foster carers and adoptive parents had sometimes been found

to be tempted to extend the time limit that had been agreed. Adults could become wrapped up in their own experiences during a pre-meet, overlooking the child's need for a gradual introduction to help them process what was happening, as one manager described:

> *The bit that they miss is that it still needs to be gradual, that there have to be gaps and pauses for the child, particularly, to process what on earth is going on, and that the 'Getting to know you' process has to build gradually and if you started with a full day, where you all went to the park and you all had tea together, it's very hard to rein that back to take it at a slower pace* (Manager, Region 3).

Managers concluded that professional presence may be needed to maintain boundaries during pre-meets. In Region 1, a child's social worker and an adoption social worker attended pre-meets to prevent issues from arising. However, managers in Regions 2 and 3 preferred low-key meetings without children's social workers to avoid impacting interactions. Region 3 introduced 'expectations meetings' before pre-meets to clarify parameters and avoid misunderstandings. Adoption social workers were present at pre-meets but kept a distance. In Region 4, either a child-care or an adoption social worker attended each pre-meet, as negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Children's preparation for pre-meets

Concerns about children's preparation for adoption and specifically for pre-meets were raised across the regions. One manager considered this a major potential pitfall of pre-meets. Social workers and foster carers were mainly responsible for preparing children. They had varying levels of experience and support. Approaches to child preparation varied across regions. Honesty and openness with children were central concerns. In Region 3, children were prepared for pre-meets similarly to Adoption Activity Days, considering age and development. Children

with significant developmental delay might not be told the identity of adoptive parents until after

introductions had started. In other cases, children were informed before the pre-meet to

understand who and what to expect. One manager suggested using a framework like that for

Adoption Activity Days to prepare children, though she acknowledged this would not be a silver

bullet:

> *We have a huge battle with foster carers sometimes to tell children about activity days,*
>
> *and childcare workers sometimes, sharing information and being up front about the*
>
> *purpose of Activity Days, they struggle with that* (Manager, Region 1).

In Region 1, children were never told the identity of their prospective adoptive parents

before or at a pre-meet to avoid building anticipation. Similarly, Region 4's Agency Decision

Makers did not agree to inform children before formal approval. Region 5 managers were uneasy

about how pre-meets were presented to children. In one region where prospective adopters were

introduced to children as their foster carers' 'friends' one foster carer had objected strongly

because she felt this required her to lie to the children. Some managers also raised concerns that

introducing prospective adopters as 'friends' could lead to confusion for a child. Reflecting on

the difficulty of achieving honesty and openness whilst maintaining an attachment-focused

practice, a manager commented:

> *You wouldn't want [prospective adopters] going over and suddenly start talking to the*
>
> *little one on a swing and trying to get over-involved, because we try and teach children*
>
> *to, you know, have discriminate attachments and relationships* (Manager, Region 4).

Several managers raised concerns about the possibility of children recognising their

prospective adopters at subsequent meetings, which could be confusing. One manager described

an experience in which a toddler had clearly sensed she was being watched and had repeatedly

pointed at her prospective adopters. While this had delighted them, the impact on the child was unknown. In Region 3, a transitions worker had been appointed to improve children's preparation for adoption. Once they had established a relationship, the worker focused on preparing children to meet and move in with their new families, following guidance *Transitions and Early Support* (National Adoption Service for Wales & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.). Outcomes were positive, and pre-meets were carefully integrated into the child's care plan, considering the timing of 'goodbye visits' with birth families, for example.

Unease about adoptive parents 'viewing' children

Managers in different regions expressed discomfort with pre-meets, feeling they may be perceived as prospective adopters 'having a look' at a child. In the region where pre-meets do not take place, this concern was strongly expressed: *'children are not cars to be picked.'* If a child is told the identity of their adopters, they could feel rejected if the match does not proceed, or feel they were 'viewed' if it does.

Due to these ethical concerns and logistical issues, one region had not introduced pre-meets, despite requests. Other managers did not see the risks as significantly different from traditional introductions. In both scenarios, adopters could withdraw after meeting the child. In the four regions with pre-meets, managers emphasised that a high degree of certainty about the match was essential, before planning a pre-meet. Pre-meets, like first meetings during introductions, required immense care, caution, and thought.

The child's future understanding of how they joined their adoptive family

While all managers raised issues of honesty with children, only one explicitly mentioned concerns about how pre-meets should be recorded for children. She described the challenge of helping a child form a coherent narrative of how they joined their adoptive family:

You want to put in the life story book 'this was the first day you met your adoptive

parents.' And that should be the first day of introductions and the start of the child's story

(Manager, Region 4).

In this and in subsequent comments, the manager expressed concern about how adults would explain to a child when they were older that *'these people came to look at* [you] *first before they decided to go ahead.'* These were *'ethical sticking points'* with some of her team, who felt such issues were uncomfortable and unresolved.

4.7 Discussion

In this study, I have drawn on five interviews undertaken with 11 adoption social worker managers representing each of the five adoption regions in Wales. Using thematic analysis, the aim of this study was to explore adoption managers' views and experiences of 1) The current practice of pre-meets across Wales 2) The underlying theories, contexts and rationales that relate to the current practice of pre-meets; 3) How practice is developing 4) Perceptions of the benefits and 5) Difficulties associated with pre-meets. In this discussion I consider my findings in relation to the chapter aims and current literature.

The current practice of pre-meets in Wales

The findings in my research in Wales align with the practice guidance outlined by Beaumont and Dibben (2017), which presents case studies from England and suggests that the implementation of pre-meets is both diverse and continually evolving. Pre-meets have become a more established practice in some Welsh regions compared to just a few years ago. They now commonly involve infants and young children, whereas previously they were primarily used for older children, sibling groups, or children with additional needs. During the 2022 interviews, three out of the five adoption regions in Wales were actively working to develop their approach

to pre-meets. By 2023, this number had risen to four of the five regions, reflecting a growing commitment to developing and expanding this practice.

In 2014, the National Adoption Service was established in Wales with a vision of promoting consistency of practice across the country (Rees & Hodgson, 2017). Like in England (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017), this study shows that across the five Welsh regions, inconsistencies in practice relating to pre-meets traverse a range of domains. These include the frequency with which pre-meets take place, their rationale, organisation, contexts, and the terminology used to describe them. In one adoption region, prospective adoptive parents always meet their child before the matching panel, while in another, this never occurs. As a result, this significant event in the journey of newly adoptive families is influenced as much by different regional policies and practice as by the specific needs of the child and their adopters.

Underlying theories, contexts and rationales that relate to the current practice of pre-meets

Evidence from this study suggests that wider changes in the adoption sector are influencing the development of pre-meets in Wales. First, the promotion of a more gradual approach to building relationships between children and their adoptive families than has happened in the past. This is evidenced in recent models of children's transition to living with their adoptive families and embedded in attachment theory (Beek et al., 2021; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.). Second, the introduction of Adopter Activity Days has been linked to the role of 'chemistry' in adoption matching (see, for example, Narey, 2015; Simpson, 2024; Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013; Yap, 2016). This development may have contributed to normalising the idea that children and their prospective adoptive parents meet earlier in the matching process, a shift that may influence both professionals and parents alike. Lastly, there have been changes in the approaches and types of

information shared about children during the linking and matching processes, which the

developing practice of pre-meets appears to relate to. Practice guidance such as *Transitions and*

Early Support guide has promoted new ways of sharing information about children. These

include Understanding the Child Days, which bring together a wide range of adults who know

the child through their different roles to share information about the child with their prospective

adopters (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.).

Furthermore, photographs and video clips featuring children are now commonly shared during

family-finding and matching processes (Grant & Lury, 2020; Dibben, 2018). These can be

accessed by approved adopters through the Adoption Register Wales database and live on-line

profiling events (National Adoption Service, n.d.) Pre-meets can be seen as enabling a child's

prospective adoptive parents to access a further source of information about a child during

matching, from meeting them in-person.

How practice is developing

Practice models (Beek et al., 2021; National Adoption Service & the Association for

Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.) suggest that a pre-meet may take place, as part of the

matching (not transition) process. Beek and colleagues assert that this distinction is important, as

after formal approval of the match, individuals' thoughts on their relationships change. However,

my research suggests that sometimes, whether professionals conceptualise 'bump-into' meetings

as part of 'matching' or 'transitions' process (or both) may vary in practice.

Practice developments in the two Welsh regions which have introduced the 'bump-into'

model of pre-meets reflect key shifts in thinking in the adoption sector which relate to family-

formation. These include the notion of 'family *building*' rather than 'family *finding*' (All-Party

Parliamentary Group on Adoption and Permanence, 2021) and a greater awareness of children's

past separations and losses which are inherent in adoption processes (Boswell & Cudmore, 2017; Lanyado, 2003; Schofield & Beek, 2018). Unlike adults, children have no psychological conception of relationship by blood-tie until quite late in their development (Goldstein, Freud & Solnit, 1973). What matters to them are the day-to-day interchanges with the adults who take care of them and who, on the strength of these, become the parent figures to whom they are attached (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; Fahlberg, 1994; Schofield & Beek, 2018). Therefore, in moving in with their new adoptive families they will experience the loss of their parent figures, their foster carers. The recognition of this loss underlies the development of the practice of the 'bump-into' model of pre-meets (Beynon, n.d.; Family Futures, 2009). The practice of 'bump-into' meetings in Wales differs from the Bradford model in that in one region, children may be told the identity of their prospective adoptive parents, if this is felt appropriate, according to the child's age and developmental stage. Also, the Bradford model is intended to be used when children aged 3 or over are being matched, whereas in Wales, the model includes infants and toddlers.

Benefits associated with pre-meets

In the four regions in which pre-meets take place, managers' perceptions about their associated benefits reflected fundamental concerns which are rooted in the importance of relationship-formation (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Adoption and Permanence, 2021; Boddy, 2013) and building confidence in the match (Lowe et al., 1999; Beaumont & Dibben, 2017; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.). These include familiarisation, trust-building, developing understanding and knowledge, connection, and commitment through human interaction. Though relevant to the development of

any relationships, they are particularly pertinent in the context of the formation of adoptive families. I discuss perceptions of these benefits in more detail below.

Research by Lewis (2018) and Selwyn et al. (2015) identified adoptive parents experiencing the traditional approach of first meetings with children taking place on the first day of introductions as highly stressful and emotional events. Managers in my research where 'bump-into' pre-meets had been introduced found that pre-meets had enabled adopters, foster carers and children to start to get to know each other and build trust. This enabled the intense period of introductions to start in the foster carer's home in a more relaxed manner than they otherwise would, further facilitating a sense of connection to develop between all parties. Furthermore, pre-meets could help foster carers prepare emotionally for the child to leave their care.

For managers in the two regions which had introduced the 'bump-into' model of pre-meets, the absence (or minimal presence) of social workers in attendance was felt to help everyone feel less self-conscious than they would otherwise and enable more 'naturalistic' interactions to take place. 'Bump-into' pre-meets were felt to enable foster carers to communicate to children that their prospective adopters were 'safe' individuals, whom they trusted and could be trusted, and thereby support children's emotional transitions to living with their adoptive family. In these ways, the rationale for 'bump-into' meetings and their associated perceived benefits reflect concerns about the need for children's transitions to be more gradual than in the past. Such concerns have been widely shared in the adoption sector since the formation of the National Adoption Service in 2014 (see, for example, Boswell & Cudmore, 2014, 2017; Beek et al., 2021; Lewis, 2018; Browning, 2015; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.).

Farmer et al. (2010a) and Quinton (2012) suggest that some aspects of the 'fit' of a match between child and prospective adoptive parent can only be assessed once the new parents and a child come together; that there are many variables in the matching process, including those which cannot be predicted. It seems an adoptive parent's response to a child, which Farmer and colleagues describe as *'emotional connectedness,'* or *'chemistry'* (Farmer et al., 2010a, p.94) is one such variable. In my research, pre-meets were widely thought by adoption managers a helpful opportunity to test the prospective adopter's response to a child. Some managers referred intermittently to pre-meets as 'chemistry meetings.' Whilst sometimes indicating unease about the use of the word 'chemistry' in the context of pre-meets, most managers felt that pre-meets enabled a nuanced process of testing the responses of the prospective adopters to a particular child which was helpful. This eased a potential fear of the adopter, that they might not be drawn the child. This concurs with perceptions of benefits associated with pre-meets observed by scholars such as Triseliotis, Lowe, and their colleagues in the 1990s, and more recently by Beaumont and Dibben (2017).

Studies indicate that prospective adoptive families do not always believe they have adequate 'information' about a child (Quinton et al., 1998; Lewis & Selwyn, 2021), although it is hard to determine what is meant by the term. Selwyn and Meakings (2015) have examined adoptive parents' perspectives, noting that many report their adopted child being significantly different from their expectations. This discrepancy can lead to adjustment difficulties, requiring additional support and therapeutic interventions.

From my research, managers indicated difficulties which sometimes arise when children differed from adopters' expectations, even leading to disruptions. Pre-meets could provide information about a child which was subjective and most readily understood by meeting in-

person. Physical proximity enabled adoptive parents to understand how a child moved, vocalised, laughed, and interacted with their foster carers and environment, which adoption managers identified as important. Practice guidance by Beaumont and Dibben (2017) indicates that attending a pre-meet may help a prospective adopter understand the lived experience of a child with complex needs. Findings in my research concurred with this. Adoption managers indicated that pre-meets could help develop a prospective adopter's understanding of their matched child's lived experience of any medical condition, behavioural or emotional issues that the child might have.

Kirk (1964, 1984), Byrne (1999) and Wood and Tasker (2021) highlight the challenges faced by adoptive parents in adjusting to parenthood. Findings from my research suggest that managers viewed pre-meets as an opportunity to assist prospective adopters with their psychological adjustment to their new parenting status. For example, pre-meets enabled prospective adoptive parents to 'picture' the child and to start to visualise them in their family. In one region, pre-meets were thought to provide an opportunity to help prospective adoptive parents manage their expectations about becoming a parent to this child, reminding them that they were building a relationship with a stranger, and that this would take time.

Adoption managers in my research considered building confidence in the match an important benefit of pre-meets. In their interviews with parents of adopted children who had left home before adulthood, or where the children were deemed at risk of leaving home, Selwyn et al. (2015) found that even before their child moved in, some parents felt that they had already made a commitment on which they could not and would not renege. It is therefore of particular significance that findings from my research suggest that some managers perceive pre-meets as an opportunity to see *'a hypothetical match in action,'* as one manager described and provide an

opportunity for adult participants to pause to reflect and discuss any concerns that there may be.

Some managers felt that after a pre-meet, prospective adoptive parents felt more able to

withdraw from a match that did not feel 'right' than after the matching panel. In this way, these

managers perceived pre-meets to play a role in helping to prevent the devastation that can result

when placements break down.

Like findings by Wood and Tasker (2021), in the four regions in which pre-meets take

place, managers made references to prospective adoptive parents' vulnerabilities and the

uncertainties they face vis a vis becoming a family. Adoption managers viewed the frequent wish

of an adoptive parent to meet their would-be child *during matching* as a common, 'human'

desire, and indicated that pre-meets could help ameliorate the stresses prospective adoptive

parents experienced. There was a keen sense from most managers that they found this relatable,

although often overlooked in past social work practice. Most managers indicated that, with

careful management, a meeting between a child and their prospective adoptive parent before

their match was formalised had the potential to bring a range of benefits to a match and how it

proceeded.

Issues and concerns

As well as benefits, managers highlighted issues and concerns relating to pre-meets. In

the adoption regions where recent practice changes had taken place, or were being considered,

managers noted different attitudes and sensitivities to children and their prospective adoptive

parents meeting during matching. In each region, managers raised concerns about the preparation

of children for adoption in general and pre-meets in particular. Concerns about the transparency

and honesty with which children are involved with pre-meets are long-standing (Beaumont &

Dibben; 2017, Cousins, 2011 and Farmer et al., 2010a) and were present in my research, though

considered less problematic for infants and toddlers. Another issue raised by one manager is how pre-meets are incorporated into children's narratives of how they joined their adoptive families, described as the child's 'entrance story' (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001).

The concept of the Secure Base comes from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) in which our relationships with significant others who are available, sensitive to our needs, and reliable provide us with a sense of security. The Secure Base concept has been adapted by Schofield and Beek (2014) and Bostock et al. (2019) in the context of social work teams. Such an approach was evidenced in my research; adoption managers emphasised how practice change had to be managed sensitively and with caution and may involve discussions with individual workers to work through any concerns. Some managers expressed the view that pre-meets would be considered on a case-by-case basis. In addition to their own team members, managers considered it important to involve others in practice changes. These included foster carers, Agency Decision Makers, adoption panel members, and children's social workers, for example. Managers across the five regions expressed an interest in the development of national guidance in relation to the practice of pre-meets.

In this qualitative study, I have used thematic analysis to explore the views of 11 adoption managers in the five adoption regions in Wales. Using interview data, I have highlighted the nature of the current practice of pre-meets in Wales, and explored the context in which it is developing, as perceived by adoption managers. I have explored their views of the benefits and challenges presented by the practice. In the following chapter, I explore in-depth the experiences of a small sample of prospective adoptive parents, and the meanings they attributed to the pre-meets they attended with their child.

Chapter 5: Adoptive parents' experiences of pre-meets

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore the experiences of prospective adoptive parents, who all took part in a pre-meet with their would-be child, before they were formally matched with one another. I draw upon interviews I undertook with three participants from two families. Interviews took place at three time points. Firstly, in the days preceding a pre-meet; secondly, within a few weeks of the pre-meet taking place, and finally, approximately 10 months after the children moved in with their adoptive families. In Part 1, I examine the adoptive parents' perspectives on their adoption journey up to the stage of pre-meets with their children. Part 2 focuses on their experiences during the pre-meets, while Part 3 delves into the adopters' experiences of their children moving in and the process of becoming and being a family. Collectively, these three sections offer insights into the experiences of adoptive families involved in pre-meets as part of the adoption process for children from the care system in Wales. I present the discussion for all three parts of this chapter at the end of Part 3.

5.2 Chapter aims

The key questions this chapter aims to address are:

 1) What difference do prospective adoptive parents feel pre-meets make to their experience of matching?

2) How do prospective adoptive parents experience pre-meets?

5.3 Background

In this section, I draw upon literature relating to introductions between children and their prospective adoptive families, including pre-meets, which I have discussed in Chapter 2 of this

thesis. The literature provides context in which I subsequently explore the findings from my research.

Published studies reporting adoptive parents' experiences of pre-meets are very rare. *Supporting adoption: Reframing the approach* (1999) by Nigel Lowe and colleagues is an early example. The purpose of the retrospective study was to develop insights into the support needs of children aged 5 or more, who had joined adoptive families. Forty-eight adoptive parents were interviewed in the study, and their experiences of pre-meets (described as 'blind sightings') are mentioned within the general findings. Similarly, Lewis and Selwyn's study (2021) which aimed to understand the experiences of prospective adopters through the adoption process includes a short section on their experiences of pre-meets. Nine of the 20 adoptive parents who had had a child placed with them had taken part in a pre-meet with their child. Beynon (n.d.) includes the views of adoptive parents in her in-house evaluation of 14 pre-meets ('bump-into' meetings) within her adoption service. Finally, in their practice guidance on pre-meets, Beaumont and Dibben (2017) include a small number of case studies of pre-meets, taken from two English adoption agencies.

In addition to the publications mentioned above, a small number of studies have specifically explored prospective adoptive parents' experiences of the period of formal introductions with their child (Lewis, 2018; Boswell & Cudmore, 2014). Several UK studies have included the experiences of prospective adoptive parents in relation to formal introductions as part of broader, retrospective research (Neil et al., 2018b; Selwyn et al., 2015; Cowan, 2022). Underlining the significance of introductions, research draws links between their quality and impact on placement stability (Neil et al., 2018b; Lewis, 2018) or even disruption (Selwyn et al., 2015; Selwyn & Meakings, 2015).

Based on the existing literature, I identified five key themes in relation to adopters'
experiences of first meetings with their children:

1. Testing the prospective adopter's response to meeting their child.

2. Understanding the child and their needs.

3. Helping psychological adjustment to adoptive parenting.

4. Developing confidence in the match.

5. Providing an opportunity to meet their child in a low-key way.

Testing the prospective adoptive parent's response to meeting a child is sometimes considered a
primary function of pre-meets (Lowe et al., 1999; Triseliotis et al., 1997; Beaumont and Dibben,
2017). One adoptive mother quoted by Lowe et al. (1999) suggests that the meeting was crucial
in determining if the match was 'wrong,' attributing this to her 'instinct' (p.172). An adoption
manager quoted in practice guidance on pre-meets written by Beaumont and Dibben (2017)
suggests that pre-meets may enable prospective adoptive parents to test whether they 'gel' with
the child, whether the match feels 'right,' and if prospective adopters feel a 'chemistry.'
Similarly, evaluations of Adoption Activity Days often link the experience of prospective
adoptive parents and children meeting to enabling adopters to experience a 'connection' with a
child (e.g., Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013, p.22), sometimes described as 'chemistry' (Yap,
2016, p.6). Using terminology apparently indicative of their rationale, scenarios where a
prospective adoptive parent attends an Adoption Activity Day to meet a specific child with
whom a tentative link or match has been made are called 'chemistry meets' (Beaumont &
Dibben, 2017, p.1). Similarly, practice guidance published in 2020 by the National Adoption
Service (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.)

suggests if a prospective adopter feels anxious about whether they will feel a 'connection' with a child, prior to meeting, a 'chemistry meeting' may take place (p.23).

In their study *Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, intervention, disruption* (2015), Selwyn, Wijedesa and Meakings investigate how often and why adoptions are disrupted after an adoption order has been made. The authors found that some adoptive parents felt early on, perhaps on first meeting, that the match with their child was not right. Out of 70 parents interviewed, seven noted that they wished they had refused the match. One parent stated:

> *I should have relied more on my instincts… I would have insisted on liking the child and knowing the child before adopting… they do not make it easy for you to meet any child. They find a child, they match the child, they say, 'This is the child for you'* (p.220).

Testing the response of a prospective adoptive parent to a child (and, sometimes, a child's response to a prospective adoptive parent) is an established rationale for pre-meets, therefore.

The second theme relates to developing adoptive parents' understanding of their child through an in-person meeting. Practice guidance (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering and Adoption, Cymru, n.d.) suggests that such meetings may enable prospective adopters to observe for themselves specific behaviours the child they have been matched with may exhibit and help manage their expectations about the child. Studies of Adoption Activity Days report that one of their key functions is to provide adoptive parents with richer, deeper, and more realistic insights into children and their personalities than may be obtained from other sources (see, for example, Simpson et al., 2024). Argent and Coleman (2012) and Lowe et al. (1999) allude to the challenge of sharing objective information about a child with their prospective adoptive parents. Lowe et al. indicate that meeting a child in-person may provide prospective adopters with a counterbalance to information received from such third parties

(Lowe et al., 1999). While social workers and foster carers need to provide honest and accurate information about a child, Argent and Coleman (2012) suggest their eagerness to achieve a desired match may temper the information they share with prospective adoptive parents. Furthermore, while adopters are generally approved to adopt a child within an age range, such as three to five years old, the individual needs and characteristics within such a category can vary enormously.

Argent and Coleman cite insufficient preparation of prospective adopters to parent the child they are matched with as a contributing factor to adoptions which disrupt. Therefore, they highlight the necessity for prospective parents to have opportunities to 'learn the child' before introductions start, a finding concurred by Neil et al. (2018b). Developing prospective adoptive parents' understanding of their child may focus on one aspect of the child, such as their behaviours, or gaining direct insights into the child's personality, for example, unmediated by others.

In addition to assessing prospective adoptive parents' responses to a child and developing their understanding of them, a third significant theme in adoption literature focuses on the adjustment to adoptive parenthood. Authors such as Kirk (1964), Neil et al (2018b); Selwyn et al. (2015) and MacDonald (2016) report adopters' experiences of their assessment as prospective adopters and subsequent experiences of matching as riddled with stress and feelings of a lack of agency in the process. MacDonald (2016) found that adopters' journeys to parenthood had been characterised by subordination to the decision-making authority of social workers, adoption agencies and the court. Participants in her study described becoming a parent as a personal life goal which others, and the formal structures they operated within, had the power to facilitate or obstruct.

Authors such as Brodzinsky and Schecter (1990) and Kirk (1964) have also highlighted unique stressors, conflicts, and challenges which confront adoptive parents, in contrast with biological parents. For example, Kirk notes that individuals are conditioned from an early age to anticipate the possibility of biological, and not adoptive, parenthood. Additionally, the process of pregnancy provides a relatively predictable timeline that gradually prepares biological parents for parenting responsibilities. In contrast, adoptive parents lack an equivalent, structured timeline to shape their emotions and thoughts around their anticipated parenthood.

Ward and Smeeton (n.d.) highlight the influence of 'pronatalist' ideology which underlies a powerful societal drive to experience pregnancy and participate in the associated 'club' of pregnancy. They note this experience is often marked by social rituals, such as antenatal appointments, and the growing popularity of baby showers in the UK. However, comparable rites of passage which may help adjustment to parenthood are scarce in adoption. The cultural narrative surrounding procreation reinforces the expectation that both men and women should feel a natural drive to have a biological child (Lockerbie, 2014). For women, societal norms further impose the assumption that they both desire and are destined to become mothers (Letherby, 1994). Prospective adoptive parents often enter parenthood after experiencing infertility (see, for example, Kirk, 1964 Ward & Smeeton, n.d.). According to Cudmore (2015), unresolved grief stemming from infertility can significantly impact the adjustment to adoptive parenting, making it crucial to address these emotions during the adoption process. However, Anthony et al. (2019) found that after a child had joined their adoptive family, support is targeted at the child's adjustment and the adoptive parent's adjustment needs are often overlooked.

In her study of adoption disruption, Cowan (2022) interviewed 41 adoptive parents. Cowan observed that many described meeting their child as *'a stark and unexpected reminder of*

their biological loss' - a poignant realisation that life was not unfolding as they had envisioned (p.133). More generally, Cowan also identified a notable gap between the theoretical preparation provided to prospective adoptive parents (such as understanding the potential effects of a child's early experiences) and their practical readiness for adoptive parenthood. Therefore, adoptive parents face distinct challenges in their adjustment to parenthood. Viewed through the lens of such challenges encountered by prospective adopters, it is especially valuable to consider the typical timeframe between the initial meeting of children and their prospective adopters on the first day of introductions and the point at which the children move in. The standard duration for introductions is approximately 14 days, though nearly 40% of children moved in within just a week of first meetings (Selwyn et al., 2015, p.84).

A significant theme in adoption research is the role of first meetings in developing confidence in the match. Scholars emphasise the importance of ensuring that prospective adopters can voice concerns about their suitability as parents for a specific child during the introduction stage (Argent & Coleman, 2012; Lowe et al., 1999; Burnell, Castell & Cousins, 2009; Selwyn et al., 2015; Byrne, 1999). However, Byrne (1999) and Tasker and Wood (2016) observe that sharing doubts can be particularly difficult during this emotionally intense period. Byrne stresses the importance of giving all parties explicit permission to express reservations, allowing concerns to be addressed constructively and potentially preventing greater challenges in the future (also see Browning, 2015; Argent & Coleman, 2012).

Despite this, opportunities for reflection during introductions are often lacking (Selwyn & Meakings, 2015). Adopters may also face rushed introduction processes, which can limit the time available for thoughtful assessment and contemplation (Selwyn & Meakings, 2015). Research and practice guidance suggest that structured opportunities for adopters to reflect on

the match, and to withdraw if necessary, are vital components of effective matching and introduction procedures. By incorporating these reflective spaces, adoption processes can better support adopters and reduce the risk of placement disruptions.

The fifth and final theme from the adoption literature relates to the setting in which prospective adoptive parents first meet their child, and the preference indicated by some for this to be neutral and low-key. In her study of nine parents' experiences of meeting their children for the first time, Lewis (2018) highlights adopters' feelings of being pressured during introductions in an intense atmosphere in the foster carer's home. Furthermore, they felt scrutinised by foster carers and social workers, whilst trying to get to know their child. Evidence from literature on Adoption Activity Days indicates that prospective adopters value the opportunity to meet children in a child-friendly setting, such as a play centre, where they can observe the child in a more natural, less intense environment than the foster carer's home (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). Beynon refers to this in her in-house evaluation of 14 'bump-into' meetings held by her adoption agency. She quotes an adoptive mother:

> *We thought that the bump-into meeting was the best way we could have met our son… it felt very organic… no one had to put on a show... he didn't feel the need to show his loyalty to his foster carer.*

To my knowledge, research into the experiences of prospective adoptive parents attending pre-meets has been limited to in-house evaluations carried out by a social worker team (Beynon, n.d.) and a handful of broader studies about the experiences of adoptive parents (see, for example, Lowe et al., 1999; Lewis & Selwyn, 2021) and there has been no research relating to the current practice in Wales. In this chapter, I aim to illuminate the experiences of a small

sample of prospective adoptive parents and explore in-depth the meanings that they attach to the pre-meets they experienced.

5.4 Method

My primary interest was in exploring the experiences of prospective adoptive parents who had attended pre-meets. I used an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) in the design of the study and analysis of data. I chose a longitudinal approach to enable an exploration of the meanings that participants attached to the pre-meets at three time points; in the days before they met their child, in the weeks after and then approximately ten months after their child had moved in. This approach enabled me to contextualise participants' experiences of pre-meets within the wider adoption journeys their families shared with their child. My approaches to methodologies in this thesis are described fully in Chapter 3.

5.4.1 Characteristics of the sample

All participants were in a heterosexual partnership and were white British. Prospective adoptive parents in the first family comprised a couple, but only one individual took part in interviews. At the time of the interviews, both families had one birth child living at home and each participant was becoming adoptive parents for the first time. Characteristics of the sample are shown in Figure 5.1, below.

Figure 5.1 Table of adoptive parent participant characteristics

Participants	Child with whom matched (and age of child when they joined their new family)	Other children living at home (and age at time of pre-meet)	First time adoptive parents?	Name of child's foster carers
Helen & Jake	Amy (2)	Lois (13)	Yes	Kathy and Carl
Chloe	Emma (2)	Ffion (5)	Yes	Jane

Note: Pseudonyms have been used throughout this chapter, to protect individuals' identities.

5.4.2 The interviews

The interviews with three prospective adoptive parents in two families took place between December 2021 and September 2023. The adoptive couple who participated were interviewed together, as this was their preference. Each of the three participants were interviewed at all three timepoints – within one or two weeks before and after the pre-meet and then approximately ten months after their child moved in with them.

Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, except for one interview which took place via video call, for the participant's convenience. Information about the study that participants received inviting them to participate stated that they would be asked to participate at three time points. Consent was renewed at the end of the first two interviews, when participants were asked whether in principle, they would be willing to take part in a further interview. Whilst participants were committed to taking part in the research throughout, childcare commitments, health challenges and holidays all affected their availability. Interviews with the participant in family 1 ranged in length from 40 to 60 minutes. The first and third interviews were shortened

due to her childcare commitments. This included the presence of the adoptive child in the third interview. The second interview with this participant, made via a video call, was shortened, and hampered by a weak internet connection. The interviews with the couple participating in family 2 were each approximately two hours in length.

Alongside specific issues I aimed to address, the primary aim was for participants to tell their story and not to simply be respondents. My aim was to capture the richness and complexity of their meaning making by being an active listener and by allowing the interview to progress down avenues that they opened, rather than those dictated by the schedule. Individuals tell their stories with varying degrees of ease, perhaps because they may not view aspects of their lives, their feelings, or events as necessarily interesting to an outsider. Therefore, I prioritised building rapport with participants when I first made contact, before and during the interview (Smith & Osborn in Smith, 2015; Larkin, Flowers & Smith, 2009; Finch, 1993). The semi-structured approach allowed me to flexibly follow their interests and concerns, and probe interesting areas as they arose (Smith & Osborne, 2015). I emphasised that my interest was in hearing participants' lived experiences.

The three interview schedules, study information sheet and consent form relating to prospective adoptive parents' participation can be found in Appendices 13-17.

5.4.3 Analysis

I utilised interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine participants' experiences and the meanings they attributed to them. IPA is not a prescriptive methodology; rather, it provides flexible guidelines that researchers can adapt according to their specific research aims (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Dunworth, 2003; Smith & Osborn, 2003). A defining feature of IPA is its emphasis on the interpretative role of the researcher.

In my analysis, I aimed to capture the temporal dimension of each participant's contributions by analysing the transcripts of each interview separately. However, the three interviews conducted with each family were ultimately treated as a single dataset, allowing for cross-referencing among them across the three parts of this study. Additional details about my methodological approach can be found in Chapter 3.

5.4.4 Ethics

I have detailed my approach to ethical considerations in Chapter 3. All names have been changed to safeguard confidentiality. The participants are referred to throughout by pseudonyms (family 1): Chloe, (family 2): Helen and Jake.

5.5 Findings Part 1: Before the pre-meet: Adoptive parents' experiences of their adoption journey

In Part 1 I explore the experiences of the prospective adoptive parents in their narratives in response to questions about their consideration of adoption as a route to parenthood; their experiences of linking and matching; their reflections on the proposed match with their child; their thoughts and feelings about attending a pre-meet and their expectations about their response to their child, including the possibility of feelings of 'chemistry.'

All participants had been motivated to adopt by their wish to provide a loving and safe home for a child who could not live with their birth family. Fertility difficulties, coupled with a desire to parent another child and for their birth children to have a sibling, were also key features of their journeys to adoption. Participants' inclination to take action to adopt a child had been sharpened by the global pandemic and experiences of bereavement or critical illness. Like many families, experiences of grief and loss shaped these parents' journeys to adoption. They had each lived with uncertainty about whether they would be able to have the family they hoped for.

Understanding such influences in their lives, for these prospective adoptive parents *and* for their children, provides important context in which their experiences are situated and understood.

I developed three super-ordinate themes in relation to Part 1, as described by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). These are shown in Figure 5.2 below, together with the themes that comprise them.

Figure 5.2: Adoptive parents. Part 1: Super-ordinate themes and themes

Super-ordinate theme	Theme
1. *'She knows us inside and out'*: Trusting the social worker relationship	- Feeling listened to, understood, valued - Experiencing challenge and growth; 'They grill you and in the best way' - Having faith in the matching process
2. Developing early feelings of connection	- Seeing the child's photograph - Early feelings of un/certainty - Identifying similarities; familial preferences and traits 'She looks like she's your child!'
3. Becoming part of a new family constellation	*'Such a difficult journey for her'* *'Adopted outside the family'* *'You've got somebody who's potentially grieving the loss of their child'*: building a relationship with the foster carer - Imagining the sibling dynamic

5.5.1 Super-ordinate theme 1: 'She knows us inside and out': trusting the social worker relationship

In this theme I explore how participants' narratives showed that the quality of their relationship with their adoption social workers was fundamental to the quality of the matching process.

Feeling listened to, understood, and valued

For each participant, being known and understood by their adoption social worker provided the foundation of the matching process. Firstly, this is illustrated in Chloe's account:

They find out every bit of information about you, all the personal information, all your thoughts, your feelings, everything [we've] been through. So, by the end of it they know you inside and out. [ ] There's been tears, there's been laughter, there's been stuff spoken about that I probably haven't spoken about with anyone else - so I think she knows me really well (Chloe, T1).

Chloe describes her social worker as a confidante. Bold questioning explored Chloe's inner world in profound ways, aspects of life of which even family and friends were unaware. Her openness left her emotionally exposed. Alluding to the losses that the couple had endured, Chloe refers to the social worker's understanding of 'everything [we've] been through' and 'tears.' These profound losses have brought Chloe to adoption and are at the core of her being. Being known and understood contained a component of healing and growth, and in later interviews, Chloe recalled that her social worker had felt 'almost like a counsellor' or a 'secondary mother.'

Jake and Helen felt similarly supported by their social worker:

[She] listens, knows exactly what, and [has] our back, 100% yes! (Helen, T1).

Helen starts with her social worker's capacity to listen, the foundation of their relationship. From listening, the worker knows 'exactly what': Helen feels the social worker intimately understands the couple's world. Finally, in her choice of the phrase '[she has] our back,' Helen emphatically evokes how their social worker had provided the very backbone of support in their journey to adoption.

Experiencing challenge and growth: 'They grill you and in the best way.'

Each participant had experienced challenge and growth within the dynamic between them and their social worker. Here, Chloe suggests a formality and distance in early meetings:

They interview you and they grill you and in the best way, because it's needed (Chloe, T1).

'Grilled' suggests an intense and emotionally painful interrogation. This quotation indicates the importance that Chloe attributes to being challenged, despite its inherent discomfort. Similarly, Helen and Jake had experienced the assessment period as one out of the norm of everyday interactions:

They [ask the] type of questions you don't really discuss in your family (Helen, T1).

For Jake, the assessment process had led him to reunification in his birth family relationships. He had contacted family members from whom he had been estranged:

It made me re-evaluate my own life and I reached out (Jake, T1).

The assessment process had shaped Jake's life in the most profound ways. It had prompted him to 'reach out,' suggesting a physical and emotional stretch which extended his thinking and connection with family members.

Having faith in the matching process

Each participant entrusted their adoption social worker to help find the right match for their family:

> *My social worker is the person I know and trust, for me and my husband, what is best*
>
> (Chloe, T1).

Chloe believes that the couple's social worker is central to finding the right match. Elsewhere, she describes the relief of having the same worker throughout assessment and matching processes, avoiding the need to build another relationship with a stranger. In the passage above, the deep level of trust in their relationship is apparent. Chloe feels the social worker knows 'what is best' - perhaps more than Chloe herself. Helen and Jake felt similarly:

> *I think that what they do behind the scenes, matching, [I'm] definitely a firm believer*
>
> (Jake, T1).

In the words *'firm believer'* Jake seems to allude to the faith he places in his social worker. She makes things happen *'behind the scenes.'* Elements of the matching process may be opaque, but Jake's trust is such that he does not feel the need to understand every detail of it.

For all participants, the matching process had started with a series of tick boxes; the key characteristics of a child who they felt would match with their family. Jake and Helen experienced this as a blunt instrument. In contrast, they recalled that their social worker had told them to *'be honest'* and to *'go with what [their] heart says.'* They recalled these words because they resonated. They embraced a process which would not be entirely rational or cerebral but driven in part by 'their hearts.' They were secure in the knowledge that their social worker would value their instincts and feelings about a potential match. They felt validated.

5.5.2 Super-ordinate theme 2: Developing early feelings of connection

In this theme I explore participants' responses to seeing photographs of the children and reading and hearing about them, and how they developed feelings of connection, by identifying familial similarities, traits, and resemblance.

Seeing the child's photograph

The two families had been shown photographs of the children at very different stages of their matching process. Whilst Jake and Helen received photographs of Amy with her CAR B report, Chloe did not. Instead, Chloe saw just a flash of Emma's face on a social worker's phone, after she had read Emma's CAR B report and met with social workers to discuss the possible match. Jake and Helen had been shopping in Tesco's with their twelve-year old daughter, Lois, when their phones pinged through an email. Attached, was Amy's CAR B report. Such were the inauspicious surroundings in which their would-be daughter, Amy, first entered their lives, after just a brief phone call with their social worker. Amy was a toddler; younger than the child they had anticipated adopting. The trio turned to the photographs of her immediately. Helen recalls this moment below:

And when her photo come up, all three of us went 'ahhh!' And that was before we read [her profile] (Helen, T1).

From the photograph, Jake, Helen, and Lois had an image of Amy in their minds, before they read about her. Wherever possible, Helen and Jake involved Lois in the family's adoption journey. Their unified response seems to signify and strengthen their bond and plant a seed of connection with Amy. At the time of their third interview, Helen recalled the impact of seeing this photograph, in which Amy's personality had *'shone through.'* Prior to the pre-meet, Chloe

and her husband had only seen a flash of Emma's face, a photograph on a social worker's phone. Nonetheless, seeing a photograph of Emma had been profoundly important:

> *That was very emotional. … Because it turned this piece of work on paper into a real-life person … Seeing her little face and knowing what she's been through at such a young age is heart-breaking then. It makes the story real, you know? And I think it was a very powerful feeling* (Chloe, T1).

What is striking about Chloe's words is that she reveals that it is only when she sees Emma's photograph that Emma becomes a 'real-life person' to her. It is as if she has only been able to think of Emma in the abstract until this point; a *'piece of work on paper.'* Seeing this first image of Emma had been *'very emotional.'* Reading about Emma had felt like reading a 'story,' perhaps too upsetting to consider 'real.' Chloe's choice of vocabulary emphasises Emma's vulnerability; when Chloe looked at the *'little face'* all the *'heart-breaking'* experiences that she had read about Emma's past came flooding to the fore. Her initial response to the photograph was in contrast with those of Jake and Helen; it reminded Chloe of the difficult experiences that Emma had already experienced in her short life.

Early feelings of un/certainty

It was only after seeing photographs of Amy, that Jake and Helen had returned home and examined her CAR B report *'thoroughly.'* Helen mirrored this term in her description of the quality of the report:

Helen: [overtalking] *because the … form is very, very thorough.*

Helen underlines the couple's trust in the system and professionals responsible for the reports. Helen and Jake approached reading Amy's CAR B report with caution, as Jake describes:

We want to make sure our decision is right for us. And, also Amy, you know, we don't want her placed in the wrong family. So, we read it very, very thoroughly. And all of us really could see why she, she's been matched to us (Jake, T1).

The passage above illustrates Jake's concern for rational decision-making based on thorough information, evident throughout his three interviews. Balancing everyone's needs is a delicate task. Amy could be placed in *'the wrong family;'* Jake indicates the responsibility he and Helen feel for ensuring that the match is right for her. After reading Amy's CAR B report, the family feel that Amy would be a good match. Jake's referral to *'all of us'* is significant, as again he and Helen actively involve Lois. Confidence in the match, Jake emphasises, is based on a *'very thorough'* reading of Amy's CAR B report, which contains the information that he needs. Again, his trust in social worker decision-making here is clear.

Chloe's first responses as she read her child's CAR B report were very different from those of Helen and Jake. She reflected:

It's hard to look at this – you know, we've never read anything like this in our life, and you read it, and it's so in-depth, so out of what we are feeling is 'normal' and gone through, it was very hard to digest. So, I expected that to be a very different moment. I thought we'd be like 'yes! This is perfect, I feel it in my heart' (Chloe, T1).

Chloe's expectations that the match would feel *'perfect'* have been dashed. Instead, harrowing feelings of alienation and overwhelm are evident: she finds it *'hard to [even] look at'* (let alone *'digest')* what she reads. She emphasises the distance between Emma's experiences and those of her family; they are *'so out of what we are feeling is normal.'* Oscillating between 'I' and 'we' in the passage above, Chloe may be uncertain the extent to which her experiences are shared with her husband. Chloe implies that others more familiar with reading similar reports (professionals,

and perhaps researchers) may be desensitised, and unaware of how upsetting, how far from *'normal'* their contents are for her. This is Chloe's earliest introduction to the child she is hoping will join her family. If she were pregnant, this may have been a scan, or a physical change. Instead, she is grappling with her would-be child's distressing formative experiences. In the passage above she reveals how she had anticipated that she would feel *'in [her] heart'* that a match would be right. Instead, initial feelings of resistance and discomfort dominate; uncertainty about whether she could become Emma's mother.

Reading about their child, Jake and Helen had a very different response from Chloe. In the exchange below, Jake highlights the clear reasoning that he sees has informed professionals' decision-making:

Jake: *... as soon as I read* [the report], *I can see the, the reasoning, I think, yeah, ... it is clear as day, why they chose her. ... when I say about the life experience, as well, there's certain things that Amy*

Helen: *may go through ...*

Jake: *that we would definitely have an insight* [Helen overtalking, agreeing] [into] *because of our own life experiences* (T1).

It is partly shared life experiences that leads Jake to see as 'clear as day' that Amy has been 'chosen' as their match. Jake feels their own challenges will help them have *'insight'* into Amy and her future needs. This is a point that Jake returns to repeatedly. It is as if he feels his own difficult lived experiences may have a purpose. They can be drawn upon to help support Amy. Also, perceptions of shared experiences strengthen the couple's feelings of connection with the toddler.

Jake and Helen described how, during their assessment process, they had been directed to research child trauma. Jake commented that as a result, *'in a way, our mind was braced for a worst-case scenario,'* indicating he felt almost primed to be matched with a child with a complex history and support needs. Helen interjects to emphasise that it is only a possibility that Amy will experience the challenges alluded to by Jake. Helen is often focused on Amy's individuality and the nature of her personality as strong determinants in how she is and how her future may unfold. This may indicate Helen's tolerance of uncertainty, her optimism and resilience. Earlier, Helen and Jake had spoken of not wanting to *'mould'* a child, and of hoping a child who joined their family would be their *'true selves.'* Throughout the interviews, there were many such instances of their acceptance of the child *'as their own person'* and an openness of approach.

Identifying similarities; familial preferences and traits

Through the course of their first interviews, Jake and Helen identified familial routines, favourite places, books, and nursery rhymes in common with Amy. Chloe also noticed similarities, for example, in bedtime routines that Emma and her daughter shared, as well as favourite places to play. For Jake and Helen, spotting commonalities with Amy seemed especially significant. The couple spoke excitedly, at speed:

Jake: *So, it was, it was uncanny. You really think wow! and then … I don't know whether this is fate or whether it is part of matching but … for instance, Amy's likes and dislikes …*

Helen: *it's very similar, yeah -*

Jake: *very like, Amy's reports are identical to how Lois was at that age, you know … I mean, there's lots of similarities* (Jake and Helen, T1).

Jake and Helen delight in identifying preferences shared by Amy and their teenage daughter Lois, when she was of a similar age. Even small details, such as the use, or otherwise, of a dummy, take on a significance. Jake refers to preferences and experiences in common as *'uncanny.'* He is emphatic in his belief that they are beyond the normal:

> *I could argue, obviously, a lot of children* [like] *similar nursery rhymes, for instance, I could accept that, but there's so many similarities, you think it was … quite uncanny* (Jake, T1).

Whilst 'uncanny' often has connotations of strange, in this context it is welcomed. The *'hidden'* process of matching seems to have an alchemic quality. Jake hints at a belief that a higher, inexplicable force may have brought the couple and Amy together. Preferences and experiences they share seem to be evidence of this.

Before their pre-meets, as they gathered information about their would-be child, all participants linked family traits with characteristics of the child they had been matched with. Perceptions of Amy as *'very energetic'* like Lois at a similar age were important to Jake and Helen. Large gatherings and holidays were central to Chloe's family life. She characterised both her immediate and extended family as being gregarious and boisterous, and her daughter Ffion particularly so. Recalling a conversation with Emma's foster carer, Jane, a few days before the pre-meet, Chloe commented:

> [Jane said that Emma is] *'a really busy bee, constantly on the go, constantly wanting to be played with, constantly climbing'* - but so is Ffion, so that would match our little girl … . Her foster carer says how happy she is …, laid back, full of life child, but so is our little girl, Ffion, so maybe this is why the match has come in (Chloe, T1).

Speaking before the pre-meet, like Helen and Jake, Chloe is quickly drawn to similarities between descriptions of Emma's energy and that of her daughter, Ffion. In the quotation above, her rhythmic and repetitive use of *'constantly'* serves to emphasise the significance of Amy's energetic levels. In her mind, energetic and temperamental similarities with her daughter help validate the match. Her comparison of the girls here suggests she is starting to imagine them together.

For Helen and Jake, fun and humour in day-to-day life were of central importance, as we can see from their responses to the question below:

> I: *So, do you have a particular idea of the kind of child that would be a good match for your family?*
>
> Helen: *We do like our sense of humour.*
>
> I: *Yeah?*
>
> Helen: *We're a fun family. full sense of humour. ... Yeah, I think that was the first thing that come to my mind.*

We see from Jake's interjection how aligned he and Helen are in this respect:

> Jake: *I agree. I'd agree with Helen. Yeah, that's the first time I've been asked that question …*
>
> Helen: *we take Hallow'een way too seriously!* [laughter] …
>
> Jake: *I can't wait to jump back in the ball pits!* (Jake and Helen, T1).

In the passage above, it is apparent that humour, fun, banter and teasing are central to Helen and Jake's identity as a family and bolster their resilience to life's challenges. Not many minutes before, the couple had been talking about the difficulties they had faced which had led them to adoption. As the conversation unfurls, they imagine how these aspects of their family's

identity will play out with Amy. They relish the prospect of parenting in a physical and fun way, and this is an important aspect of their own needs and expectations. It is significant that Jake suggests that they have not previously been asked about the 'kind' of child with whom they would feel best matched. Here, he appears to interpret 'kind' as 'personality.'

Like Helen and Jake, Chloe had not discussed the role of humour when she and her husband had expressed their matching preferences. Yet this also appeared to be an important factor which, based on information shared by the foster carer, she felt strengthened her match with Emma:

> *We have found out that she likes to crack jokes and tease people and that's a big part of our family, you know? … So, I think, you know, the similarities of her personality to Ffion, and the fact that she likes to be teased, have a laugh and joke and stuff for her benefit and our benefit is going to work, because naturally that's going to work together a lot more, isn't it?* (Chloe, T1).

Chloe had previously mentioned that the CAR B report had only indicated Emma's 'basic' personality traits. From the passage above, we can see how the conversations with Emma's foster carer contrasted in colour and tone with the written information Chloe had received about Emma. She described the latter as *'black and white'* seemingly referring to its lack of nuance, as well as to its form on the printed page. She feels that humour will help build and bind the new adoptive family together. Not just humour *per se*, but how it plays out in her family, *'cracking jokes,'* *'being teased/teasing,'* and *'having a laugh.'* Her repetition of the phrase *'going to work'* nods to her increasing confidence in the match. Chloe once more tentatively connects her daughter and Emma together with perceived shared personality traits.

'She looks like she's your child!'

Perceptions of physical resemblance with the child were shared by all participants. Firstly, Chloe believes (and hopes) that Emma and her daughter Ffion look similar:

They're very similar, even to the looks … . They've got very similar hair, and both got blue eyes and stuff, so it's very [pause] *fitting* (Chloe, T1).

Interestingly, in the passage above, Chloe's attention slips from perceived similarities between the girls' character and behaviour she had been describing, to those of physical appearances. In the passage below, Chloe presents a rationale for her hope that the girls may look similar:

[Physical appearance] *could possibly be a factor* [in matching] *because they're already going to be slightly on the outside, aren't they, because they're adopted, so you don't want them to look completely different to your family because then there'll be more questions of them* (Chloe, T1).

Chloe is preparing to parent a little girl whom she believes, is concerned, may be *'slightly on the outside'* due to her adoptive status. Physical resemblance between family members could lead to strangers more readily accepting the group as a family unit. Perhaps, she wants to have a family who could 'pass' as a biological family. It could help a child 'blend in,' thereby making their life easier. Her earlier pause before linking physical resemblances with her feelings about how the match was so *'fitting'* may also reveal something unspoken. Perhaps, it could feel easier to bond with a child who resembled her biological family. She may also be uncertain whether the girls *do* share physical similarities. She has only seen the briefest glimpse of a photograph of Emma's face on a social worker's phone, so it is hard for her to know.

For Helen and Jake, perceived similarities between the child's appearance and a resemblance in their family strengthen their confidence in their match:

Immediate family, they look at [the photo], *and go, 'Wow, … she looks like she's your child' … we feel so blessed in as much as the match … we feel is a perfect match* (Jake, T1).

The warmth of Jake's voice conveys delight when family members say that Amy looks like *'their'* child. We understand this to mean their *biological* child. Such comments represent acceptance from the wider family, a welcome into the fold. The *'firm belief'* in the matching process Jake expressed earlier seems to have paid off, and the couple feel *'blessed.'* Physical resemblance may feel the final piece in the jigsaw that creates a *'perfect match.'* None of the participants had articulated to social workers that physical appearance was a consideration. Truthfully, the physical characteristics that Jake, Helen, and Chloe identified (*'brown eyes, blonde hair'*) were vague. However, identifying *perceived* similarities helped them feel connected with the children and appeared to play an early role in claiming their children as potential family members.

5.5.3 Super-ordinate theme 3: Becoming part of a new family constellation

In this theme I explore how participants had started to mentalise the children, and the experiences they may have, leaving their foster carers' home. I also explore the extent to which, during the matching phase, the child's birth family and foster carers appeared present in the adoptive parents' minds, as well as their imaginings of the future relationship between their birth and adopted child.

'Such a difficult journey for her'

Participants each anticipated that the children would experience significant grief and loss when they left their foster carers' homes. Although this was a concern for Chloe, it was a particular focus for Jake and Helen, even before the pre-meet. This difference could be attributed

to the couple's early certainty about Amy joining their family. Also, Amy had made a brief appearance during Jake and Helen's first on-line meeting with her foster carer, which took place before the pre-meet. It seems likely that this had made the imminent move from her foster carer increasingly more 'real' for Jake and Helen, who imagined Amy's world in some detail. They noted the imbalance between their detailed knowledge of Amy, and her lack of knowledge of them. Amidst their excitement, before the pre-meet, they were already imagining the *'difficult journey'* Amy would have ahead, leaving the security of her foster carer:

> *We're excited to adopt her but in her mindset, she is facing another kind of removal. So, that's like two experiences in a lifetime already. And now this will be her permanent home, but she won't see that, I imagine, from a child's perspective. She might grow up initially thinking, well, 'will I be moving again?' You know, … such a difficult journey for her* (Jake, T1).

What is striking about the passage above is Jake's capacity to consider Amy's *'mindset.'* He recognises the gulf between the certainty that he and Helen have that theirs will be her *permanent* home, and Amy's possible feelings; *'will I be moving again?'* Even before meeting her, Jake is starting to imagine the grief Amy will likely experience, leaving her foster carers. Evoking the passage of time and distance, as well as physical transition, the move will just be the start of Amy's *'journey'* to become part of his family. Jake is preparing himself to parent a child who will need time and support to process all her experiences, including losses inherent in her move. There will be no quick fixes. His capacity to mentalise Amy's world here is powerful.

'Adopted outside the family'

For Jake and Helen, Amy's birth family held a strong psychological presence from their earliest knowledge of her. From her CAR B report, they learnt that Amy's family was extensive and complex. They wanted to try and understand how Amy fitted within her family structure:

> Jake: *I literally had to do … a family tree on paper, because there wasn't one in the CAR B, just to map out and understand the dynamics of* [Amy's] *family …*
>
> Helen: *… unfortunately for her, she's the only child out of the siblings that's been adopted outside the family* (Jake and Helen, T1).

Here, Jake's use of the word 'family,' without any qualifier, is significant. For Jake, Amy's 'birth' family remain simply her 'family.' At this early stage, the couple are pro-active and sincere in their desire to understand Amy's birth family. Amy has siblings, who have been scattered by circumstance and the actions of the state. Helen's comment *'unfortunately ...,'* and the sadness in her tone, acknowledge Amy's loss of close sibling relationships, and identity with her birth family. Even before meeting, the couple are anticipating the future identity and relationship needs that Amy may have, as she grows up. They are adjusting to Amy's birth family becoming part of their lives, in a way which is unknown.

Following her reading of Emma's CAR B report, Emma's birth family did not appear to be present in Chloe's thoughts in the way Amy's had been for Jake and Helen. Perhaps, Chloe chose not to talk about them, or did not associate them with the focus of this research. It is also significant that she remained uncertain about her match, prior to the pre-meet. She may not have wanted to invest time and energy in thinking about Emma's birth family relationships, for this reason. They were, however, mentioned in the context of their medical histories, as this was a concern for Chloe. Also, discussing Emma's CAR B report, Chloe commented she had read:

Lots of information about what she's been through and what she's been subjected to at

home (Chloe, T1).

And so, Emma's birth family were alluded to, in the context of her past, abusive

experiences. Understandably, Chloe found these *'heart-breaking.'* Emma's birth parents appear

distant figures in Chloe's mind, contained within Emma's past.

'You've got somebody who's potentially grieving the loss of their child': building trust with

the foster carer

In the days leading up to the pre-meet, Jake and Helen had met Amy's foster carer twice,

whilst Chloe had met Emma's foster carer just once. All meetings had taken place on-line.

Establishing a positive relationship with their child's foster carer was a priority for all

participants, as Chloe describes:

> *She seemed really easy to talk to, she seemed to really care for Emma and Emma seemed*
>
> *to really care for her too, and that is a huge thing … . So, seeing her and knowing that*
>
> *we could potentially get on with her really well is a huge thing because when we come to*
>
> *the introductions eventually it will be a lot in her house with her eventually, if Emma is*
>
> *matched …* (Chloe, T1).

Chloe's need for reassurance that she will be able to get on well with Emma's foster carer

is a principal focus. Firstly, Chloe is relieved she finds Jane *'really easy to talk to.'* Then, Chloe

starts to understand and process the relationship between Emma and Jane. This feels bittersweet.

From her training, Chloe has understood that Emma's capacity to have an attachment with Jane

is a positive sign that will impact on the nature of the relationship that she may have with Emma.

However, hearing how much Jane and Emma care for one another may bring to the fore the

enormity of removing Emma from Jane's care. Before the pre-meet, Chloe is intentional and optimistic about future contact with Jane, for her own and for Emma's sake.

Similarly, soon after first meeting Amy's foster carer, the prominence in Jake and Helen's minds of developing and maintaining a positive relationship with her is clear:

Jake: the dynamic between adopters and foster carers is, is a unique one … - you've got somebody who's really excited … And you've got somebody who's potentially grieving the loss of their child they've developed a bond with … it's important that both parties get on with each other chemically kind of, … if you don't, if the foster carer doesn't like the adopters … , I think that it will be a difficult process for all parties [Helen agreeing] (T1).

Helen and Jake know that their own excitement contrasts with the foster carers' grief at the 'loss' of 'their' (the foster carer's) child. They understand that the foster carer/child relationship is far from being a transactional one. Jake feels that adoptive parents may have little influence on whether the foster carer/adoptive parent relationship works. Rather, this is contingent upon 'chemicals' and whether the foster carer likes the adoptive parent. Foster carers are perceived to hold the power.

Building a strong relationship with her foster carers seemed to Jake and Helen to be the foundation stone of a relationship with Amy. Before the pre-meet, the couple's social worker had invited them to be in touch with Kathy, with the caveat that Amy would not be included. From this, Jake and Helen commented how they had *'clicked, there was a commonality'* (T2). They felt they shared values with Kathy, and that they were *'speaking the same language.'* The couple were reassured, from their video calls, that the relationship between them and Amy's foster family would be good:

> [We were] *asking those questions which gave Kathy reassurance, that we were there for the right reasons, we knew Amy inside out from the CAR B … we actually invested our whole selves into it* (Jake, T2).

Jake's priority was to convince Kathy of the couple's suitability to become Amy's parents. Enmeshed in an acknowledgement of the foster carers' love and care for Amy, the couple accepted this. Reassuring Amy's foster carers, therefore, was Jake and Helen's first task, in building a relationship with them. At this early stage, they wanted to get to know Kathy's family, and for her to get to know theirs:

> Helen: *We were telling her about ourselves, she was telling us about herself …*
>
> Jake: *'My son's into this' and 'what does your son do' I mean, it … was nice, just natural conversation* (Helen and Jake, T2).

It is significant that Jake refers to *'natural conversation'* of turn-taking and mutual disclosure. Trust develops by either party demonstrating their desire to know each other's whole family. There are parallels with Jake and Helen's desire to see Amy's 'natural' behaviour at the pre-meet, unencumbered by the context of introductions. Ahead of the matching panel, at an earlier stage than Chloe, Helen and Jake start to build a relationship with Amy's foster family, and in doing so, gain insight into Amy's family life.

Imagining the sibling dynamic

As we have seen above, participants often viewed Amy and Emma through the lens of their experiences of parenting their birth children, for example, by looking for similarities between them. From an early stage, Chloe and her husband had started to prepare Ffion, then aged five, to have an adoptive sibling but no details about Emma (aside from her sex) had been

shared. During matching, Chloe was protective towards both Emma and Ffion, as they had both already had difficult experiences in their young lives:

> *How's [Emma] going to cope with what she's gone through, is it going to make her like this, is it going to make her like that, so we had to sort of really figure out not just now, but what is possibly going to happen in the future and how it would affect our family and our daughter [Ffion]?* (Chloe, T1).

Before meeting Emma, Chloe is anxious, whether the early adversities that Emma has experienced will have an enduring effect and whether she is making the right decision for Ffion. Helen described her family as an 'open book' in which 'nothing was taboo.' Helen's desire, shared by Jake, is to nurture a culture of open communication and honesty in her family. In a family in which mental health issues and estrangement had featured, this was a conscious, deliberate choice. Helen and Jake had encouraged their teenage daughter Lois to discuss her feelings about adoption in general, and about the match with Amy in particular. They wanted Lois to be a part of the pre-meet. Lois had identified many aspects of her childhood in common with Amy, and said she felt a 'bond' with her. She had emphasised to her parents that she wanted to be a 'sister, not a babysitter.' In these few words, we see that Lois had her own expectations of and hopes for her relationship with Amy, which she was able to share openly with her parents.

5.6 Summary of Part 1

In Part 1, I explored the experiences of Chloe, Helen, and Jake as they recalled them, just days before they took part in a pre-meet with Amy and Emma. In Part 1, I identified three super-ordinate themes: 1) *'She knows us inside and out'*: trusting the social worker relationship; 2) developing early feelings of connection and 3) becoming part of a new family constellation. In their first interview, Jake and Helen already felt confident that they wanted their match with

Amy to proceed. Though positive and hopeful, prior to the pre-meet Chloe felt uncertain about her family's match with Emma. In Part 2, drawing primarily upon interviews which took place in the days after they had attended a pre-meet, I explore participants' experiences of pre-meets and the meanings they attached to them.

5.7 Findings Part 2: Experiences of the pre-meet: Adoptive parents' experiences of attending pre-meets

In Part 2, I explore the experiences of the prospective adoptive parents in their narratives in response to questions about taking part in a pre-meet; their impressions from being with their child for the first time; their subsequent feelings about their match; their perceptions of the impact of the pre-meet and their plans concerning their match with their child. I have developed four super-ordinate themes from participants' narratives. These are shown, together with their themes, in Figure 5.3 below.

Figure 5.3: Adoptive parents. Part 2: Super-ordinate themes and themes

Super-ordinate theme	Theme
1 Understanding the whole child	• Understanding the *'real'* child • Understanding the *'natural'* child *'without us being in the picture'* • Gathering information unmediated by others
2. Providing reassurance	• Relieving anxieties: *'Come panel there's [ ] no backing out'* • Reassurance for all: *'We're moving in the right direction'*
3. Feelings of connection	• Expectations about meeting • Experiencing chemistry …? • Feeling constrained and awkward
4. Absorbing and adjusting to change	• Time to *'digest'* and *'process'* • Familiarising the child

5.7.1 Super-ordinate theme 1: Understanding the whole child

In this theme I explore how all participants valued being with the child in-person, to enable them to understand their child in a way that was qualitatively different from information gleaned from written reports, conversations, photographs, and video clips. They wanted to experience the child themselves, unmediated by others.

Understanding the 'real' child

Participants all described ways in which they felt being physically present would (and did) help them understand their child as a real person. Helen noted how friends responded to hearing that she and Jake had not yet met Amy, the child with whom they had been matched:

And they say 'have you met her yet?' 'No.' And the shock on their faces! (Helen, T1). Helen's tone revealed that she shared her friends' implicit belief, that meeting a child needed to be integral to the matching process. Knowing and understanding a person by being with them was fundamental, human behaviour. Similarly, Jake underlined the importance he attributed to meeting Amy during the matching process:

> *You are adopting a child … not a piece of paper, [laughing] it's not a kind of a case, you*
>
> *adopt an actual physical child* (Jake, T1).

Adopting a child is not just a bureaucratic or legal process involving *'a case.'* At its centre is Amy, a *'physical'* being, whom Jake feels needs to have a physical presence and agency in the matching process. Jake, Helen, and Chloe all felt that without being present with the children, they were lacking some fundamental knowledge about them, as Jake's comments reveal:

> *We feel like we know her incredibly well, because we've read so much and seen so much*
>
> *already without meeting her … But at the same time, you know, we haven't actually seen*
>
> *her, so it's very bizarre* (Jake, T1).

Jake contrasts the feeling that Amy is known to him and to Helen with the reality. He is straddling two worlds. Jake does not believe it possible to know somebody, without having been together, in person. As much as Jake is struck by the strangeness of how well he already feels he knows Amy, it would also feel strange, committing to adopt a child he had never met.

At the pre-meet, Helen and Jake sat at the same table as Amy's foster carer. They were introduced by their first names, as her friends. The couple had a few, small interactions with Amy, initiated by her, firstly, as they arrived:

> *When we got in, she said, [child's voice, pointing to an imaginary hook] 'coat off!' So, it was coat off, and I was freezing, because we were wet* [all laughing] (Helen, T2).

Then, Jake recalled:

> *She offered to share one of her soggy Maltesers* [all laughing] (Jake, T2).

Amy had asked Jake and Helen to sing for her:

> Jake: [child's voice, warm, quizzical] *'Baby shark? Insy winsey spider?' she wanted a response. I said, 'ah, ok!'*
>
> Helen: *I'm going to have to get used to singing these words, I tell you, and I've got a terrible voice!* (Jake and Helen, T2).

From their exchanges with Amy above, we see how Helen and Jake had enjoyed relaxed, humorous, and low-key interactions, led by Amy. We sense the warmth they felt towards her, and their happiness. They had developed more insights into her personality. They knew some of the songs she liked to sing and would learn more before introductions with Amy in her foster carers' home started.

Chloe had followed the guidance given to her by social workers, and unlike Helen and Jake, she and her husband had sat at a distance from Emma at the pre-meet and not interacted

with her. Nevertheless, prior to the pre-meet Chloe described how she felt it was important to be with Emma, prior to formal approval of their match:

To actually see [Emma] *in reality, you know?* (Chloe, T1)

This phrase was the culmination of a few short sentences, in which Chloe emphasised multiple times that she wanted to see Emma. Seeing a photograph of the toddler had helped, but until Chloe had seen her *'in reality,'* Emma remained unreal to Chloe.

All participants described how pre-meets had helped them to be able to visualise their child. Each participant was surprised by their child's size, finding them to be different from their expectations. Recalling seeing Emma at the pre-meet, Chloe had been surprised by:

Just how dwtty[1] she was, how small she was, she's very slight (Chloe, T3).

The use of these three synonyms, repeated in quick succession, emphasises how Chloe processed Emma's diminutive size. Chloe may have forgotten just how little and dependent a two-year-old would be. Written reports and conversations nor a photograph had conveyed this.

Understanding the 'natural' child 'without us even being in the picture'

'Natural' was a word used frequently by all participants, who each described wanting to experience the children behaving 'naturally' in a 'natural' environment. These repeated references seemed indicative of their perceptions of the artificiality of a scenario in which they met their child during traditional introductions. Participants perceived a natural environment for the children to include the play centres in which the pre-meets took place. In the following exchange, we see how Jake and Helen felt the setting would help enable them to see Amy's *'natural'* behaviour:

---

[1] In Welsh dialect, 'dwtty' means someone who is sweet or cute.

Helen: *You know, how when people come to the house, and like the child is on their best behaviour, … but this* [way, we'll] *be able to see her, observe her, because she doesn't know we're there, and her just being herself rather than -*

Jake: *Yeah,* [see] *behaviours and how she's interacting and … see her in the setting she's in, without us even being in the picture* (Helen and Jake, T1).

Jake and Helen felt that during formal introductions, knowledge of their identity/presence would affect Amy. They may only see the *'best behaviour'* version of her, not *'her just being herself.'* Chloe also felt that seeing Emma when she was unaware of Chloe's presence or identity was important:

[We are] *making sure the child's completely unaware of the situation so* [she] *can just be natural and carry on* (Chloe, T1).

Here, we can see similarities with Helen and Jake's desire to see Amy *'being herself.'* Similarly, Chloe wants to see Emma *'carrying on,'* unself-conscious of her adoptive parents' presence, and able to be *'natural.'* All participants felt the pre-meets would enable them to understand more about the children's temperaments. Chloe wanted to see how Emma reacted to her environment and events, and whether she had an ability to self-regulate. Chloe explained her hopes for the pre-meet further:

It'll just be nice to see how she interacts and see her as her own person, laughing, playing, just generally how she is day-to-day (Chloe, T1).

Before the pre-meet, Chloe described how she had a fragmented sense of Emma, and an image of her, *'fading'* her head. From the passage above, we understand that witnessing how Emma *'laughs'* and *'plays'* and is *'day-to-day'* is important for Chloe. Similarly to Jake and Helen,

Chloe indicates the importance she attributes to experiencing Emma *'as her own person'* unmediated by others.

Seeing the children interacting with their foster carer and other children at the pre-meet was important for each participant. They subsequently found this to be a powerful and reassuring experience. Chloe recalled:

> [She gave] *cuddles out and that really shows a great form of attachment for the foster carer … it was nice to see her playing with other children, because obviously from a trauma background you don't know how she'll react to other people* (Chloe, T2).

Remember, Chloe had found Emma's CAR B report and past experiences difficult reading. Her words reveal fears about parenting Emma, a child who had a *'trauma background.'* She had wondered whether Emma would be 'like' other children, whether she would be affectionate, and form attachments, enjoy being and playing with other people. This had been a concern for Chloe, for whom large gatherings were an important part of her family life. Watching a little girl who wanted *'to get stuck in and be part of it'* had been reassuring, and the relief and pleasure in her voice here are palpable. The experience was to take on a particular importance. This boisterous toddler who was full of life was in contrast with the clingy, withdrawn child glued to her foster carer's side during introductions. Chloe had seen a little girl who was sociable and joyful.

Unlike Chloe, Jake did not seek reassurance that Amy *could* play and interact with others. He and Helen wanted to understand more about *how* Amy interacted. They were able to do this at the pre-meet:

> *There were special moments of just her interacting with children, how she interacts with* [foster carer] *Kathy. She did have a tantrum at the end of the visit, … so we saw how*

> *Kathy parented her, how she responded to Kathy - that was that was worth the weight in*
>
> *gold. Because we quickly realised that you've got a child that listens* (Jake, T2).

In this short passage, Jake returns to the importance of seeing Amy - experiencing her with his senses, his own eyes. The *'special moments'* he speaks of with tenderness involve seeing Amy interacting with her foster carer, Kathy, and other children. Similarly to Chloe, Jake and Helen are developing insight into Amy's personality and behaviour, and how this could be supported.

Generally relaxed, midway through his second interview Jake appeared agitated. He and Helen had discovered that Amy's 'goodbye visit' with birth family members had taken place in the same play centre where they had met her just a few days later. Jake reflected:

> *We wanted to see - her natural behaviour ... and it's important* [the pre-meet] *is in a*
>
> *setting she's comfortable with ... However, meeting the birth parents at the same venue, I*
>
> *think ... psychologically, the, the risks are so many ... you've created ... a good memory*
>
> *and a bad memory. And will those two psychologically get confused when she gets older?*
>
> (Jake, T2).

Jake and Helen's belief they were meeting Amy in a location where she felt emotionally safe is now in question. Which version of Amy's 'natural' behaviour had he and Helen seen? His faith in social work practice is questioned. It is striking that he and Helen are already thinking about the future with Amy and the earliest memories that she may have of joining their family. Jake is concerned that she may fuse difficult memories of her goodbye visit with her birth family with memories of meeting her new family.

Gathering information, unmediated by others

Participants all shared a desire to come to their own understanding of the child they had been matched with, unmediated by others. Their reasoning, and the way they expressed this varied. Firstly, before the pre-meet, Chloe felt she had an incomplete picture of Emma:

> *The more we talk to people, the more we get a sense of her personality.* Um [pause]. *It's still hard at the moment because we have yet to meet her to put that into play* (Chloe, T1).

We saw in Part 1 how conversations had helped Chloe understand much more about Emma's personality, helping balance information about Emma's background, that she had found hard to *'digest.'* Talking had helped Chloe to *'get a sense'* of Emma. This 'sense' of Emma is only partial, however, and Chloe wants to put the information she has received 'into play.' By this, she means to interpret information from other sources and compare them with her own experiences. Seeing Emma had reminded Chloe how subjective and situated others' perspectives of the toddler had been:

> *They would talk of her being 'busy' and 'wild,' so that was quite interesting because when we saw her, we didn't actually think that she was that 'busy' and 'wild' compared to our older daughter* (Chloe, T3).

Chloe reflects on how her norms of behaviour differed from those of others. Chloe recognised her understanding of 'busy' and 'wild' differed from that of others. She needed to understand others' descriptions of Amy in the context of her own family. Similarly to Chloe, Jake wanted to check how the understanding he had developed of Amy from other sources related to experiences of Amy he had observed for himself:

> *She's very assertive and she definitely, you can see she likes to control, not so much control but she … knows what she wants, doesn't she?* (Jake, T2).

Jake and Helen had used Amy's CAR B report as a springboard from which to ask social workers and the foster carer questions, to find out more about Amy. Similarly, they discussed their experience of seeing Amy with social workers. After the pre-meet, Jake noted:

We felt confident that what we'd read is the child we see in front of us (Jake, T2).

As well as similarities, there were differences between how participants compared information from elsewhere with their own experiences. Chloe's language was impressionistic. She wanted to check whether the 'sense' of Emma that she had developed from other sources matched her own experience of her. This was in contrast with Jake's more analytic approach of 'corroborating' information.

Jake oscillated between talking about what his experiences meant for him personally and viewing them in a wider context. This was his nature and his professional training. Therefore, he considered the view that pre-meets could be substituted by photographs and videos of a child and volunteered a detailed counterview:

All the photos and videos we had [before the pre-meet] were very kind of one-sided. We just saw a very happy child, always dressed immaculately, always perfect. Always doing something really fun, in … [an] outdoor park or carving pumpkins, you know, so it's all positive (Jake, T2).

It is striking that Jake describes photographs and videos as *'one-sided;'* curated snapshots of Amy. He concludes that they present an incomplete picture of her, in a literal and metaphorical sense. Though helpful, Jake suggests they are subjective and flawed sources of information. Emotionally, problematic: who would share a photograph of a distressed or angry child, and if they did, how may they be judged? The unspoken reality in Jake's mind nods to the pressure on foster carers to present children in their 'best' light. He wants to try and understand Amy, as far

as is possible, in her entirety. Not just the 'carving pumpkins' version. As a complete human being.

5.7.2 Super-ordinate theme 2: Providing reassurance

In this theme I explore participants' perceptions of how pre-meets had helped deepen their confidence in the match with their child and provided reassurance, for themselves, for professionals and for foster carers.

Relieving anxieties: *'Come panel [ ] there's no backing out!'*

Each participant viewed matching panel as the point at which they would be fully committed to proceeding with the match. Looking back, Jake described this as the point at which the match had been *'set in stone.'* Before the pre-meet, Chloe anticipated that Panel represented an immovable point of no-return:

> *Because come panel date then is when it will become official, and there's no backing out*
>
> *then, you know?* (Chloe, T1).

Once she has attended matching panel, Chloe knows she will feel committed to proceeding with the match with Emma. Chloe's confidence in the match remains tentative and she needs to be in person with Emma, to check for what she describes as potential *'red flags.'* These would surely signal harm, perhaps danger, for her family. The pressure on Chloe to make the 'right' decision still feels enormous. She is hopeful but uncertain about the match with Emma. She has faith in a process which incrementally developed both her and professionals' confidence in the match:

> *All these little meetings we have and all this information we find out is basically for us to*
>
> *decide whether … we want to go ahead with the match but also for her social worker to*

also decide whether we are right for the match. So, every meeting makes it stronger or

weaker. And for us, at the moment, luckily, it's making it stronger (Chloe, T1).

Chloe trusts the organisational systems and behaviours to keep her family's best interests foremost. The pre-meet was a progression from various '*little meetings'* and an opportunity to help decide whether the match should progress. Chloe feels that the pre-meet will form part of the social worker's assessment; professional approval of the match is not a given. Again, Chloe steps cautiously, managing her uncertainty, hoping that her feelings will move in tandem with the social worker's judgement. Her reference to how the match feels *'at the moment'* hints at a fear that at the pre-meet, feelings could rapidly change. Prior to the pre-meet, Helen and Jake felt confident about their match with Amy. They already felt a 'bond.' Whilst Jake and Helen mention that they do not assume that their match will proceed, the possibility that it might not appears faint in comparison with its prominence for Chloe.

Uncertainties about the match with Emma had woven through Chloe's first interview. She described vividly how these feelings had dissipated after the pre-meet:

When we got in the car we were both 'oh wow, how natural is that?' And we both very

much felt like a weight had been lifted off our shoulders and we were really happy with

everything that was happening really - it almost seals the deal - you know? (Chloe, T2).

Chloe experienced a strong sense of relief and happiness after the pre-meet. As is common for her, she uses a somatic reference to describe how she feels released from a *'weight'* on her shoulders. Following the pre-meet, Chloe uses the word *'natural'* eight times, to describe how she felt about the match with Emma. It is this feeling which gives her most confidence and *'almost seals the deal.'* Nevertheless, her use of the qualifier *'almost'* highlights her awareness that whether Emma will join her family is still dependent on the agreement of others.

Similarly, Jake and Helen were aligned in their feelings that the pre-meet would, and did, enhance their confidence about proceeding with their match with Amy:

[We will be able to] *say categorically 'yeah, we do feel* [it's] *an absolute positive match'* (Jake, T1).

It made us more confident that it was a correct match (Helen, T2).

However, after the pre-meet they remained cautious:

Helen: *You don't want to get too excited. You want to see it in black and white -*

Jake: *You're driving away, and it was that uncertainty of 'will we get through panel?' and it's a difficult one* (T2).

Like Chloe with Emma, Jake and Helen knew that to become Amy's parents, they were dependent on the judgements of others. This stream of thought trickled through the narratives.

'We're moving in the right direction': reassurance for all

Each participant felt that pre-meets provided reassurance about the match for social workers, adoption panel members and foster carers. Soon after the pre-meet, Chloe observed:

It gives everyone sort of 'this is a good thing,' 'we're moving in the right direction' (Chloe, T2).

Prior to the pre-meet, Helen and Jake were considering how pre-meets could help reassure professionals:

It's a lot of responsibility for the social worker, to get it right' (Helen, T1).

The gravity of the decision that Panel make, to do that final sign off, is a massive, you know, decision (Jake, T1).

Jake viewed pre-meets as an assurance process for all parties; the final step before introductions between the child and their adoptive family started.

5.7.3 Super-ordinate theme 3: Deepening feelings of connection

In this theme I explore participants' expectations about how they would respond to their child, being physically present with them for the first time, and how this related to their actual experiences. This included their interpretations of ideas of 'chemistry.'

Expectations about meeting

Participants each had their own ways of approaching this first meeting. Helen had an open mind:

Sometimes you can have expectations and then come away a bit deflated thinking 'oh my gosh, the expectations have not been met.' So, … I say that's a good thing going in with no expectations (Helen, T1).

Reflected here is Helen's openness, which permeates her interviews. Jake compared the feelings he hoped for on meeting Amy to his recent experiences of being reunited with a family member he had not seen since childhood:

A very powerful kind of just feeling of … completeness, just … natural [which feels like knowing] *that person much deeper than I would anybody else* (Jake, T1).

Jake hoped that he would feel a *'completeness'* on first being with Amy, a child who occupies a liminal space between being both 'known' and a 'stranger.' Chloe tentatively linked her hopes with ideas of 'chemistry,' as we see below.

Experiencing 'chemistry' …?

Prior to their first interview 'chemistry' was not a concept that participants had considered in the context of adoption. Yet, each participant responded that it resonated with them; Chloe, perhaps, most of all. The passage below is taken from her first interview:

I: *So, can I ask you, is 'chemistry' something you've thought about?*

Chloe: *I haven't, but … when I met my husband … I had this gut feeling and you know … I was drawn to him … . And I believe that was chemistry. So, I would like to believe that chemistry is a thing and I would like to think that it may be part of it … it could be that gut reaction that we'll get tomorrow* (T1).

Previously, Chloe had said she had been hoping she would feel *'in her heart'* that the match was right. Here, she hopes for another bodily sensation, a *'gut reaction'* on meeting Emma. Later in her first interview, she comments:

Whether it is chemistry or whatever the word is, I suppose, … it would be nice to have that ease I suppose and you can be natural around them (Chloe, T1).

Chloe links 'chemistry' with being able to be *'natural'* around someone. She is hesitant; unsure that 'chemistry' is an appropriate term for the feeling she is hoping for. She seems to distance herself from it, hinting that an alternative term might be more apt. She continues:

Love grows – … But … I would like that initial connection where you just want to go and talk to them, you want to find out more about them, you want to be in their company, you know. I want that kind of ease to start with (Chloe, T1).

In the passage above, Chloe distinguishes between *'love'* and *'connection.'* She wanted to feel an *'ease'* with Emma from their first encounter. At the pre-meet, Chloe *did* experience the feeling of ease, perhaps 'chemistry' that she had hoped for:

We felt it was meant to be … she didn't feel like a strange child, it felt like we sort of know her, she felt like she would fit easily into our family, so it was nice, it felt quite natural, you know?

I: *I'm really curious about this phrase 'it was meant to be' - can you tell me a bit more about that?*

… if they'd turned round and said 'you can take her home now' I would've happily done that. Um, so maybe it's the chemistry we talked about. Maybe it's that in sync feeling with someone, before you even know them (Chloe, T2).

At the time of her second interview, Chloe makes multiple references to her sense that the match was *'natural.'* Having seen Emma at a pre-meet, Chloe also talks of feeling 'drawn' to her, echoing her description of meeting her husband for the first time. Similarly to Helen and Jake, though at a later stage, she now experiences a feeling that the match was meant to be. In her interview soon after the pre-meet, Chloe states that the encounter had given her *'a hope of how* [Emma] *would look when she does join our family.'* Her confidence in their match had grown and she has started to imagine Emma as part of her family.

Jake and Helen had examined Amy's CAR B in meticulous detail and identified a myriad of reasons why professionals had identified her as a potential match. They felt notions of 'chemistry' were significant in relation to 'connection' and 'bonding.' These were linked, in turn, with factors such as shared interests, preferences, and personality:

'Chemistry' for me is definitely the bond … some sort of connection, in that early start of a relationship (Jake, T1)

[It's] *things in common … . I mean, if there's nothing in common, then you've got no base, no foundation* (Helen, T1).

Helen's imagery suggests *'things in common'* provide the *'foundation'* of a relationship to be built upon; she did not need to test feelings of *'chemistry.'* Meeting Amy, Helen and Jake felt a strong, positive response to her and their feelings of connection strengthened. They noticed that they wanted to comfort her when she fell over. They had, in their minds and hearts, started to

claim her as their child. Helen and Jake spoke of feelings of enormous warmth towards Amy.

Stumbling across his words with emotion, Jake recalled meeting her for the first time:

> *Her face - she's, she's, she's got kind of an energy, it's like an energy - she's very happy.*
>
> *So, the, the impression that we get, probably the type of person that lights up a room …*
>
> *to see her in real life. It's just like, wow, **that's** Amy!* (Jake, T2).

Jake's focus here is on Amy's *'energy'* and its effect on others around her. It was only by being

with Amy *'in real life'* that Jake experienced this. We are reminded of Jake's previous

comments, of the importance of understanding and responding to Amy as *'an actual physical*

child,' not a *'case.'* Helen and Jake's strong, emotional response to meeting Amy strengthened

feelings of connection with their child.

Feeling constrained, awkward

Professionals had clearly communicated with Chloe that the pre-meet was to be an

'observation' of Emma, to see whether she and her husband were happy about progressing with

their match. The word 'observation' was unambiguous, and Chloe had understood there was to

be no interaction with Emma. For Jake and Helen, the rationale for the pre-meet seemed opaque:

> *They've not talked about the process of the* [pre-meet] *and why they do it. The purposes*
>
> *behind it* (Jake, T1).

Subsequently, their experience of arrangements was confused. Before the pre-meet, the couple

had been told that they would not have any interaction with Amy. However, on the day of the

pre-meet, they were advised that they could be introduced, as her foster carer's 'friends.' Ethical

issues from the child's perspective were a concern for each participant. Jake and Chloe felt the

children should not be told the identity of their prospective adoptive parents in case the match

did not progress. Jake was concerned an older child might guess their identity. For Helen, the

greater risks were if children were not familiarised with their prospective parents before introductions started, or if a match progressed which would not have otherwise, had the prospective parents and child met during matching.

Observing the children at a pre-meet raised some uncomfortable feelings for all participants:

> *We were going to a play centre to watch a child who didn't know us … and we were just sat there with our social worker watching a child. So, it did feel a bit of an awkward situation* (Chloe, T2).

Chloe fears being judged, and conveys feelings of discomfort, isolation, and loneliness, amidst the profundity of the situation:

> *There's other families who don't know what you're doing and don't know what you're going through* (Chloe, T2).

Seeing her child for the first time, Chloe feels she needs to contain her feelings and hide emotions from others present. Jake and Helen share Chloe's discomfort. Their earlier emphasis on the importance of seeing Amy *'acting like herself'* was in sharp contrast with their own experiences:

> *We felt like we couldn't be ourselves. … whatever the intention is of that process, you shouldn't judge the adopters because we felt like we weren't able to … be there for her and kind of play with. So, we felt a little bit like - guarded* (Jake, T2).

Jake and Helen felt their behaviour at the pre-meet was constrained by rules and circumstances. Whilst feeling unable to be themselves, they were conscious of the possibility of being judged and scrutinised by others present.

5.7.4 Super-ordinate theme 4: Absorbing and adjusting to change

In this theme I explore how participants felt pre-meets helped enable their adjustment to becoming a family, including temporal aspects.

Time to 'digest' and 'process'

During her first interview, Chloe described feeling *'literally flung into the world of adoption'* after her initial contact with the adoption agency. In this small phrase, Chloe conveys the lack of control and powerlessness she experienced in the early stages of her adoption journey. Attending two pre-meets enabled Chloe to *'think and digest'* what Emma joining her family could mean. She could absorb and internalise changes and regain some sense of control that she had lost, when she had been *'flung'* into parenthood. Similarly, before the pre-meet, Jake and Helen's narratives revealed their feelings about the prospect of becoming Amy's parents in a very short time frame:

> Helen: [excitedly] *it's literally three and a half weeks til she's with us -*
>
> Jake: … *So on that basis it's helping us process it ourselves, isn't it, because we're seeing Amy. Yes, it brings it to life for us, like, Amy actually is gonna be our child!* (Helen and Jake, T1).

We saw in Theme 1 how attending a pre-meet made the child more 'real' to each participant. Simultaneously, pre-meets also helped bring to life the prospect of becoming this child's parent. At the pre-meet, observing Amy's behaviour after she had fallen over gave Jake and Helen insights into her world, and helped them imagine their future together:

> Jake: *Amy just stood up, just scanned the room, looked for the nearest adult …*
>
> Helen: *if it was our child*

> Jake: *she'd ... run straight to us. ... So, it was ... a chance for us to ... work out what priorities that we've got with her and the ... importance of building that strong bond with her* (Helen and Jake, T2).

Jake and Helen process what parenting Amy may look and feel like to them. Having found lots of similarities with Lois at this age, at the pre-meet they found a striking difference. This helps the couple work out their priorities for parenting her.

Familiarising the child

At the time of their first interviews, Helen was the only participant to comment on the short time frame between formal approval of the match and introductions starting, from the child's perspective:

> *I mean, she's never ever, ever met us - or seen us. That is scary* (Helen, T1).

None of the participants had been told that the rationale for the pre-meet included familiarising the child with them. Nonetheless, after the pre-meet Jake and Helen considered this important:

> *So having met us already, and then photos on the table, so she could pick up and it sort of just puts it in her mind 'oh right, okay, I've met them, they were* [gentle tone, pause] - *nice.' And you know, I think it helped* (Helen, T3).

Helen felt that the pre-meet had given Amy a low-key introduction to her new parents; part of a process of familiarisation, alongside family photographs they had provided for Amy, before introductions starting. Jake agreed that the pre-meet had *'helped massively'* in this respect. Though less certain, Chloe, too, felt that Emma recognised her and her husband, from the pre-meet:

> *She did seem a little more comfortable. Whether that was because she recognised us* (Chloe, T3).

5.8 Summary of Part 2

In Part 2, I explored the expectations, hopes and subsequent experiences of Chloe, Helen, and Jake as they recalled them, in specific relation to the pre-meets they took part in with their adoptive children, Amy and Emma. In Part 2, I identified four super-ordinate themes: 1) understanding the whole child; 2) providing reassurance; 3) feelings of connection and 4) absorbing and adjusting to change. We have seen how participants experienced pre-meets as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the child they had been matched with, 'as their own person,' 'unmediated by others.' They could see the children's behaviour and relational aspects which they felt would be affected by the context of introductions, including the child's knowledge of their identity. They experienced a strong, positive response to being with their child; feelings of connection or perhaps 'chemistry,' and following the pre-meet each participant was certain that they wanted to proceed with the match. Adoptive parents reported that the pre-meets they took part in relieved their anxieties, as they anticipated after matching panel being fully committed to proceeding with their match. They started to adjust to the prospect of the child joining their family.

Arrangements for the pre-meet varied between the families, and for Jake and Helen, were changed on the day, enabling them to interact with Amy, albeit in a limited way. Jake and Helen were dismayed that the location in which the pre-meet took place was not the neutral space for Amy that they anticipated. To differing extents, participants felt they were constrained at the pre-meet, and unable to be themselves. They were conscious of the possibility of their behaviour being scrutinised and judged.

5.9 Findings Part 3: Adoptive parents' experiences after the pre-meet and their child joining their family

In Part 3, I explore participants' experiences following their pre-meet with their child. This includes their responses to questions about the child's introductions to their family, the transition of the child moving in, their journey of becoming a family, and their reflections on the significance they attributed to participating in pre-meets. Narratives revealed four super-ordinate themes, which are shown in Figure 5.4 below.

Figure 5.4: Adoptive parents. Part 3: Super-ordinate themes and themes

Super-ordinate theme	Theme
1. Building familiarisation and connection	- A marginalised sibling - Digital technology and printed photographs - Playdates: *'she took to us so well, straightaway'*
2. Early challenges and struggles	- Introductions with their child - Living together
3. Finding support and ways through challenges	- Reaching out - The passage of time, doing things 'our way'
4. Becoming and being a family	- The pre-meet from a distance - Feeling like a family - The family constellation

5.9.1 Super-ordinate theme 1: Building familiarisation and connection

In this theme I explore participants' experiences of developing familiarity and connection between their family, the child, and the child's fostering family. Participants described their birth children as marginalised in the pre-placement phase. To address this, families sometimes

employed creative strategies to try and mitigate this exclusion. To varying degrees, the families were able to build familiarity and connection with their child before the child moved in using photographs, digital technology, and playdates.

A marginalised sibling

Each participant perceived their birth children to be marginalised by the processes by which their adopted children joined their families. Whilst Helen and Jake had included Lois in the adoption process wherever possible, they felt this was not true of professionals, as Helen's comments reveal:

The process - seems like no one really wants to know how Lois feels (Helen, T1). Remember the strength of support that participants felt they had received from their social workers. In contrast, in the quotation above, Helen conveys her sense of disappointment in a process with the goal of building a newly adoptive family, in which she felt her older daughter's feelings were ignored. Participants each felt that their children needed a longer time frame and more time together, before the new siblings joined their families, so that they could get to know one another:

We pushed them to do two [playdates], but they didn't want us to do two, because they said it's all about [irritated tone] the child that's to be adopted rather than the birth children. But we disagreed with that (Chloe, T3).

Chloe *'pushed'* for Ffion and Emma to have two playdates and not one. In this one word, Chloe conveys the physical and mental energy expended and the struggle with professionals. At this early stage, Chloe feels Ffion's needs were overlooked, ostensibly in Emma's interests.

Digital technology and printed photographs

In Part 1, we saw how participants all met their children's foster carers on-line, before the pre-meet had taken place, helping them to establish a positive connection with them. Between their match being approved at panel and introductions starting, the level and nature of contact between the participants and foster carers varied in frequency, nature, and tone. Jake and Helen's social worker had given them *'free rein'* to be in touch with Amy's foster carer, suggesting contact unconstrained by formalities.

Emma's foster carer and Chloe were in touch; they met on-line, and Emma's foster carer shared some photographs of Emma via WhatsApp. However, informal, reciprocal, and frequent contact with the fostering family was dominant in Jake and Helen's narratives in a way in which it was not in Chloe's. After their match was approved at the matching panel, Jake and Helen asked whether their daughter, Lois, could join the WhatsApp group:

> *Kathy, our foster carer said 'Yes, that's absolutely fine.' So it was a start of Lois's journey, so she was sharing photos of her childhood and ... that's helped Lois massively to build that connection ... . Lois felt trusted and part of the whole process* (Jake, T2).

Jake describes Kathy as *'our foster carer'*: she has developed a relationship with his whole family. It is indicative of the authority Jake attributes to her, that he and Helen sought permission from Kathy, not a social worker, to include Lois in the WhatsApp messaging, enabling Lois to take an early, active role in building her new extended family with Amy's foster family. The participants all met their child on-line prior to formal introductions. The timing and nature of these interactions varied. Jake and Helen had already met Amy, briefly, before the pre-meet and formal approval of their match, during a planned, on-line meeting with her foster carer. In the passage below, we see how Jake and Helen experienced this first interaction:

> Helen: *they didn't announce who we were …*

Jake: *The foster carer appointment was supposed to be just with the foster carer wasn't it, but they did say she would be in the background, which is fine. So ... we had a chance to see her, but not directly ... she did ... come on the call just go 'hi' and wave ... that was special because ... that was unplanned. And just natural, which was good, it was good to see her interact* (Jake and Helen, T2).

Though unspoken, it seems all involved accepted that Amy was unlikely to remain *'in the background'* during the video call. This was a semi-planned, unofficial first encounter, in which Amy's foster carer had been entrusted to manage a low-key interaction, a *'chance to see her, but not directly.'* Jake and Helen valued this relaxed, child-led, impromptu interaction. They repeat their desire to see Amy's *'natural'* behaviour and value meeting her, outside the context of formal introductions.

Chloe and her husband's first on-line interaction with Emma took place just a day before formal introductions started. Chloe described the purpose of the meeting as an opportunity:

Just to show our faces, so that she knew who was coming to the door the next day (Chloe, T3).

Chloe felt that the video call was primarily intended to help lessen Emma's anxiety about *'who was coming to the door.'* Chloe's comment seems to emphasise, at this late stage, the 'stranger-ness' of Chloe and her husband to Emma. Asked whether she had recorded the meeting, Chloe responded:

Even though we'd been matched she wasn't ours and I don't think we would have felt comfortable recording it. Just in case it hadn't gone through properly and didn't materialise (Chloe, T3).

Though formally approved, just a day or two before introductions started, the possibility that the match with Emma might not *'materialise'* was in Chloe's mind. Respectful of formal boundaries, Chloe's comment that *'she wasn't ours'* is poignant. Later, we will see that it was many months before Chloe felt that Emma had become 'theirs' - or they 'hers.'

In the days before introductions had started, all participants provided photographs of themselves and their families, to help familarise the child with their new family. The foster carers were tasked with sharing the photographs with the children:

> *She … was able to look at photos of us all before she got to meet us, so she was able to familarise herself with our faces* (Chloe, T3).

It is Chloe's belief that the book is intended to help familiarise Emma with her new family. However, we sense Chloe's feeling that, like the video call, the purpose of the book may be limited. Emma may be able to identify her new family members' faces when introductions start but she will not know them. Significantly, this is Ffion's first active involvement in Emma joining her new family, with the inclusion of her photograph, reading a story to the sister she has not yet met.

Like Ffion, Jake and Helen's daughter Lois was involved in making materials for her prospective sister, before they had met. She made a video for Amy, which Jake and Helen showed me, after their interview, together with a video which Kathy had sent them, of Amy watching it. Soon after I left the couple, I described my experience of seeing the two videos. An excerpt from my fieldnotes is given below:

> *The video featured the teddy they had given Kathy for Amy. The teddy was at the steering wheel of the family's car, 'driving' to their home. Then, teddy meets a Peter Rabbit toy (a favourite of both Amy and Lois) in the garden, and the family's dog, catching a ball. In another*

sequence, Helen and Jake sit on a sofa introducing themselves (as 'Mummy' and 'Daddy') - singing and dancing together, to the camera, addressing Amy. Helen, Jake, and Lois read a children's book together, on what will be Amy's bed, lit by fairy lights. Lois brushes her teeth, waving at the camera. The tone is light and the soundtrack comprises Amy's favourite songs.

Helen and Jake also delighted in sharing a video that the foster carer had sent them, of Amy watching their video. In it, Amy bounces and laughs along to the music. She points and names family members (including the dog) prompted by the foster carer, who is talking to Amy whilst filming her. Subsequently, Helen and Jake comment how they will replay the video to Amy, once she has joined their family (fieldnotes, T2).

Jake, Helen, and Lois incorporated their knowledge of Amy and her preferences into the video. This included Peter Rabbit, a toy which held meaning for both Lois and Amy. They used humour to connect with Amy. Kathy has shown the family that she is actively helping Amy become familiarised with and feel connected to them. She is also enabling Jake and Helen adjust to being called 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' by hearing Amy referring to them as such.

Through a combination of seeing them at the pre-meet and photographs, in Part 2 we saw how Helen felt Amy's trust in the couple had grown. Before introductions started, Helen and Jake experienced several occasions in which, spontaneously, positively, and unprompted, Amy demonstrated she recognised her new family. In the following passage, Jake describes Amy's intervention on a video call between the couple, Amy's foster carers and professionals. The purpose of the call was to determine the timing of Amy's introductions:

She spotted us, as a small square in the bottom of the screen of about nine people, and her eyes lit up … . And she, she made a point of jumping in on the call. Pushed the button. She's like, 'Mummy, Daddy!' and Panel were laughing and she said, 'I got a

photo,' she ran off grabbed the photos brought them back and she's going 'Mummy,

Daddy' (Jake, T3).

Jake's joy at being identified and called 'Daddy' by Amy is evident. The interaction further strengthened the connection that the couple felt with this little girl. Remember, that Jake had considered the responsibilities felt by professionals placing children with their adoptive families. In this passage, he delights in the reassurance about the match for everyone present. Following this call, Panel members decided that Amy was ready to start introductions with her new family. Through her actions, words and response, Amy was already starting to embrace Jake and Helen as her new parents.

Playdates: *'She took to us so well, straight away'*

After formal approval of their match, participants met with the children and their foster carers in a play centre. These playdates were the first opportunity for Lois and Ffion to meet their new siblings. Each participant perceived all parties mutually drawn to each other. We see this clearly in responses, firstly, from Chloe:

She took to us so well, straight away … it was nice to see Emma and Ffion play and see like how they got on together, like whether they clashed at all. They didn't. They done really well together, actually (Chloe, T3).

In Part 2, we saw how Chloe had felt *'drawn'* to Emma at the pre-meet. She is relieved, that this is reciprocated. Emma had *'taken'* to her new family *'straight away.'* The earliest experience that Chloe had of the girls being together was reassuring. I asked Chloe whether, before the playdate, Ffion had been aware that Emma was her prospective sister. Chloe showed me a video made by Ffion on their way to the playdate. Emma paused her play to come and watch the video with us:

Chloe: *she knew everything. In fact, she knew - she recorded a video to give to Emma later in life.*

[Chloe plays the video on her phone]

Ffion: *we're going to Emma!!!* [excited voice] – …

Chloe: *and what's going to happen today?*

Ffion: *Emma's my sister! She's going to be my sister! …*

Chloe: [warmly, to Emma, watching and listening]: *that was Ffion, wasn't it? Saying she was very excited to meet you!* (Chloe, T3).

Earlier, we saw the difficulties for Chloe, recording her first meeting with Emma. Now she had found a creative solution, and she was using the video made by Ffion as tool to support Emma to connect her with her past.

Jake commented that the playdate was a '*more relaxed*' experience than the pre-meet. Though not yet formally ratified by the Agency Decision Maker, the match had been approved at Panel and unlike at the pre-meet, Lois was present, and they could all play with Amy. Jake described how the playdate unfolded 'naturally,' pointing to its informality, outside the formal process of introductions. Helen and Jake wanted to experience such low-key, *'natural'* interactions with Amy, before introductions started. Here, they describe their experience of the first moments of the playdate:

Jake: *there was a straightaway connection. Amy said to Lois, because of all the videos and the photos*

Helen: [child-like voice] *'Lois'*

Jake: *… and lit up with joy … Lois … was kind of **really** um touched by that instant …*

response. … I mean, it was magical, that's the only way I can describe it … she saw us and she

went, 'Mummy, Daddy' … It was just that realisation of like 'my goodness', the sheer sense of this has happened … a special moment, definitely (Jake and Helen, T3).

This was one of several 'special moments' which Jake commented were unique markers of their journey to becoming an adoptive family. Similarly to Chloe's experiences, Amy's 'instant' response to Lois strengthens the whole family's feelings of connection. Preparation enabled Amy to recognise Jake, Helen, and Lois, and she called them by their names. Jake and Helen's language conveys a sense of wonder at Amy's response to them.

5.9.2 Super-ordinate theme 2: Early challenges and struggles

In this theme I explore challenges and struggles participants experienced during introductions and soon after their child moved in with them.

Introductions with their child

Feelings of discomfort during introductions with Emma dominated Chloe's narrative. While Jake and Helen's narratives reflected an overall positive experience, they also encountered challenges during this period. Introductions with Amy were carefully planned by their social workers, with the aim of gradually building up interactions and caregiving tasks with their child. Jake described these introductions as *'meticulously planned,' 'carefully orchestrated,'* and *'carefully mapped.* The repetition of such similar phrases in quick succession underscores the sense of security he derived from the detailed, structured approach. However, Helen did not feel as at ease with all aspects of the process, as illustrated in the following exchange:

We were just like two new parents trying to like make it all fun and happy, … [but] you had to bring the discipline in as well so I think I found that hard … because you're trying to be friendly so [Amy] *likes you* (Helen, T3).

Helen's narrative reveals that during introductions the possibility that she might not be accepted by Amy is in her mind. She wants to make Amy's experience of introductions to be *'fun and happy.'* She is worried that being expected to manage Amy's behaviour may jeopardise this. For this reason, she returns to finding the experience of introductions *'hard'* twice. Helen's comments suggest she may have preferred to let her own intuition shape her interactions with Amy, rather than following any expectations or plan. Jake, however, is comfortable with a prescribed approach to building a relationship with Amy. It is possible that he is someone who feels more comfortable in an environment where there is a structured process. Both Helen and Jake felt introductions with Amy went very well. Their main challenge concerned feeling unprepared for the complexity of the adoptive parent/foster carer dynamic:

> Jake: *What we both didn't expect is the emotional connection we built with the foster carers and the emotional journey that we both went on, on the final day where she is formally handed to us, like to see the foster carers literally -*
> Helen: *crying, weren't they? …*
> Jake: *they were trying not to but they did … . And we were planning to spend a few hours … but you could see they were so emotional, they said 'actually, no, it's fine, just, kind of 'go''* (T3).

Jake, Helen, Lois, and Amy's earliest experiences of becoming a family were encased within the foster family's grief, and careful planning dissolved in emotion. The couple feel unprepared both for the emotions they witness, and the evocation of strong emotions in them. In contrast with Jake and Helen, Chloe's does not comment on the mechanics of introductions. Instead, her narrative reveals the overwhelm and discomfort that dominated her experiences. Emotional strain permeates her narrative. She grapples with a process she describes as *'weird'* and *'strange'*:

It's really hard, going into somebody else's home, being called 'Mum' and 'Dad,'

thinking 'this is my child and now I need to get to know you, even though you're a

*stranger.' … we went into the house where it's **really** intense and it's like all eyes on you,*

and it's like now is the time to meet your daughter because in ten days' time your

daughter's going to be living with you so you need to get to know her, it's quite kind of

'time's ticking' (Chloe, T3).

For Helen and Jake, their first experience of being called 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' by Amy had been joyous. For Chloe, the experience had been very different. With 'all eyes on you,' feelings of scrutiny and overwhelm are evident. At the pre-meets and playdates, Chloe had felt relaxed. She had felt a 'natural' connection with Emma and, for the first time, felt certain about their match. Here, Chloe feels trapped and pressured. Her relationship with Emma is forced and artificial, and there is no going back. 'Time's ticking' reflects Chloe's growing panic. She is on a countdown to something big, evoking urgency, like a ticking bomb. It is significant that in the passage, Chloe recalls others referring to Emma as her 'daughter.' Chloe does not feel ready for this, and we sense her intense fear. Emma no longer feels like a child whom Chloe could imagine fitting straight into her family. Instead, she is a 'stranger' to Chloe yet also, simultaneously, and confusingly for Chloe, her 'daughter.'

During introductions, we have seen how Helen is sensitive to the possibility she may be rejected by Amy. However, her narrative does not suggest that this became a reality. For Chloe, this was different:

We're saying we're 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' but we don't feel like we're 'Mummy' and

'Daddy' … she might just play with us for five minutes, but you can see she just wanted

the foster carer, she didn't want us to go near her (Chloe, T3).

Chloe highlights the ambiguity of her relationship with Emma. The *'Mummy'* whom Emma wants is Jane, her foster carer. Chloe returns to 'not feeling like Mummy and Daddy' many times:

> *It was even hard for us to say those words when we didn't feel like it at the time. And even when she moved in with us, it still didn't feel like that, you know? … it took a* **long time** *to build up to that* (Chloe, T3).

From the passage above, we see how instead of signifying a special relationship, a bond, being called 'Mummy' seemed to augment Chloe's feelings of alienation from Emma. For Chloe, 'being Mummy' denotes an actual relationship, not a 'match' that has been formally agreed. The feeling that she had become 'Mummy' would be a process which took much longer than the brief period of introductions. 'Being Mummy' involves feeling wanted and trusted by Emma, something Chloe did not experience during introductions, or for many months after.

Participants each felt frustrated that their (birth) children were not able to take part in introductions in the foster carers' homes, as Chloe describes:

> *The introductions were all about me and* [husband's name] *getting to know Emma, and Ffion wasn't allowed to be part of the introductions* (Chloe, T3).

We saw earlier that Chloe had *'pushed'* for more playdates between Ffion and Emma. Once again, her frustration is apparent, that professionals' focus was on the relationship between the adoptive parents and child, rather than the whole family. At this point, it seems Chloe felt a recipient of others' plans, lacking agency.

Living together

All three participants experienced challenges after their child moved in with them. However, these were much more significant for Chloe than for Helen and Jake, whose narratives mostly revealed a sense of ease:

> *It hasn't been as hard … I thought it was going to be, her settling in. It's been like a duck to water, really* (Helen, T3).

Helen felt braced for difficult times, after Amy moved in with them, but these had not materialised. Her chosen idiom suggests that Amy joining her new family felt natural, an easy and enjoyable process. Nevertheless, Helen and Jake's narratives revealed challenges in the settling in period. Amy was used to a different parenting style from that which came most naturally to them. Chloe also recognised that the life and parenting that Emma had experienced differed *'massively'* from those in her new home. Adjusting to her new environment, with more boundaries, different food, and a sibling of a similar age had been very hard for the little girl. The difficulties which formed the most significant part of Chloe's narrative centred on experiences of rejection and emotional distance which had continued after Emma moved in. In contrast with Jake and Helen, Chloe characterised the first few months as a *'struggle:'*

> *So, for instance, if she fell over and hurt herself, she wouldn't allow us to comfort her, she would actually hit and kick us away. Um, she didn't want us to cuddle and kiss her, or get that affection*
>
> I: *was that a shock to you?*
>
> *I struggled massively with it, um, more than my husband, because I'm the main care giver and always been the one that if … they're not very well they would come to Mummy. 'Mummy give them their medicine,' 'Mummy make it better again.' And she didn't want that, she would push us away, she would hit and kick us more* (Chloe, T3).

Her experiences in the months after Emma had moved in were painful and unexpected for Chloe. They jarred with her previous experiences of motherhood. She is longing to be able to heal Emma, to provide a sanctuary for her, to *'make it better.'* Rejection was physical. The little girl's pain and struggle to adjust to living with her new family was especially challenging for Chloe. This may have felt more unbearable, because the difficulties were not experienced equally with her husband.

Chloe described the struggles between the new siblings, Emma and Ffion, whom Chloe felt had not had sufficient opportunities to get to know one another, before Emma moved in. Chloe described how Ffion's experience differed from her those of classmates and their newborn siblings, which had shaped Ffion's expectations:

> *She wanted to be mother hen and she wanted to give her a bottle and change her nappy* (Chloe, T3).

Chloe witnessed Ffion's sense of loss, being unable to be the 'mother hen' big sister to a newborn. Instead, Emma physically lashed out at Ffion. Chloe's feelings were inextricably connected with those of Ffion:

> *They didn't know each other, and they really did struggle to get to know each other in a very intense environment* [sounds strained] … . *To see* [Ffion] *so upset and* [saying] *things like 'I don't like her, she's mean to me' 'I want you to take her back, I want you to give her back' was heartbreaking. … So, that really … stopped the process of me getting closer to* [Emma], *and then maybe her feeling that, and getting less close to me … so it was a vicious circle and we were trying to figure out how we were going to do it* (Chloe, T3).

Chloe's feelings of isolation and desperation are clear. She is trying to bond with a toddler whose behaviours were causing pain and distress to her older daughter. The task of balancing everyone's needs feels impossibly difficult and hopeless. In *'a vicious circle'* there is no escape for Chloe. Unsurprisingly, she subsequently wonders whether in adopting Emma, they had *'done the wrong thing.'*

Unfortunately, Chloe's adoption social worker went on sick leave in the days after Emma moved in with the family, and did not return. The colleague who stepped in to cover was also soon absent, due to health issues. In the following passage, Chloe recalls her experiences:

> *We were left - it did feel a bit like a dump and a run situation – … because of the short staffed-ness I think … . If we were really struggling, we could pick up the phone 'we need you' and they would be here. But we* [didn't] *get that sort of constant contact then* (Chloe, T3).

Chloe deftly conveys the enormity of the impact of the sudden disappearance of her social worker. Chloe's family has been left without support at this time of intense vulnerability. We understand she sees it as a failure of the system, not of any individual. We understand from the passage that an arrangement in which the onus was on Chloe to ask for support was ineffective.

5.9.3 Super-ordinate theme 3: Finding support and ways through challenges

In this theme I explore participants' experiences of seeking and finding support during the weeks and months following their child's move into their family. I also examine how participants' narratives revealed that the passage of time and their efforts to navigate challenges independently contributed to their adjustment and progress.

Reaching out

All participants found support from individuals after their child moved in with them. The nature and role of those individuals differed between the two families. For Chloe, early and continual support from her mother and two on-line sessions with a psychologist were of particular significance. For Jake and Helen, on-going contact with Amy's previous foster carers was important, as was the input of a dedicated life journey social worker. Community support from a Daddies' club that Jake attended with Amy was also welcomed.

In the weeks after Emma was placed with Chloe, the family had been advised to go into what Chloe described as a *'mini lockdown.'* This had involved not seeing friends and family, with the intention that she and her husband could focus on bonding with Emma. Chloe was very close to her mother, who had come to stay after Chloe had given birth. She found separation from her hard to tolerate:

> *We actually broke that rule and after 2 weeks on ourselves,* [Mum] *said 'you know, this is so hard on you, you need your Mum here, you know, looking after you, to support you.' So, they did actually come down to support for the weekend. And um, that helped hugely, that helped massively* (Chloe, T3).

Chloe found the isolation experienced in her new mothering role unbearable. It is striking that Chloe describes *'breaking the rule'* which had restricted her from her usual support channels. She needed stability and support provided by her existing family to help forge her new one. This need was such that she was now willing to go against professionals' guidance, to access the intimate support from her mother that no-one else could provide. Ten months after Emma moved in, her mother's support endured:

> *We still struggle to think* [sing-song voice] *'how are we going to do this?' … I constantly am like 'why's she behaving like that?' 'could it be because of what she's been through?'*

> *… my Mum will say 'are you over thinking it? If she were your birth child, you'd just say*
>
> *she's just being two!'* (Chloe, T3).

Chloe's 'sing-song' tone suggests she experiences a frequent, exhausting dialogue with Emma's past. She seems bewildered, trying to make sense of behaviours which are unfamiliar to her. It is Chloe's mother who provides a sounding board, enabling Chloe to see Emma's behaviour through a lens other than that of trauma, or adoption. One of the difficulties that Chloe faced was that Emma singled her out for rejection, preferring male family members. Through the adoption team, Chloe received support from a psychologist, who provided insights into Emma's behaviour:

> *To **her** women let her down, so she was too scared to attach to me. Or let me in – because*
>
> *she was scared that I would leave her … she didn't want Mummy to care, she didn't want*
>
> *Mummy to do anything* (Chloe, T3).

We sense Chloe's developing awareness of the psychological presence for Emma of her birth mother and foster carer, and how this may be impacting on her own experience of becoming Emma's mother. Chloe refers to herself in the third person, as 'Mummy.' We understand that the psychologist had helped Chloe depersonalise Emma's rejection of her. The rejection was of her 'Mummy' role, not of her, *per se.* Though still painful, this had made Chloe's experience more bearable. Drawing on guidance from training Chloe had received combined with advice from the psychologist, male family members redirected all Emma's basic care needs (such as hair brushing, nappy changing and nose wiping) to Chloe. For Chloe, this had been *'a big part of us cracking it'* like a code, which she had been provided with tools to solve. She had found a way into Emma's trust.

In Part 1, we saw how Jake and Helen had already started to mentalise Amy. Prominent in their minds were the grief and losses Amy had experienced, including those of leaving her foster family. Unlike Emma, Amy was supported by a dedicated life journey worker, who worked with her birth, foster and adoptive families. This focus, helping Amy truly understand her identity and the important people who were connected to her, was a frequent, reoccurring theme in the narratives of Jake and Helen in all three interviews:

> *They said that's the thing with the life journey, is weave in the full journey, not just focus on that one chapter* (Jake, T3).

The professional input had helped Helen and Jake see life journey work as a dynamic process, to be 'woven' into daily life. The *'one chapter'* referred to by Jake is Amy's removal from her birth parents' care. Jake values and celebrates her life in its entirety. Jake has empathy for Amy's birth family and her foster family, and a desire to help Amy understand her life as a coherent narrative, an unfinished book, not just a chapter. Her past comprises much more than the reasons why she was unable to live with her birth family.

After Amy moved in with Jake, Helen and Lois, their relationship with Amy's fostering family continued to develop and contact was regular. Following guidance from the social worker, Amy only had online contact with Kathy and Carl for six months after she moved out, or met with them in places Helen and Jake described as *'neutral.'* After six months, Jake and Helen took Amy to their home, where she looked in the bedroom she had once had, and saw it was now occupied by two *'babbas,'* as Jake describes:

> *It was nice for her to meet the foster children because it helps explain the story, 'there's two children also being cared for now' and then you can replay the story back to her* (Jake, T3).

Jake and Helen's strong, familial relationship with Amy's former foster carers supported Amy to make sense of her past. The couple know that Amy will need to have a clear narrative of how she came to live with them repeated, perhaps many times. Jake and Helen found that after Amy joined their family, their relationship with Amy's foster carers provided access to what they described as the *'small, human stories'* of her life, which were not written down. Helen and Jake felt that knowing more detail about Amy's life provided colour and made her sense of her past more whole. Their relationship with Kathy and Carl also helped Jake and Helen develop strategies to manage Amy's behaviour, in relation to food, for example:

> *The advantage of seeing the foster carers is we've understood what those contact centre visits were like … all her siblings would rip out all of her stuff, eat everything and take all the toys and she would be left with nothing* (Jake, T3).

Jake and Helen could share with Amy's former foster carers challenges that they were experiencing. Jake now understands how experiences with Amy's birth family continued to impact on her and his compassion for her deepens still further. He conveys that much of Amy's past could have been unknown to Amy, lost, had the two families not established trust and an on-going relationship.

The passage of time, and doing things 'our way'

All participants' narratives revealed how the passage of time had helped them work through any difficulties with their child. Helen and Jake noticed how Amy became calmer at mealtimes, after sticking to the routine that Kathy had suggested. The passage of time also helped Chloe develop a bond with Emma:

> [The foster carer has done] *an amazing job, she was very loving towards Emma, so [that] helped us with the fact that Emma could trust adults … after a while she was able to*

attach to us. So, I think that's definitely the foster carer where that's come from … It's

just hard transitioning, it just takes time (Chloe, T3).

From the passage above, Chloe recognises the importance of the attachment between Emma and her former foster carer. She felt that this had created foundations from which she and Emma could build their relationship. This attachment could not be 'gifted' from Emma's foster carer to Chloe, however. It took time to build. This emphasis on the passage of time and struggle was repeated by Chloe:

We knuckled down and we worked it out … it was just 'keep on going, keep on going'

and eventually we broke those boundaries down (Chloe, T3).

'Knuckling down' suggests a task they addressed with an energy and gritty determination. We are left in no doubt that this period felt hard, emotional work for Chloe. Alongside the element of time, she is focused and resilient.

Participants all described ways in which they had found their own ways of parenting, and bonding as a family. Gradually, Helen and Jake felt able to relax some of the routines that Amy's foster carers had established with her. For example, they became more flexible about her bedtime routine. They described these changes as being able to follow their *'natural'* parenting style. The choice of the word *'natural'* nods to the adaptations that they had made in their approaches to parenting Amy, compared with their older daughter. It indicates some of the constraints they felt, in parenting a child who has already experienced others' parenting. We understand that being able to relax into their *'natural'* parenting style felt an important adjustment.

Chloe's narratives revealed her consciousness, that aspects of her parenting style differed from Emma's foster carers. Also, having a new sibling of a similar age with whom they had to share attention and toys had needed adjustment for both Emma and Ffion. This had taken time.

Gatherings and holidays were an important part of Chloe's family life, in which her family bonded. Chloe rejected the advice of professionals, not to take Emma on holiday in the months after she joined the family. She felt this had benefitted the whole family:

> *Though she played up quite a lot on holiday, when we brought her home that's when I found it changed, because she was actually cuddling and kissing me then. …So, once she knew that she was safe and she was coming home with us, she was a lot more loving towards me … we've actually done a lot of holidays with her now, we feel it benefits us* (Chloe, T3).

From the passage above, we see Chloe's developing insight into Emma's inner world. Chloe recognises that Emma's feelings of being unsafe had created a barrier between them, both emotional and physical. Chloe has developed confidence in making judgements based on her own instincts, and feels relief when Emma becomes more loving towards her. Chloe draws upon her previous parenting experience and the norms of her family life. She is clear, that benefits for Emma cannot be separated from those for the whole family, and vice versa.

5.9.4 Super-ordinate theme 4: Becoming and being a family

In this theme I explore participants' perspectives on the lasting significance of the pre-meet. I also delve into their perceptions of what it meant to become and be a family, along with their reflections on who they considered to comprise 'family.'

The pre-meet from a distance

In their third interviews, all participants again recalled pre-meets as a turning point at which they had felt certain about proceeding with their match:

> *It was less pressure on us, … because we hadn't signed that bit of paper and we could just comfortably meet her, and see what she was like before going forward* (Chloe, T3).

We are reminded of how in Part 2, we saw that all participants perceived pre-meets as the final step in the matching process, an opportunity to pause before their final decision was made; to corroborate and build on information received from other sources. What is particular about Chloe's narratives is the way in which they reveal the pressure she experienced, which the pre-meet had helped relieve.

Findings presented in Part 2 showed how the sense of connection participants experienced with their child at the pre-meet had been central to their decision to proceed with the match. In their final interview Jake suggested that attending the pre-meet had been one of the most important parts of the matching process. *'Corroborating'* information they had read and heard about Amy by being with her had been central to feeling comfortable about proceeding, he said. Ten months after they had first met their daughter, Jake and Helen's narratives revealed a further level of significance:

> *That* [pre-meet] *for us is a special moment we can share with Amy when she's older, because … there was that connection and we made that choice to want to continue with the process … . So,* [we can say] *it genuinely **was** from the heart. It wasn't us just … reading loads of reports to make a decision to adopt you, we actually met you, fell in love with you as our child and wanted that process to continue* (Jake, T3).

Like Chloe, Helen and Jake experienced meeting Amy as an important, human element in the matching process. They anticipated questions that Amy might ask, about how she joined her adoptive family. The pre-meet had played a leading role in how they had become a family. Helen and Jake described how they would tell Amy that ***she*** had been an active participant in the process. They wanted her to know that their decision *'genuinely **was** from the heart.'* That they had wanted to become her family having met her. Not just *'reading loads of reports'* and talking

with people about her. It is striking that, in the passage above, Jake starts to address Amy directly; *'we actually met you, fell in love with you as our child.'* He is rehearsing future conversations he will have with his daughter.

Feeling like a family

By their final interviews, participants were all the legal parents of their children. For Jake and Helen, this had been an important marker, and an anniversary they would celebrate. The change in legal status was important for Chloe, too; the family shared the same surname. Narratives each conveyed a strong sense of being settled and established as a family unit. Helen felt like *'we've always had her.'* Such comments were typical of each participant, conveying a strong sense that life without their children was now unimaginable, as Chloe described:

> She **is** our daughter now, we **feel** like she is our daughter, Ffion will instantly say *'she's my sister'* without even a question. … You know, we'll tell her *'we love you,'* she'll say *'I love you.'* … things have changed **hugely**, luckily, and now watching them play and laugh and cuddle … so now, they are a lot closer, that makes it a lot easier too (Chloe, T3).

From Chloe's narrative, we see how Ffion claims Emma as her sister, *'instantly'* refers to her as such without *'even a question.'* This is central to Chloe's feelings of her mother/daughter relationship. Chloe acknowledges the huge change in family relationships with relief. For Jake, the strength of his feelings of connection with Amy had come as a surprise:

> I never thought I'd feel like that as adoptive parents but I genuinely just feel she is our child as in … I feel like I know her inside out, just as I know Lois. We've got to know her traits, her mannerisms and that does take a while to get used to because when you first have her, you're going by what you read and what you expect to see whereas now, I

genuinely can look at her and I can pre-empt what she's going to do and it took us

probably about seven, eight months to get to that point (Jake, T3).

There is delight in Jake's voice. He has reached a point of understanding, knowing Amy as well as his birth daughter; 'inside out.' This had taken time. The connection between Jake and Amy is strong; 'I genuinely feel that she is just our child': their relationship does not need any qualifier. Helen's narrative frequently reflected her uncomplicated and accepting approach to life and the role she felt that Amy's personality played in developing feelings of connection:

Jake: *With a baby, it becomes the norm as you grow up with them but with a child, … you can't get to that point until you've spent a long while with her.*

Helen: *She's an easy character to … get to know though* (T3).

This remark is typical of Helen, who describes Amy as a *'happy-go-lucky'* toddler. She is focused on Amy's personality as a key determinant of how she has settled into her new family. Similarly, Chloe experiences Emma's personality and behaviours at the centre of the development of family cohesion:

*At first when she was pushing me away and rejecting me, it was when she started loving me back when we broke that boundary … When she let me in, when she started giving me kisses and cuddles … when she started trusting me a lot more and allowing me to do stuff. And, I felt like her **Mum,** when she allowed me to **be** her **Mum** [gentle laugh]* (Chloe, T3).

Chloe believed it was Emma's behaviours that determined when Chloe felt able to be her 'Mum.' Chloe's experience of becoming Emma's Mum had felt one of loving, but of not being, or feeling, loved back. Now, that had changed. This was evidenced in reciprocal, physical touch and affection; in 'kisses and cuddles.'

The family constellation

Chloe's narratives underlined the significance of her extended family, and Jake and Helen indicated that Amy's former foster family (the carers and their son) had become prominent family members. Amy's birth family also occupied a strong psychological presence for Jake and Helen. Firstly, we see how Chloe viewed Emma in relation to the wider family:

> *She's absolutely amazing with my Mum and my Dad and my sister ... we're all quite boisterous, ... she's quite loud herself, so she fits in, absolutely perfectly, so that's great* (Chloe, T3).

Remember, from reading and hearing about her and at the pre-meet, Chloe had been drawn to Emma's high energy. In the passage above, Emma's energy and enjoyment of large, family gatherings had helped her belong to the wider family. Chloe sees that Emma is 'amazing' with her new grandparents, who have established a relationship with their granddaughter easily. Whilst all participants remained in touch with the foster carers, narratives suggested divergence in these relationships. Chloe describes her experience:

> *The foster carer was … **very** loving … it is a job, it is a passion, yes, we did get to know her and we are still close to her now, and we met up before Christmas and you know,* [and] *we'll ask them to come to* [Emma's] *birthday* (Chloe, T3).

Contact with Emma's foster carer may not have been as regular, or as informal, as Chloe had hoped for. Chloe feels that the foster carer was very loving towards Emma, and they meet up for festivities. Yet, this does not feel like the *'pick up the phone'* relationship she had hoped for. Her comment *'it is a job'* seems to hint at an explanation of some emotional distance. This was in contrast with the closeness between Jake, Helen, and Amy's former foster family:

> Helen: *The other day we were going out for a walk and you filmed her and she said,*
>
> *'Hiya Kathy, I'm on my scooter, look how good I am.'*
>
> Jake: *Yeah, so she thinks that's normal, and Kathy sends a message back* (T3).

Here, the intimacy between all parties is apparent. They have developed an everyday, informal relationship, typical of extended family. This is valued by the couple. Amy can be in touch with Kathy directly and regularly, and initiate contact herself. Interestingly, the couple mention that not all professionals had supported on-going contact with Amy's foster carers after the move, leading Jake to make the following observation:

> *I think if Kathy and Carl hadn't been welcoming, you probably would have taken Amy*
>
> *and think 'Oh well, you know, that's it'* (Jake, T3).

Jake attributes the strength of their relationship to the determination and desire of each party to remain part of the others' lives. Tellingly, he and Helen speak of a shared 'chemistry' and 'humour,' which had strengthened the relationship. However, from the quotation above, we see how precarious this had been. Amy's birth family were also often present in the narratives of Helen and Jake:

> Helen: *It's not for us to say they're not her parents, because they are*
>
> Jake: *and … when she's older, what's to say those birth parents have completely*
>
> *transformed their lives … and want to make contact?* (T3).

In the passage above, Helen and Jake appear aligned in their thoughts and feelings. The couple attribute value to talking with Amy about her birth parents; this is normalised, and part of everyday family life. They appear open to the idea that Amy's birth parents may *'transform'* their lives in the future and could have a greater presence in Amy's life.

5.10 Discussion

In this chapter, I address the overarching question: What are prospective adoptive parents' experiences of the role of pre-meets in the formation of newly adoptive families? Interviews with participants were conducted at three distinct time points, allowing for an exploration of their experiences within the broader context of their adoptive child joining their family. The use of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) in this chapter's design provided participants with the opportunity to engage with complex, ambiguous, and emotionally charged subjects. This approach facilitated a thorough examination of individual experiences, uncovering their unique meanings (Smith, 2015). I am unaware of any other studies that specifically examine prospective adoptive parents' experiences of pre-meets, or that use an interpretive phenomenological approach.

This discussion is organised around key themes that span the interviews that took place at three time points. The themes are: 1) Adjustment 2) Confidence; and 3) Connection.

Adjustment

Kirk (1964) observes that adjustment to adoptive parenthood presents distinct challenges compared with non-adoptive parenthood. This includes the lack of markers (such as a pregnancy) that aid non-adoptive parents in adjusting to their changing status. Like other studies (Soares et al., 2023), motivations to expand their families and philanthropic ideals were driving factors in participants' desires to adopt their children. However, as described by Kirk and others (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Wood & Tasker, 2021). fertility challenges and losses were inherent in their journeys to adoption. Unlike non-adoptive parents, parenthood entailed navigating bureaucratic and emotional obstacles (Dance & Farmer, 2014; Kirk, 1964)

and a reliance on the judgement of others as to their suitability as parents (Solnit et al., 1973). Such challenges permeated participants' narratives.

MacDonald (2016) and Wood & Tasker (2021) have written about the considerable adjustments and adaptations family members must make in their transition to becoming an adoptive family. MacDonald has explored how societal perceptions of adoption shape the experiences of adoptive parents in family formation, navigating public openness and difference, and highlights the stigma and cultural narratives surrounding adoption. Wood and Tasker (2021) explore the concept of 'unsafe uncertainty' (Mason, 1993) in relation to adoptive parenthood, emphasising the necessity for professionals to provide support to help adopters move to a position of 'safe uncertainty.'

Adoption disruptions have been associated with various parental factors during the transition period. These include unrealistic expectations, an idealised perception of adopted children, and motivations for adoption (Goldberg, 2009; Palacios et al., 2019; Randall, 2013; Rushton & Dance, 2004; Selwyn et al., 2015). It is therefore of particular significance that in my research, adoptive parents indicated that pre-meets helped them in the early stages of their adjustment to their forthcoming parental roles. This included making their new status as parents feel more real, and helping them process their transition into parenting. Seeing their children at the pre-meet helped participants prepare mentally and emotionally for parenting this child and allowed them to envision the children as part of their family. Participants felt attending pre-meets made the process feel genuine and tangible.

Sibling relationships in newly formed adoptive families can be both stabilising and challenging (Meakings, Coffey, & Shelton, 2017). Kirk's theory of adoptive relationships centers on the roles of adoptive parents and child in family formation and does not take account of

sibling relationships. In my research, in parallel with their parents, children already in the adoptive family lacked markers and scripts typically associated with their new role; becoming an adoptive sibling. Ffion, for example, expected her new sibling's arrival to be like those of her friends, who had welcomed newborns. She wanted to play the 'mother hen' to her new sister. Instead, her new sibling pushed her away. Like findings of other studies, families needed more opportunities for the prospective siblings to get to know one another, before the adoptive child joined them (Lewis & Selwyn, 2021). They also needed support to develop the sibling connection (Meakings et al., 2017).

Confidence

Matches were identified by adoption social workers rather than adopter-led approaches. Concurring with other studies (Adoption England, 2024; Featherstone, Gupta & Mills, 2018; Ruch et al., 2018), participants found building trusting relationships with adoption professionals played a key role in their confidence in the matching process. Challenges were alleviated by consistent relationships with the same adoption social workers who remained involved throughout the assessment and matching processes. The strength of these relationships underpinned confidence in the professionals' ability to find the right match.

Studies by Kohn-Willbridge et al. (2021) and Selwyn and Meakings (2015) highlight difficulties experienced by adoptive parents when the adopted child differed significantly from their expectations. Conveying a child's personality through written or verbal information presents social workers with significant challenges (see, for example, Quinton, 2012; Cousins, 2011). Before the pre-meet, participants commented that they had so far relied on subjective information mediated by others - the 'middle men' to whom Kirk (1964) refers. Prospective adopters wanted to understand their matched children in-person, using their own frames of

reference. They wanted to see the child behaving 'naturally' - away from the artificiality of introductions and unencumbered by knowledge of their prospective parents. Participants described how experiencing their children's energy, hearing their voices, and observing how they played and interacted with others developed their confidence in their match.

Matching is a central part of an adopter's journey to parenthood, and one which is inevitably characterised by uncertainties (Quinton, 2012; Cousins, 2011). As Dance et al. (2008) note, matching is often fraught with emotions, including hope, fear, and guilt, which may hinder prospective adoptive parents' ability to articulate doubts. Adopters' fear of jeopardising future adoption prospects can further complicate their capacity to raise concerns they may have (Yap, 2016). Whilst practice guidance advocates for sufficient reflection time during introductions and the option to withdraw from their match if necessary (Argent & Coleman, 2012; Byrne, 1999; Browning, 2015), Selwyn & Meakings, (2015a) found that this does not always occur in traditional introductions.

Like other studies (Triseliotis et al., 1997; Lowe et al., 1999; Farmer et al., 2010a), prospective adoptive parents in my research viewed pre-meets as providing opportunities to be with their child and confirm (or otherwise) their wish to proceed with the adoption process, in circumstances which felt less pressured than introductions in the foster carer's home. Although authors such as Byrne (1999) and Quinton (2012) underline the importance of understanding matching as a process and not a one-off event, like findings in studies by Selwyn et al. (2015), participants unanimously viewed formal approval of their match at panel as irreversible. Pre-meets provided them with relief from the anxieties surrounding this pivotal decision, with participants reporting greater confidence and calmness in their approach to introductions with their children than they would otherwise have experienced.

Connection

Prospective adoptive parents often seek connections with their matched child, developing a sense of 'destiny' (Marre & Bestard, 2009; Farmer et al., 2010a). In my research, after reading and hearing about their child, participants noted traits they felt they shared with the child, such as sociability and energy, and like other studies (Paine et al., 2019), highlighted humour as crucial for building bonds. Photographs shared during matching often help adoptive parents form attachments, turning the child into a relational figure. Cartwright (2003) compares these images to a coveted family photograph such as a foetal sonogram, symbolising an imagined future family member. Grant and Lury (2020) report some practitioners' views that photographs can evoke strong emotional reactions, potentially clouding judgment. However, Marre and Bestard (2009) suggest that such emotional reactions may be positive, as perceived resemblance bridges biological and adoptive kinship. In this study, during matching, photographs were shared with prospective adoptive families, albeit to differing extents. These photographs played an important role in enabling parents to envision their children as family members, helping develop a sense of connection.

The role of 'chemistry' in matching has underpinned developments in adopter-led approaches (e.g., Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013; Narey, 2015). A lack of 'chemistry' is sometimes linked to disrupted adoptions (Cowan, 2022). In general, interpersonal chemistry refers to an instant emotional and psychological connection (Ceccoli, 2004; Swann, Sellers & McClarty, 2006), though few studies (e.g., Selwyn & Meakings, 2015b; Farmer et al., 2010a) explore its meaning in adoption contexts. Farmer et al. (2010a) found that their first meeting with their child was the point at which prospective adopters often experienced they 'clicked' with them. In my research, before the pre-meet, all participants believed that 'chemistry' was

important in human relationships, although the meanings they attributed to the term varied. Sometimes, it simply meant 'things in common.' After taking part in the pre-meet, participants' narratives revealed feelings of joy, destiny, and connection with their matched child. Attending the pre-meet developed the adopters' deep sense of emotional connection with their child, and they began to embrace the children as 'theirs' - both emotionally and psychologically. At the time of their final interview, one participant revealed that he imagined future conversations that he would have with his daughter, telling her that she had played an important role in the matching process; that her family had chosen to proceed with the adoption based on meeting her.

As Lewis (2018) found in her study of the experiences of adoptive parents meeting their child for the first time, participants in this study were conscious of being observed and judged throughout the pre-meet and found the scenario's artificiality uncomfortable. They were also acutely aware that their match might not be approved. Concurring with findings of Kirk (1964) and Solnit et al. (1973), participants in my research conveyed how they needed to navigate feelings of a growing connection with their matched child whilst managing this uncertainty.

The importance of developing familiarity between a child and their adoptive family post-match approval but pre-introductions is well recognised (e.g., Fahlberg, 1994; Schofield & Beek, 2018). Recent approaches emphasise gradual connection-building, considering the child's losses in adoption (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; National Adoption Service & Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.; Beek et al., 2021). Participants indicated that their child had started to recognise them, from the pre-meet. Photographs, videos, and toys from prospective parents, shared effectively by foster carers, are key in the process of building familiarisation and connection, and provide an early opportunity for a child's adoptive family and foster carer to work together (Blackmore et al., 2020). In the current study, Amy's prospective adoptive family

created a video for her, to introduce Amy to her new family in a way that felt engaging and familiar. Her foster carer used the video to create a reciprocal exchange. This played a meaningful role in easing her transition while strengthening relationships between her, her foster carer, and her adoptive family. The video helped support open communication (Brodzinsky, 2016) and develop an 'entrance story' for Amy about how she joined her family (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001; Kranstuber Horstman, 2011).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital media use in building and sustaining relationships increased significantly (Nguyen et al., 2020). While digital communication risks losing sensory and contextual knowledge important for relationships (Broadhurst & Mason, 2014), research by Copson et al. (2022) highlights its potential to support children's transitions into adoptive families. In my research, before introductions, all participants had online contact with their child's foster carer and, in some cases, with their child. Once their match was approved, Helen and Jake had significant online interaction with Amy's foster family which strengthened their connection with Amy. In contrast, Chloe's online contact with Emma and her foster carer was more limited. Consequently, whilst this contact appeared to have helped familarise all parties with one another, it did not appear to have developed connection between them in the way it had done for Helen and Jake.

After their matches were formally approved, both families took part in playdates (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017), marking the first meetings between children already in the adoptive families and their new siblings. For Helen and Jake, hearing Amy call them 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' during the playdate, and call their birth daughter by her name, was profoundly affirming (Jones & Hackett, 2012). For Chloe, seeing Emma and her birth daughter playing

together had strengthened her feelings of connection with Emma, and provided further reassurance about the match.

A period of introductions in the foster carer's home followed the playdates. Research identifies various challenges that may hinder introductions, such as foster carers' unmanaged grief (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014), strained dynamics between foster carers and adoptive parents (Neil et al., 2020; Lewis, 2018; Selwyn et al., 2015; Browning, 2015), and rushed introductions (Selwyn et al., 2015). These challenges were evident in participants' experiences. Jake and Helen noted how the foster family's grief overshadowed their family's introductions with Amy. Chloe described feeling trapped in a stranger's house. Participants' experiences echoed findings in other studies in which prospective adoptive parents have felt pressured, rushed, and scrutinised during introductions with their child (Selwyn et al., 2015; Lewis, 2018), whilst trying to build feelings of connection. Attending the pre-meet allowed Chloe and her husband to mentally retain their initial experience of Emma at the pre-meet, providing a reference point for comparison during formal introductions.

Approximately ten months after moving in, participants reflected on how spending time together had gradually deepened their connection with their child. However, other factors were also significant. In the Care Enquiry (2013), Janet Boddy describes relationships as the *'golden thread'* in children's lives (p.2). Maintaining relationships significant to a child is established in law (Children Act 2014). Specifically, the importance of maintaining connections between children and their former foster carers has gained attention (e.g., Beek et al., 2021; Browning, 2015; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.; Boswell & Cudmore, 2014). After Amy moved in, Jake and Helen developed a close relationship with Amy's foster family, and enjoyed everyday exchanges of information on WhatsApp, which

might commonly be found in grandparent/child relationships. The foster carers shared *'small human stories'* from Amy's past that had not previously been disclosed, and helped equip Amy's family with strategies to support her. Together with highly valued support from Amy's life journey worker, this relationship helped the family form a coherent narrative of Amy's past, aiding her adjustment and development (McAdams, 2001).

Research undertaken by Meakings et al. (2018) as part of the Wales Adoption Cohort Study emphasises the importance of adoption support in newly adoptive families, which may be challenged by staff turnover (Selwyn & Meakings, 2015a). At her third interview, Chloe noted a lack of support from her adoption social worker due to sickness absence. Instead, she relied on her mother and short-term intervention from a psychologist appointed by children's services. This support was invaluable in helping to better understand her daughter's behaviour and support their relationship-building.

In this chapter I have explored the experiences of a small group of prospective adoptive parents who took part in a pre-meet with their child. I have done so within the wider context of the children joining their adoptive families, and have considered the meanings that the parents attributed to their experiences. In the following chapter I explore the experiences of foster carers, taking part in pre-meets with children in their care.

Chapter 6: Foster carers' experiences of pre-meets

In previous chapters, I have explored the experiences and views of adoption managers and adoptive parents in relation to pre-meets. In this chapter, I explore the experiences of foster carers who had each taken part in multiple pre-meets. I draw upon interviews I undertook with seven participants from five families.

6.1 Chapter aims

The key questions this chapter aims to address are:

1) What are foster carers' experiences of pre-meets? and

2) What role do they perceive pre-meets play in relation to how children join their adoptive families?

6.2 Background

In Wales in the year ending 31 March 2024, 4,955 children were living with approximately 3,800 foster families. This represents 69 percent of the 7,198 children in care looked after away from home (Welsh Assembly Government, 2024). The number of fostering families who care for children waiting to be adopted is not recorded. Research evidence has shown escalating challenges in both the recruitment and retention of foster carers have led to a shortage of fostering families in the United Kingdom (Ott et al., 2023; The Fostering Network, 2024.) Foster carers' experiences of a lack of support, feeling undervalued and not respected by social work teams were cited as key contributors to the crisis (The Fostering Network, 2024). In Wales, these issues informed the priorities of the National Fostering Framework Final Report 2018-2021 (National Fostering Framework, n.d.). Undertaken as one of the major strands of work designed by the Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Group, the Framework

states that foster carers should be respected as professional childcare colleagues, and fully involved in decision-making.

The fostering role is unique. Foster carers are required to meet the needs of a child on behalf of a corporate parent (the local authority or Trust), within a regulated framework (Nutt, 2012). For optimal development, children need to receive sensitive, responsive care, characterised by warmth, affection, and intimacy (World Health Organisation, 2004). The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services in England and Wales set out the entitlement of a child in foster care to grow up in a loving environment and to be treated in the same way a good parent would treat their own child (Department for Education, 2011). Foster carers therefore provide for a child's physical, emotional, and psychological needs, and all other markers of 'good parenting,' whilst working within a framework at odds with many aspects of 'normal' family life. Simultaneously, they hold public and professional understandings of care regarding children, who are subjected to bureaucratised regulations and protection within the formalised childcare system, and a more personalised understanding of care that depends on a particularised and emotional bond between an individual child and an individual carer (Nutt, 2002; 2006; 2012).

Family boundary ambiguity is a useful concept in helping to understand family composition in fostering families and the role of members within it (Boss & Greenberg, 1984). The impact of this ambiguity has been considered in the fostering research (Boss, 2006; Twigg & Swann, 2007; Thomson & McArthur; 2009). One of the starkest aspects which differentiates the role of the foster carer parenting a child who will move on to adoption and other parenting roles is that the foster carer will support that child to move on to a new family. This is the case for each foster carer in this study. Recent developments in adoption practice promote on-going

contact between a child and their former foster family, once the child has moved on to adoption (see, for example, National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.; Boswell & Cudmore, 2017). However, research has highlighted the difficulties of children and foster carers staying in touch, once the child moves in with their adoptive family (see, for example, Swain, 2016).

Foster carers generally contribute to developing children's profiles for family finding activities (Farmer et al., 2010a) and provide written reports of day-to-day care of a child, which are included in the child's CAR B. However, research evidence suggests that foster carers have little involvement in helping identify the child's adoptive family. Although it may be considered 'desirable,' meeting the wishes of foster carers in the matching process is rarely seen as essential (Farmer et al., 2010a, p.101).

In a study by Selwyn et al. (2015) of adoptions which had disrupted or were under significant strain, 30 percent of adoptive parents described experiencing foster carers as being unhelpful and obstructing their child's move. There has been little research about matching and transitions processes from the perspective of foster carers, however. The importance of the fostering role during children's transitions has been highlighted in other research evidence (e.g. Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; Neil et al., 2018b; Lewis, 2018). Common themes in these studies are the need for more gradual transitions for children, and the development of a constructive relationship between a child's fostering and adoptive family, before their transition begins. Work by the Australian academic Andrew Browning, suggests practice development in these areas is of international interest (Browning, 2015.)

Findings of these studies have informed recent practice guidance. In 2020, the National Adoption Service and the Association for Fostering and Adoption, Cymru launched the Good

Practice Guide, *Transitions and Early Support.* The Guide highlights best practice in Wales along with key principles from evidence-based models of transitions, *Moving to Adoption* (Neil Beek & Schofield, 2018; Neil et al., 2021) and *'By Your Side'* (Norris, 2012). These models intertwine in the Good Practice Guide, to offer an attachment and trauma-informed framework for navigating transitions to adoption (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.). Working closely with foster carers is a core principle of the Guide. For example, following a shared decision by professionals and prospective adoptive parents that a match is likely to proceed, the Guide suggests an Understanding the Child Day may be convened. Also intended as an opportunity to share information about the child and understand their inner world, a primary function of this day is to start to develop the relationship between the foster carer and the prospective adoptive parent, with the aim of reducing anxieties, enabling them to focus on the child (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption Cymru, n.d.). Similarly, the innovative Adopting Together Service, aimed at supporting children who have waited longer for adoption, incorporates clinical psychologist-led Team Around the Child meetings, before the match is formally approved. Research evidence suggests that these meetings help the adoptive parent's understanding of the child and build the adoptive parent/foster carer relationship (Shelton, Merchant, & Lynch, 2020).

In 2017, shortly before the publication of *Transitions and Early Support*, Coram BAAF had published Practice Note 64, *Best practice in meetings between prospective adoptive parents and children prior to matching*. The Note's authors, Sally Beaumont and Elaine Dibben, suggest pre-meets could help build positive relationships between foster carers and prospective adoptive parents, ahead of the emotionally charged typical fortnight of intensive introductions. The Note includes a few short case studies of pre-meets held in England, written by adoption professionals.

None report directly the experiences of foster carers who have participated in pre-meets or report pre-meets which take place in Wales.

From scoping activities undertaken in the early stages of my doctorate and subsequent interviews with adoption managers, I knew that pre-meets were taking place with increasing frequency in Wales. Personal communication with one of the authors of practice guidance on pre-meets published by CoramBAAF in 2017 suggested that research into the practice of pre-meets had not been undertaken. The exception was an evaluation undertaken by the adoption team in Bradford, where a model of 'bump-into' meetings had recently been implemented (Beynon, n.d.). The model implemented in Bradford was intended to provide children over the age of 3 with low-key interactions with their prospective adoptive parents. Informed by psychotherapists located in the adoption agency Family Futures (Burnell et al., 2009), the aim was to reduce children's anxieties, prior to being told the identity of their prospective adoptive parents and introductions starting. The unpublished evaluation was written around 2016, at which point the adoption team had held a 'bump-into' meeting for 14 matches. It comprises a summary of participants' survey responses and captures a flavour of their experiences, which are all positive. The number and roles of respondents is unknown, however, and may only include one foster carer. I am unaware of other research which reports the experiences of foster carers who have taken part in pre-meets. There is therefore a dearth of research about the experiences of foster carers who have participated in pre-meets, which this chapter aims to address.

6.3 Method

I was primarily interested in the experiences of foster carers who had attended pre-meets, with children who had been in their care. I used an interpretive phenomenological approach in

the design of the study and analysis of data. My approaches to methodologies in this thesis are described fully in Chapter 3.

6.3.1 Characteristics of the sample

Figure 6.1: Foster carer participant characteristics

	Kirsty and Tony	Paula	Sarah	Becky and Graham	Carys
Region	1	1	2	2	2
Years registered as a foster carer	10+	5+	10+	10+	10+
Adopted child, still living at home	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Birth and/or foster child still living at home	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

Each of the seven participants had a minimum of five years of experience of fostering children waiting for adoption – most had many more. Whilst some had previously cared for older children, their experiences of pre-meets related to infants and toddlers. Three participants (Kirsty, Tony and Paula) fostered within Region 1, which employed a model of pre-meets called 'sightings' in which a prospective adoptive parent saw their matched child from a distance. Four participants (Carys, Sarah, Becky and Graham) fostered within Region 2 which employed a

model of pre-meets called 'bump-intos', in which an interaction between the child and prospective adoptive parents took place.

6.3.2 The interviews

I interviewed 7 foster carers in 5 families. The interviews took place between May and August 2023 and each lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Two couples participated in interviews together, as this was their preference. In each of these instances, one partner (both male) was only present for part of the interview. All names have been changed to safeguard confidentiality. The participants are referred to throughout by pseudonyms [family 1] Kirsty and Tony, [family 2] Paula, [family 3] Sarah, [family 4] Becky and Graham, [family 5] Carys. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, rather than on-line, at the participants' request. I had met two participants (in one family) approximately a decade before, when I had worked as a practitioner in the local authority. The other participants were unknown to me. I emphasised confidentiality aspects of the research with all participants.

The interview schedule, study information and consent form relating to foster carers' participation can be found in Appendices 20-22.

6.3.3 Analysis

I used an interpretive phenomenological approach as described in Chapter 3. An example of the initial themes identified for one participant and a table of super-ordinate themes and illustrative quotations can be found in Appendices 23 and 24.

6.3.4 Ethics

I have detailed my approach to ethical considerations in Chapter 3. All names have been changed to safeguard confidentiality. The participants are referred to throughout by pseudonyms.

6.4 Findings

Participants' experiences of what happened at pre-meets varied considerably. For example, prospective adoptive parents sat in a car, watching a child play outside, or 'bumped into' and interacted with foster carers with a child, in a garden centre or park. Participants described pre-meets in which social workers attended the whole time, for a short time or not at all. Most arrangements were intended to last approximately one hour. During the interviews, it became apparent that all participants were strongly supportive of pre-meets. Carys expressed her view succinctly:

> *Stop all this nonsense, they can't meet them until the very first day of introductions, which is what used to happen when we first started fostering, how bizarre was that? Crazy!* (Carys, Region 2).

All participants also felt that infants and toddlers and their prospective adoptive parents should be able to interact at a pre-meet. Some participants had experiences of children and their prospective adoptive parents meeting in arrangements which were like the pre-meets, but took place after the match had been approved at panel. These meetings took place in the community or in the foster carer's home and were felt to significantly ease children's transitions. Generally, foster carers felt that more meetings between children and their prospective adoptive parents should take place than at present, before the more intense period of introductions in their home. Alongside the use of digital contact, such as on-line video calling, they felt that low-key meetings helped build relationships between children and their prospective adoptive parents as well as foster carers and prospective adoptive parents.

Some foster carers spoke of other practice changes that they had experienced, such as a greater acceptance by professionals of the importance of an on-going foster carer/child

relationship, after the child had moved on, and a greater emphasis on children's more gradual transitions from foster care to their adoptive families. Such changes were widely welcomed.

I developed five super-ordinate themes in relation to the narratives of the group, which are summarised in Figure 6.2 below, together with their related themes.

Figure 6.2: Foster carers. Super-ordinate themes and themes

Super-ordinate themes	Themes
1. Grief and loss	• The grieving family • *'Not that I want to cling to her'*
2. Strangers meeting	• *'Breaking the ice'* • *'I need to meet [them] to make sure they're okay!'*
3. Building confidence	• Feeling 'right' • *'To actually, physically see this child!'*
4. The child/adoptive parent bond	• *'A real natural start'* • *'I'm giving him permission to leave me'* • *'This is our child'*
5. Experiences of the system	• Feeling marginalised • Managing possible risks to the child • Understandings of the rationale for pre-meets • Approaching 'the rules'

6.3.1 Super-ordinate theme 1: Grief and loss

In this theme I explore participants' experiences of emotional challenge relating to children moving to live with their adoptive families. They describe feelings of uncertainty about contact with their foster child once they have moved to their new family.

The grieving family

Five participants located pre-meets firmly within a period infused with loss. They spoke

of their strong bonds with children and intense sadness as the time approached for them to leave

their care. They struggled as they tried to manage their own feelings of bereavement whilst

supporting the child moving on. Where they had other children living at home, supporting them

with the grief they experienced further drained the foster carers' emotional energy. Tony

passionately described the loss of his children's *'baby brother:'*

> *It's really hard for us to let them go [ ] it is just difficult and the child picks up on that. [ ]*
>
> *when a child's been here a long time, they're your children, aren't they? Then [ ] they're*
>
> *going to be uprooted again and going to someone else* (Tony, Region 1).

Tony's use of *'uprooted,'* suggests that when a child moves on, they experience an unnatural,

forced rupture. They have belonged to his family and are being transplanted, at speed, into a new

family. In contrast with Sarah's view, as we will see below, he believes it inevitable that children

moving on will be affected by his family's grief, a view echoed by his wife, Kirsty:

> [Foster carers] *try not to show* [grief] *but it's just human nature, isn't it?* (Kirsty, Region
>
> 1)

For Kirsty, grieving is natural and cannot be denied or hidden. Whilst Becky also struggled

emotionally when children left their care, she was also aware that the intensity of her feelings

differed for each child. Speaking softly and slowly, she explained why she thought this was so:

> *I get more upset for the ones where the parents haven't been involved very much … I*
>
> *think I take more of the role of the birth parent … I became the birth mum in my head, so*
>
> *that's why I was so attached when he moved on* (Becky, Region 2).

Becky identifies as this baby's mother, and, feeling an explanation may be needed, offers this as

why she felt so upset when he left. Graham interjects, with urgency: *'the wife cut the cords on a*

few of the kids,' highlighting the intimate, parental nature of the couple's relationship with foster

children, and suggesting an inevitability about their emotional struggles. Once the child had left

their family, the couple's grief was disenfranchised, as Graham's recollection of a conversation

with friends reveals: [they said] '*that child's not yours anymore, that child's moved on'*

(Graham, Region 2). Like Tony, Graham felt the child had belonged in his family. Yet, even

with his peers, Graham feels expected to simply *'move on'* after the child's departure.

Narratives of the longest-standing foster carers, Carys and Sarah, were characterised by a

stoicism. Carys did not reference her own sadness when children moved on. As we see in the

following quotation, Sarah had developed coping strategies:

> *We've always worked on the assumption that you do your crying in private, this is a good*
>
> *and positive experience for the child, because the child will pick up if you're anxious and*
>
> *stressed they will pick up on it* (Sarah, Region 2).

Sarah believes that it is in a child's interest to hide her grief. In quick succession, Sarah repeats

how the child will *'pick up'* on her emotions. Her comment seems almost mantric: *'this is a good*

and positive experience for the child,' perhaps as a mechanism to help herself through. Although

Sarah highlights children's sensitivity to her emotional state, she also believes that she can

protect them from it. Similarly to the other five participants, Carys and Sarah's narratives

revealed the strength of their connections to the children in their care. Carys was one of several

foster carers who described her role, caring for infants born withdrawing from drugs:

> *To make them feel safe and secure and know that you're always there for them, so they*
>
> *need … cuddling and holding and just being there for them, soothing them* (Carys,
>
> Region 2).

Carys deftly conveys the infant's fragility and dependence on her. She provides the baby with safety and security; their relationship is intense, physical, and emotional, and involves '*cuddling*' '*holding*' and '*soothing.*' By foregrounding the significance of this bond, akin to mother/baby, she contrasts her role with that of nurses, for example. Sarah explicitly characterises her relationship with children she fosters as one of 'love':

> *We do love them from the time they come through the door you're treated as ours until they leave. They're very precious* (Sarah, Region 2).

From this quotation and from that of Carys above, Sarah and Carys foreground intense bonds with their foster children. In doing so, they communicate that whilst they maintain a professional stance, they nevertheless experience children moving on as a time of great emotional challenge.

'Not that I want to cling to her'

Except for Carys and Sarah, participants shared their anxieties about whether contact with children would continue after they moved in with their adoptive families. They were anxious about the impact that a severed relationship could have on children, now and in the future, as well as the loss for themselves and their family. The capacity for adoptive parents to remove them from a child's life was dominant in their thoughts, as we see in the following quotation from Paula:

> *It's well over a year that I've spent healing her and getting her to attach. I don't want someone to ruin that and just cut me off. It needs to be done in a proper, gentle way so that it doesn't damage her again. That's what I fight for, not that I want to cling on to her, but I don't want any damage to the hard work that I've put in* (Paula, Region 1).

The 'someone' whom Paula is alluding to is the baby's (unknown) adoptive parent. As the matching date approaches, Paula's mind is occupied with thoughts of how a stranger could

damage the baby's sense of safety by cutting Paula off. She is bracing herself to have to *'fight'* for on-going contact. She is conscious that her actions may be interpreted as unprofessional, clinging to the child.

Similarly, Kirsty was concerned children could feel *'abandoned'* by her. A single word, laden with anxiety and uncertainty, indicative of deliberate neglect and damage. Becky comments, *I think they just want that child, they'll say anything to the social workers and as soon as they've got that child then…* Adoptive parents' intentions to maintain contact may not transpire; they may say what social workers want to hear, to appease them. Becky and Graham's feelings of vulnerability resonated through their narratives. They were grateful that one adoptive parent had put their photographs in *'proper frames'* thereby recognising them as important people in the child's life.

Unlike all other participants, Sarah and Carys did not appear anxious about on-going contact with children and their adoptive parents. In their experience, adoptive parents did stay in touch, although Sarah said this was *'purely on their terms.'* This was how she felt it should be; a foster carer did not have any *'right'* to stay in touch with a child, she said. This was the adoptive parent's decision. She saw her role being to *'look after the child until their forever family comes along.'* Her narrative suggests a pragmatic approach which may protect her from feelings of disappointment.

6.3.2 Super-ordinate theme 2: Strangers meeting

In this theme I explore participants' experiences of pre-meets helping develop their embryonic relationships with prospective adoptive parents. This includes how pre-meets helped reduce foster carers' own anxieties about meeting and the suitability of the match as well as those of adoptive parents.

'Breaking the ice'

The experience of pre-meets *'breaking the ice'* between foster carers and adoptive parents, reducing anxieties, was a theme in six participants' narratives. The view was widely shared that prior to the introduction of pre-meets, they were complete strangers to one another at the start of introductions. Pre-meets helped build trust and understanding between both parties, facilitating a more comfortable start to the intense period of introductions. This was in stark contrast with past experiences, as Sarah described:

> *We've had some adopters that you could see then shaking as they come through the door*
> *... we've had adopters in the past that have been walking up and down outside ...*
> *because they're so nervous, it's taken them a lot to even get to the door* (Sarah, Region
> 2).

Sarah has witnessed adoptive parents' anxiety such that even entering her home has presented a distressing challenge. She twice references her front door. This is not just a physical barrier to be traversed to meet their child for the first time, this could be seen as an opening into a new, family life. Sarah recognises that she is the literal and metaphorical gatekeeper, a barrier, or hurdle, for adoptive parents. Pre-meets had made a *'huge difference'* in getting *'first reservations and impressions out the way;'* they had helped alleviate her own anxieties as a foster carer, as well as those of adoptive parents. This mutual reassurance and trust-building inherent in pre-meets featured in six other participants' narratives, including here, in a quotation from Carys:

> *It's just breaking that first initial ice bit of getting them to know me and know I'm not an*
> *ogre, I'm looking after the child, and for me to get a feeling of them and how they're*
> *going to be and knowing that this is going to work* (Carys, Region 2).

Carys conveys a sense of a mutual checking out she experiences with adoptive parents. Later, she talks of pre-meets reducing everyone's nerves and removing their *'dread'* of first meeting in her home. Referencing herself as an *'ogre'* may be somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Nevertheless, in the eyes of adoptive parents, she recognises that foster carers are powerful figures who may seem intimidating.

Kirsty describes how pre-meets were pivotal in starting to build relationships between the two families:

> *Building up a relationship starts at Day 1 … whether it's called a sighting or whatever they call it, from our perspective that's the day we grow with them and get to know them, and the more we get to know them the more they can get to know their future baby* (Kirsty, Region 1).

Describing how the families '*grow*' together, Kirsty conveys a sense that the families will change one another; become close. This relationship is essential, as it will be at the root of the new parents' relationship with their child.

'I need to meet [them], to make sure they're okay!'

In differing ways, all participants saw pre-meets as a source of reassurance about the suitability of the adoptive parents as a match. Kirsty looked for an *'emotional'* response towards their child:

> *When we do a* [pre-meet], [by] *instinct, we definitely know if it's going to be right or not. I think with all the ones so far, it's been good.* [ ] *it actually gives me goosebumps thinking about it* (Kirsty, Region 1).

In the passage above, Kirsty reveals trusting her *'instinct'* about people. This experience is so profound, that she experiences an embodied reaction, *'goosebumps,'* when she recalls it. Similarly, Sarah sought reassurance about the match:

> *I think once you see them and you're satisfied that yes, they are going to be loving these children and it is right for the child then I think it makes it a lot easier, it makes the process easier* (Sarah, Region 2).

Sarah can start mentally preparing for introductions and adjusting to the child moving to their new family. She emphasises this makes the process *'easier,'* tacitly acknowledging its challenge. If approached differently, Paula also believes that pre-meets could reassure her about a match:

> *I need to meet* [them], *to make sure they're okay!* [laughs] … *I need to have a picture in my head, so that I'm happy, where she's going. … And I want to see them play with her as well …So that will put my heart more at rest if I see them playing* (Paula, Region 1).

The candid nature of Paula's narrative reveals her *'need'* to meet the child's new parents ahead of introductions, to feel at ease and *'happy.'* Similarly to Kirsty, she describes this as an embodied experience; her heart will be *'at rest.'* Like Sarah, she needs to have a *'picture'* in her head of the adoptive parents; like Kirsty and Tony, feeling reassured is dependent upon seeing them interacting with the child. Kirsty, Tony, and Paula all foster in areas where a model of pre-meets is practiced which does not include physical interaction between children and their adoptive parents. From their narratives, the beliefs and values of the foster carers are not aligned with those of the adoption service.

Although Carys valued the opportunity to start to build a relationship with the adoptive parents at a pre-meet, she was the only participant who consciously distanced any personal

feelings about them she may have from her feelings about a match. Calmly, deliberately, she said:

> *As long as that Dad is doing everything that he can for that baby, in terms of care,*
>
> *protection, play, loving, as long as you can see all those things there and you think yeah,*
>
> *he is a good dad or a mum come to that, some mums you think "oh gosh", but you don't*
>
> *show it [ ] you always encourage* (Carys, Region 2).

Carys appears to dismiss attaching importance to her own personal affinity with a new parent. She consciously affirms them, as her way of supporting the child. She recognises this as a difficult process and has chosen an approach she believes helps her in her role.

Tony, Kirsty, Carys, and Sarah all describe physically passing a child to their prospective parents, at a pre-meet. This is a conscious act, imbued with significance, as we see in the following quotation from Sarah:

> *I always say to them, 'Have a hold of the baby because this is going to be your child,*
>
> *have a cwtch,[2] have a cuddle,' and as long as the child isn't distressed, that's fine* (Sarah,
>
> Region 2).

Sarah's focus here is on building the bond between the adoptive parents and their would-be baby. She emphasises the need for physical contact, and gives the adoptive parents permission to *'hold,' 'cwtch'* and *'cuddle'* the child, signalling that she is accepting of the match. This also helps build the relationship between herself and the adoptive parents. She takes account of the child's response to being held. The possibility in her mind that the match may not progress is not apparent, however. Similarly, Tony, who expressed a view that it was *'cruel'* not to let the prospective parents hold their child:

---

[2] In Welsh, a 'cwtch' is an affectionate embrace; a cuddle.

I said to the social worker 'this isn't right' so I picked the baby up, brought him to the

table, then I just passed him over to the adopters (Tony, Region 1).

Once comfortable with the match, we see the importance that Tony attaches to enabling the

adoptive parents to hold the baby, demonstrating his acceptance. For Carys, as well as showing

acceptance of the match, *how* she passes the child to their prospective adoptive parents is

carefully considered. Its primary function concerns conveying safety to the child, as we see

below.

6.3.3 Super-ordinate theme 3: Building confidence

In this theme I explore participants' experiences of how pre-meets helped adoptive

parents develop confidence in the match with their child and understand them as a whole person.

Feeling 'right'

Participants all valued pre-meets as an opportunity for prospective adoptive parents to

feel how they responded to meeting their child. When asked, a few participants aligned this with

feelings of 'chemistry.' More commonly, participants commented that meeting their child

needed to feel *'right'* for the prospective adoptive parents, and meeting ahead of panel made it

easier for them to say if this was not the case. Participants all felt the adoptive parent's initial

response to meeting their child should be heeded, as Carys describes:

You don't really know the gut feeling until you meet that child, you hear that child, you

watch that child, you interact with that child, whether that child is going to be yours, ...

and maybe that's why they were so, so many that broke down ... because they hadn't had

a chance to be together for these bump-ins to decide if it's right (Carys, Region 2).

For Carys, a child's prospective adoptive parent needs to experience the child with their own

senses, *'hearing,' 'watching'* and *'interacting'* with them. Elsewhere, she suggests that a

negative reaction to a child's vocalisations could be significant enough to jeopardise the success of a match. For Carys, a pre-meet is the point at which she believes adoptive parents can *feel* whether they want to proceed; she associates the lack of pre-meets in the past with placements disrupting, with a clear implication that they should not have proceeded. Carys describes the importance of an embodied experience, a *'gut feeling,'* though she rejects the idea that this is 'chemistry.' Similarly, Sarah comments:

> *I always say to them 'if it doesn't feel right, please tell me,' it's got to feel right, the chemistry has got to feel right because it's not going to work otherwise. You can't have a baby at all costs … I think it takes a lot to say that if you're waiting for a child … to turn round and say 'Actually, this isn't the match for us,' that takes an awful lot because they do think, 'we're never going to get one then if we do say that, we're never going to get our child'* (Sarah, Region 2).

Like Carys, Sarah views an adoptive parent's first response to meeting their child as a key indicator of the match's success. Unlike Carys, she calls this 'chemistry.' She asks adoptive parents directly how they *feel* about the child. She fears an adoptive parent might feel pressured to proceed with a match *'at all costs.'* Sarah feels that their fear may be rooted in a belief that honesty may scupper their chances of having a family at all. Unspoken, the potential 'cost' here is at everyone's expense, especially the child's. As for Carys, this is prominent in her mind. She respects adoptive parents who express uncertainty about their match, saying *'it takes a lot to do that,'* and actively wants to help enable them express any concerns they may have.

Similarly for Paula, pre-meets reassured adoptive parents about their match. She talks of past practice:

They were going in blind, basically, which is not the right way to do things … It's … a huge commitment to go and meet a child that you've never actually seen in the flesh and the first time you meet them is when you've been to panel (Paula, Region 1).

Paula feels adoptive parents have had unreasonable expectations made of them in the past, being expected to *'go in blind'* and commit to adopting a child whom they have not met *'in the flesh.'* She conveys a sense that is widely shared amongst participants, that the human desire to meet a child before formal matching is easily understood. As for other participants, for Paula panel represents a watershed, a point from which it becomes much harder for an adopter to withdraw from a match.

Unlike other participants, Becky, Graham, Kirsty, and Tony did not appear to have considered pre-meets as an opportunity for prospective adoptive parents to test their response to meeting a child, as we see below:

Graham: *Is it a bump-in for them to kind of 'like' the child as well?*

Becky*: … they could say no, I suppose …* (Region 2)

From this exchange between the couple, we see that the possibility that a prospective adoptive parent might withdraw from a match seems remote.

'To actually, physically, see this child'

Sometimes, foster carers indicated how a low-key meeting at a pre-meet with their matched child helped prospective adopters adjust to their parenting role. For example, Becky recalled one adoptive couple's appearance of overwhelm on the first day of introductions, when they first met their matched child. She described a look of *'what have we done?'* on the adopters' faces, as the little boy ran towards them, calling *'Mummy!' 'Daddy!'*

The role of pre-meets in helping develop the adoptive parents' understanding of a child featured in the narratives of five of the seven participants, illustrated in the following quotations:

> *Most of our babies are drug or alcohol babies … if you read it in black and white* [it can seem very concerning] *. They're often surprised how the children are normal* (Sarah, Region 2).

> *You can tell a lot about a child just by the way they play and the way they interact with others. …to actually, physically, see this child maybe running around or cooing and rolling* (Carys, Region 2).

Participants felt that meeting in person enabled prospective adoptive parents to understand their child in different ways, unmediated by others. Sarah alludes to the potential for written information to take on disproportionate significance for a prospective adoptive parent and see the child as other than *'normal.'* For Carys, seeing the way the child moves, interacts and sounds are essential ways in which they can be understood, and prospective adoptive parents need to meet the child so that they can use their own frames of reference to understand them.

6.3.4 Super-ordinate theme 4: Supporting the child/adoptive parent bond

In this theme I explore how participants believed pre-meets helped to develop the child/adoptive parent relationship, including how children are familiarised with their prospective parent/s and respond to them.

'A real natural start'

Six participants felt pre-meets helped familiarise children with their prospective adoptive parents. Sometimes, after the initial pre-meet, there were additional meetings, both before and after formal approval of the match, and children and their prospective adoptive parents sometimes saw each other on-line. After the match had been formally approved, photographs of

their prospective adoptive parents were shared with children. The nature and intensity of the process of familiarisation varied greatly. From the quotations below, we see how participants felt pre-meets eased the path towards formal introductions:

> *His face would light up when he saw them and we knew that he remembered.*
>
> *the child* [is] *like 'oh, I know you, okay, let's play' … and it's lovely and it's just a real natural start to introductions* (Sarah, Region 2).

Sarah watched the child's face *'light up'* at the sight of his prospective adoptive parents, and experiences pleasure and reassurance from this. This shared experience helps build her own relationship with the little boy's new parents. Similarly, Carys enjoys how pre-meets provide *'a real natural start'* from which relationships can build; a contrast with the artificiality of starting introductions without such a meeting is inherent. Below, Carys conveys the importance of children's responses to their prospective parents:

> *If they were screaming and shouting all over the place, then we'd know perhaps we need to do a bit more work. Or heaven forbid, perhaps you're not the right adopters, the child's terrified of you for some reason, you just don't know* (Carys, Region 2).

Vocalised and non-verbal responses are carefully observed. The relationship between children and their adoptive parents may be helped to develop, by *'a bit more work.'* However, ultimately, the match may not work. It is only by being together, in person, that the child's response to their prospective parents is experienced. Carys's comment *'the child may be terrified for some reason'* points to her belief that human responses cannot be fully anticipated or understood. Commenting that babies are very *'intuitive'* and *'pick up on everything,'* Kirsty highlights infants' sensitivities to others' difficult emotions. Her observation about babies seems a deliberate counterpoint to a view that babies may find joining a new family 'easier' than older

children. Kirsty draws attention to how inherently difficult the task of helping a child transition to living with their new family is. *'Nothing's easy.'* Having adoptive parents in her home for two weeks is *'really hard.'* Building a relationship with them, through pre-meets and other means, before introductions start can help ameliorate the awkwardness of the foster carer/adoptive parent dynamic. She spoke of how this more relaxed atmosphere helped facilitate the *'instant bonding'* between and the baby and their adoptive parents.

Pre-meets that Paula had taken part in involved adoptive parents seeing a child from a distance. In the passage below, she describes their limitations:

[It should] *not just* [be] *a 'viewing.' It should be the start. It's that bond, forming. But it's not, at the minute, it's just 'look at these children'* (Paula, Region 1).

Paula experiences adoptive parents having a 'viewing' of a child, a word with uncomfortable connotations of sales and commerce. *'It's just 'look at these children''* suggests children may be seen as objects of display, lacking agency. Meaning the relationship, the bond, between the child and their adoptive parents, she comments that the *'ball that should start rolling.'* As any living being, the relationship needs to be *'drip fed;'* nourished and nurtured. Nothing can be rushed. Paula feels pre-meets have the capacity to help develop the child/adoptive parent bond, but feels the way they are organised restricts this.

'I'm giving him permission to leave me'

Kirsty, Sarah, and Carys spoke of how pre-meets helped them to communicate to children that their adoptive parents were 'safe' people. Gradually, from the pre-meet, Kirsty consciously gave children, including infants, *'permission'* to join their new families:

I'm showing him, telling him, and just making him feel I'm giving him permission to leave me in a way (Kirsty, Region 1).

Through actions and words, Kirsty consciously gives permission to the child that he can move on. She wants to help ameliorate any divided loyalties he may feel, joining his new family, and convey that his adoptive parents are safe, so that he will trust them. In the lengthy passage below, we see how Carys also conveys safety to a baby as she passes them to their prospective adoptive parents. Speaking softly, she demonstrated her actions with an imagined baby, as she spoke:

> *I start with the baby always on my lap … because I want this baby to feel safe, 'it's okay, it's fine, you haven't met these people before, I don't know how you're going to react to them' and I don't know how they're going to react to the baby, so we've got the table between us, everybody feels safe, it's okay. And then when baby starts smiling, you know, and tapping the table and they'll be tapping the table, that kind of thing, the interaction between them and I think 'Yeah, this is going well', so … I put the baby on the table. Just side on and I'm still holding onto the baby, so the baby still feels safe and is okay. Now slowly but surely … I'll say, 'I think she's ready, would you like to hold your baby?', and it's like 'oh yes!' …they take over then holding the baby* [then] *I say 'she's okay, pop her on your lap, she'll be fine', and that's how I do it* (Carys, Region 2).

Carys provides emotional support for a baby being held by their prospective adoptive parents for the first time, and in doing so, she conveys safety to the child and shows the adoptive parents her acceptance of the match. Her emphasis is on making sure that the baby feels safe, and she takes her cues from her, watching when she starts smiling, moving slowly, at the baby's pace. Carys shifts seamlessly into imagining the baby's world; *'you haven't met these people before, I don't know how you're going to react to them.'* Simultaneously, she observes the reactions of the new parents. Cautiously, we see Carys tenderly enabling the family's first physical contact.

'This is our child'

All participants noticed how pre-meets enabled prospective adoptive parents to start to 'claim' the child as a member of their family. For Kirsty and Tony, this was central to their experience, as illustrated in the following passage:

> *They were standing there and he was playing ... and I could just see their faces. It went into my body, I could just feel – like I feel emotional now. I feel an emotional feeling, like they loved him straightaway* (Kirsty, Region 1).

Kirsty describes an embodied experience. She senses a *'surge'* of emotion towards the child from the adoptive mother, which Kirsty identifies as *'love.'* This *'surge'* in the prospective adoptive parent is mirrored in Kirsty's body and appears pivotal in the adoptive parent/foster carer relationship. It may be the point at which she accepts them as the child's new family. Similarly, Paula describes pre-meets as an opportunity for the '*heart-stuff'* to form, and Sarah notices prospective parents claiming a child, by observing their body language. Her language conveys her pleasure and sense of relief:

> *It's lovely because you can see them, if it's a couple you can see the look between them as if to say, 'This is our child'* (Sarah, Region 2).

Carys, Becky and Graham, all talked of spotting physical similarities between the child and their new family at a pre-meet, as we see in the exchange between the couple:

> Becky: *as soon as we met them, we said he just fell into their family, he didn't look out of place or anything, it just seemed*
>
> Graham: *no-one would know* (Region 2).

Similarly to other participants, at this pre-meet Becky and Graham experienced feeling that the match was 'meant to be.' Perceptions of family resemblance seemed to reassure them that the

child and their prospective adoptive parents were a natural fit together. They could visualise him as part of his new family, and started to see how he would belong there.

6.3.5 Super-ordinate theme 5: Experiences of the system

In this theme I explore how foster carers felt marginalised within the process of matching. I explore participants' perceptions of risks to the child and the rationale for pre-meets, and their experiences of guidelines and rules.

Feeling marginalised

Six of the seven participants felt marginalised in key decisions about the future of children in their care. They shared a view that they knew the children better than anyone else, and yet their views were ignored, as we see in the following quotation from Tony:

I'm the only one that actually knows the child in this room. I've spent every second of every day with her … and I was asked to come along … they expect us to do all of these things but they don't consider us, because we haven't done a degree (Tony, Region 1).

Tony's frustration is palpable. He knows this child because he spends *'every second of every day'* with her. Others are making decisions about the child known to them from a professional distance, as a 'case.' He has been invited to advocate for the child, but he does not feel listened to or respected. Instead, social workers value professional status over knowing a child. Sarah's comments echo those of Tony:

It's up to the social worker[s] to go through who they think is more suitable for a child they've never even met half the time … . We're just told to get on with [the match] *once it's happening … we're the ones who know this child the best* (Sarah, Region 2).

Similarly to Tony, Sarah's tone is irritated; she feels her views should be at the heart of the matching process, but instead she is dismissed, told to *'get on with it.'* Elsewhere, she notes she

is on the *'outside of the circle,'* in a system that fails to recognise her value. During matching, she is asked to contribute written information about children, but much of the form she is asked to complete does not reflect the needs of babies. Carys was the only participant who felt at ease with her input into the matching process:

> *They do ask us what type of adoptive parents do we think would be a good match? What is the child like? They go quite in-depth about that … . I give my opinion anyway, whether it's asked for or not - but these days, it is asked for* (Carys, Region 2).

Unlike Sarah, Carys felt her views were sought and valued. However, her reflection that she gives her opinion *'whether it's asked for or not'* nods to the influence of her tenacity and strength of character. Her reference to *'these days'* suggests she has experienced recent practice changes, which are more inclusive of foster carers.

Managing possible risks to the child

Foster carers all spoke of their desire to see the babies and toddlers they had cared for interacting with their prospective parents at a pre-meet. Their experiences were of low-key, relaxed interactions, which were flexible, child-led and enjoyed by all. Interactions which were familiar to the children, like meeting the foster carers' friends, for example. None described any negative experiences for children, as we see in the following quotation from Sarah:

> *At this age they don't understand, it's just a new face talking with her* (Sarah, Region 2).

However, Kirsty, Sarah, Carys, and Paula all acknowledged potential risks to children posed by pre-meets, if their match did not proceed, for example. Kirsty appears cognisant of a view that children may be harmed by a pre-meet, and defends the practice:

> *They don't think every stranger is going to be their prospective parent, even if the adoption doesn't go ahead* (Kirsty, Region 1).

Participants expressed trust in foster carers and prospective adoptive parents, to mitigate

potential risks, as Sarah described:

> *If it's a toddler ... [adoptive parents] need to be more aware that you need to let them*
>
> *come to you rather than you go to them, because that's their own space. I think adopters*
>
> *are very aware* (Sarah, Region 2).

Similarly, Paula seemed to suggest that professionals were concerned with potential risks which

could be managed, or perhaps did not even exist:

> *If it gets to Panel and it's a 'no' then I don't think it would damage the child ... if you*
>
> *haven't said 'this is your new mum'. Obviously, you're not going to do that* (Paula,
>
> Region 1).

For her, it is *'obvious'* that this will not happen. She seems exasperated at what she perceives to

be a lack of trust in all parties, to act sensitively and protectively towards children.

Understandings of the rationale for pre-meets

Whilst all participants held their own views about the purpose of pre-meets, they were

equally uncertain of, or disagreed with, professionals' rationales, as Sarah commented:

> *No-one has really explained why they just rolled it out and said, 'this is how we're doing*
>
> *it now'* (Sarah, Region 2).

Sarah described an experience of a pre-meet at which the prospective adopters kept a distance

from the child; a distance that she found disquieting. She took this as a negative indication about

the couple's feelings about their matched child, and only later discovered that they were just

following the guidance they had been given. The experience of changes in adoption practice

being imposed on them was widely shared. Paula was aware that pre-meets were described by

professionals as an opportunity for a prospective adoptive parent to see a child without

interacting with them, but felt the key rationale should be building the child/adoptive parent bond. Similarly, Kirsty disagreed with the rationale for pre-meets that had been shared with her:

> *It should be about how the child interacts with the prospective parents and it should be about how the parents interact with the child. I know that's not what it's meant to be, it's just meant to be for them to see the child* (Kirsty, Region 1).

The difference between Kirsty's view of the official purpose of pre-meets and what she feels they should be about is striking. She is acutely conscious of the gulf between the two.

Approaching 'the rules'

Except for Carys, it was clear that participants felt that 'rules' about pre-meets were a source of contention, particularly around physical interactions between children and their prospective parents. In the areas in which Tony, Kirsty and Paula fostered, children were supposed be seen from a distance. This was not the case for other participants, although some indicated physical interactions were not supposed to take place, but did. Unlike other participants, for Becky, ambiguity about the rules is a source of uncertainty and concern:

> *You don't want to do something and they go 'you shouldn't have done that'* (Becky, Region 1).

The general tenor of most narratives, however, was that rigid rules were unhelpful and that pre-meets should (and did) unfold primarily according to foster carers' judgements and instincts. Kirsty suggested current practice is highly contingent on the workers involved, and even an individual worker's practice could be *'different every time.'* Such inconsistencies appeared to give her and Tony some license to interpret rules as they felt most appropriate, following their instincts. Similarly, we see how Sarah has agency to determine how a pre-meet may proceed, in ways which differ from the parents' expectations:

I ... do what I think is right. ... Very often I've said to them, 'Would you like to feed them,

would you like to hold them?' They've said, 'Are we allowed?' I said, 'Yes, you are, you

can, I'm saying you can' (Sarah, Region 2).

Like almost all other participants, Sarah had felt marginalised from the process by which

children's prospective parents were selected. Here, during their first meetings, Sarah takes an

impish delight in shaping how first interactions between children and their prospective parents

take place.

6.5 Discussion

In Wales and across the United Kingdom, pre-meets between children and their

prospective adoptive parents are taking place more frequently than they have done in the past.

(Beaumont & Dibben, 2017; Morrison, 2018). Little is known about the experiences of people

taking part in pre-meets, however, including foster carers. In this chapter, I have drawn on the

narratives of seven foster carers to explore how they experienced pre-meets and ascribed

meaning to them. Foster carers' own experiences of pre-meets cannot be neatly separated from

others. They are intertwined with, and impacted by the experiences, as they perceive them, of the

adoptive parents and children with whom they travel. This is evident in their narratives.

Coping with any transition is difficult, but it has a distinct meaning and complexity in

foster family life. Research has shown that foster carers are surprised by the degree to which they

establish attachments to and love the children in their care (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019). Furthermore,

the impact of grief is often shared by other children in the fostering family (Williams, 2017). The

nature of grief experienced by foster carers is often that it is *'disenfranchised,'* defined as *'the*

grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly

acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported' (Doka, 1984, p.4). Pre-meets occur at a

delicate time of high emotions for foster carers. Focus in the adoption sector has highlighted the benefits of on-going contact between children and their former foster carers once the child joins their adoptive family (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, n.d.). However, worryingly, in 2021 The Fostering Network reported that 51% of foster carers registered with local authorities in Wales stated they were not supported to keep in touch with children they had previously cared for (The Fostering Network, 2021). It is unsurprising, therefore, that feelings of loss and grief that the participants experience have such a presence in this chapter. Together with the uncertainty of future contact they may have with the child, these are fundamental to the context in which pre-meets take place.

In adoption as well as in other forms of permanence, government policy recommends a paradigm shift from 'family finding' to 'family building' activities (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Adoption and Permanence, 2021). Also, models of good practice and research concerning children's transitions prioritise building relationships more slowly than in the past (Beek et al., 2021; National Adoption Service & the Association of Adoption & Fostering, Cymru, n.d.; Browning, 2015). This includes relationships between foster carers and prospective adoptive parents, as well as prospective adoptive parents and the children they are matched with. In my research, foster carers indicated that pre-meets can help them build relationships with children's prospective parents. This is significant, because establishing a positive relationship between a child's foster and adoptive families before formal introductions commence is important to support a child through their transition to their new family. The psychoanalyst Andrew Browning (Browning, 2015) suggests that establishing a constructive relationship between the two families will help to emotionally hold a child during their transition. Furthermore, the quality of the foster carer/prospective adoptive parent relationship has been

found to impact on children's introductions to their new family (Neil et al., 2018b; Selwyn et al., 2015; Lewis, 2018). In this study, foster carers' narratives revealed that pre-meets helped them manage their anxieties about getting to know their child's new parents and reassure them at an early stage about the suitability of the match. Foster carers' empathy peppered their narratives. Looking through adoptive parents' eyes, some participants described themselves as powerful figures. *'Breaking the ice'* prior to more formal meetings was important for everyone, therefore.

The low-key nature of the meetings, their location away from the foster carers' homes, and enabling parties to meet for the first time at an earlier stage than they would otherwise were all considered helpful factors in matching and transitions. It is interesting that foster carers indicated that difficulties in dynamics between themselves and prospective parents were rare. Their fear of potential difficulties was more common than the actuality. Pre-meets enabled foster carers to *'put a name to a face,'* and picture the child's prospective parent. They could start to visualise the child as part of their new family at an earlier stage then they would otherwise. Sometimes, they spoke of their delight in seeing prospective parents start to claim a child, catching a couple's look of *'this is our child,'* for example. Seeing interactions at a pre-meet enabled foster carers to assess how children and their prospective parents responded to one another. They felt these first responses were important and talked of them as *'gut feelings,'* *'heart-stuff'* forming or, sometimes, *'chemistry.'* Witnessing such responses was a significant factor which helped foster carers feel reassured about a match. They felt more relaxed and confident, moving forward.

Foster carers experienced pre-meets helping familiarise children with their prospective parents, and start to build a bond between them. They helped foster carers start to convey to a child that their prospective parent was *'safe,'* which is central to the success of children's

transitions (e.g. Beek et al., 2021; Burnell, Castell & Cousins, 2009; Fahlberg, 1994). The extent to which this was possible depended upon the way in which the pre-meet was organised and whether interaction between children and their prospective parents was allowed, for example. All participants in this study supported interactions taking place during the pre-meet. This finding is interesting, because some models of pre-meets currently employed in Wales do not support any interaction between children and their prospective parents.

The importance of having access to as much information about a child as possible is fundamental in successful matching (e.g. Farmer et al., 2010a; Quinton, 2012; Thomas, 2013). In advance of formal matching, foster carers considered it human nature for prospective parents to want to meet their child, to understand them more fully. For example, how the child moved, their vocalisations and interactions with others were all considered uniquely understood by an in-person meeting. Prior to meeting, a child's additional needs or medical conditions could take on an amplified potency in the imagination of a prospective parent which could distort their expectations about a child.

Difficulties of sharing doubts about a match may be compounded during the emotionally charged time of introductions and explicit permission to share concerns are likely to help (Byrne, 1999; Browning, 2015; Tasker & Wood, 2016.) In their study of adoptions which had disrupted, or were experiencing intense difficulties, Selwyn et al. (2015) observe that adoptive parents *'felt they were on a conveyor belt, with no time for reflection and no opportunity to say 'Stop''* (Selwyn et al., 2015, p.348). In this study, foster carers acknowledged the difficulties for prospective parents sharing that a match did not feel right, perhaps because of their *'gut response'* to a child, or perhaps because the child was significantly different from how they imagined.

For everyone's benefit, though very painful, foster carers wanted prospective parents to share any concerns at an early stage. This task was felt considerably easier if the prospective parent had not been through the formality of matching panel. Foster carers' narratives suggested that relieving the pressure on a prospective parent to feel compelled to agree with a match is perhaps the key difference between pre-meets and other meetings which may take place between children, their foster carers, and prospective adoptive parents, before the period of formal introductions.

The long-standing shortage of foster carers in the United Kingdom has been described as at a crisis point. Six in ten of 2,883 current foster carers questioned for a study conducted by the Fostering Network said they had considered resigning (46%) or were currently considering doing so (14%). Among these groups, the most common reasons were a lack of support from their fostering service and a lack of respect from other professionals in the team around the child (54%). Burnout or poor wellbeing related to fostering was cited as the next most common reason why current carers had, or were, considering resigning, with 53% reporting this (The Fostering Network, 2024). In this study as in others (e.g. D'Amato & Brownless, 2022; Shklarski, 2019) foster carers often felt marginalised by professionals. They mostly felt excluded from the process by which an adoptive family was chosen for their foster child. They experienced this as an injustice which could impact negatively on the child, as they felt that they were the individuals who knew the child best.

Although they were universally supportive of pre-meets, foster carers in my research were sometimes unaware of professionals' rationale for holding such a meeting, as this had not been shared with them. Foster carers appeared to have agency in what happened at a pre-meet. They relied on their instincts and knowledge of the child to guide them. Sometimes, they seemed

unfettered by rules, particularly in relation to interactions between children and their prospective adopters. They did not think there were negative consequences for children attending a pre-meet, even if the match did not proceed. However, foster carers in this sample talked of pre-meets involving infants and toddlers. Some spoke of how pre-meets involving older children, for example, may have to be differently managed.

In this chapter I have explored the experiences and views of foster carers in relation to pre-meets. In the final, following chapter I discuss the overarching findings from my research, in relation to the existing literature.

Chapter 7: General discussion

7.1 Introduction

In this thesis I have explored the role of pre-meets in the formation of newly adoptive families. 'Pre-meets' is an umbrella term used to describe first meetings between children and their prospective adoptive parents which take place before formal approval of their match (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). They present an alternative to first meetings which have commonly taken place after formal approval of the match, and during an intense period of 'introductions' between a child and their prospective adopter/s, in the foster carer's home (Selwyn et al., 2015).

The existing, sparse literature about the practice of pre-meets indicates it has been contested, ad hoc, and varied in both nature and underlying rationale. Only a small number of case studies (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017; Beynon, n.d.) have been conducted by social work teams. There have been no comprehensive studies examining the nature, context, or rationale for current pre-meet practices in the UK; their perceived benefits and challenges. Furthermore, there has been no detailed exploration of the meanings individuals who participate in pre-meets attribute to them. These gaps in the literature were identified as key areas for investigation in this thesis.

Findings of this study are based on semi-structured interviews with 11 adoption social work managers from all five of the Welsh adoption Regions, 3 prospective adoptive parents (from two families) interviewed at three time points, and 7 foster carers (from five families). Through interviews with adoption managers, I address the following questions:

1) What is the current practice in Wales relating to pre-meets and how is it developing?

2) What are the underlying theories, contexts and rationales that relate to the current practice?

3) What are the perceived benefits associated with pre-meets?

4) What are the difficulties associated with pre-meets?

Through interviews with prospective adoptive parents, I address the following questions:

1) What difference do prospective adoptive parents feel pre-meets make to their experience of matching?

2) How do prospective adoptive parents experience pre-meets?

Through interviews with foster carers, I address the questions:

1) What are foster carers' experiences of pre-meets? and

2) What role do they perceive pre-meets play in relation to how children join their adoptive families?

Below, I discuss my findings in relation to the research questions I have outlined above.

The main findings from this study indicate that across Wales, pre-meets are taking place much more frequently than before the formation of the National Adoption Service in 2014. Practice is evolving and diverse across a range of domains, including terminology used, organisation and the frequency with which pre-meets take place. Participants in all three groups commonly associate pre-meets with helping build relationships and connection and developing confidence in a match. Involving children already in the adoptive family in the matching and transitions of adopted children is also an area of discussion. Interviews with participants revealed debates and sometimes contrasting views held in relation to the positioning of adoptive children and pre-meets, and consideration of a child's best interests.

7.2 Overview

This chapter begins by drawing upon data from adoption social work managers interviewed in my research. I examine the current practice of pre-meets, their underlying

rationale, and the context in which they are developing. I then address perceptions of the experiences, benefits and difficulties associated with pre-meets, as identified through analysis of data from all three participant groups; adoption managers, adoptive parents, and foster carers. I identify five themes, which together provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance and impact of pre-meets across various perspectives. These five themes comprise: building confidence in a match; building relationships and connection; the adopters' psychological adjustment to parenting this child; managing change and the positioning of children in pre-meets.

7.3 Key findings

7.3.1 A diverse and evolving practice

The current practice of pre-meets in Wales

Below, I address the research question:

What is the current practice in Wales relating to pre-meets and how is practice developing?

Findings from my research indicate that compared with only a few years ago, in most Welsh regions pre-meets are becoming more 'standard' practice. In 2022, three of the five adoption regions in Wales were actively developing their pre-meet practices. By 2023, this number had increased to four out of the five regions. In these regions, pre-meets often involve infants and young children, whereas they were previously usually limited to older children, sibling groups, or children with additional needs. Two of the five adoption regions are developing a model of 'bump-into' pre-meets, like that developed in Bradford (Beynon, n.d.). One difference is that in Wales, infants and toddlers are included in the model. In the 'bump-into' model children with their foster carers meet their prospective adopters in a public space, such as in a park, before formal approval of the match. Prospective adopters are typically introduced to the child as their foster carer's 'friends.'

In England, the practice of pre-meets varies significantly between adoption agencies (Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). Similarly, my research reveals differences across the five Welsh regions. These span multiple domains, including the frequency, rationale, organisation, and the context of pre-meets. Across and sometimes within regions, the terminology used for pre-meets varies. They are described as 'bump-intos' 'sightings' or 'chemistry meets' for example. In the *Transitions and Early Support* practice guide (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.), pre-meets are referred to as 'chemistry meets' or 'viewings' (p.23). This inconsistent terminology sometimes reflects the different rationale and organisation of pre-meets. At other times, it appears ad hoc, and terms may be used interchangeably.

The heterogeneity of practice means there are significant differences in the experiences of families across Wales. In one adoption region, children and their prospective parents always take part in a pre-meet, whereas in another this never occurs. Consequently, whether children and their prospective parents meet before formal approval of the match is sought may depend on the region in which the match takes place, rather than on the specific needs of families.
the development of pre-meets in Wales.

The context and rationale for the developing practice

Below, I address the research question:

What are the underlying theories, contexts and rationales that relate to the current practice?

Evidence from my research suggests that broader changes in the adoption sector are influencing the development of pre-meets in Wales. First, changes in thinking around children's transitions. Second, the increased diversity in the sources and nature of information about a child shared during matching. Third, the development of adopter-led approaches in which prospective adopters can play a more active role in identifying their own potential links and matches. The

first two of these are embedded in recent practice guidance on children's transitions, launched by the National Adoption Service in 2020 (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.). Below, drawing upon my findings from interviews with adoption managers, I outline the changes in adoption processes which provide context for the developing practice of pre-meets, before exploring my findings from across the three participant groups.

1. Changes in thinking around children's transitions

Addressing the losses experienced by children during transitions is a long-standing concern (e.g. Fahlberg, 1994; Lanyado, 2003; Schofield & Beek, 2018). However, research by psychotherapists Sophie Boswell and Lynne Cudmore (2014; 2017) has drawn greater attention to the emotional complexities and challenges children face when leaving their foster families, including the loss of their foster carer relationship. Their research has informed recent models of transitions which advocate for a more gradual approach to building relationships between children and their prospective adopters, and an approach which takes account of the child's losses. These models include the introduction of short meetings in the foster carer's home after the matching panel but before formal introductions commence (Beek et al., 2021; National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.).

Adoption managers in two of the five Welsh regions related their emergent practice of pre-meets primarily to developing relationships between children and their prospective adoptive families more gradually than has happened in the past. They linked this with changes in thinking in the adoption sector around children's transitions, although most managers in my research conceptualised pre-meets firmly as part of the matching process. In one region bump-into meetings may be held shortly before or shortly after formal approval of the match. Here, whether

the meeting was part of the matching or transition process was described as sometimes 'fluid.' Beek et al., (2021) espouse that this distinction is important as participants will be thinking differently about relationships once the match has been formalised. My findings suggest in at least one region managers do not always view the matching and transitions processes as such separate entities.

2. The changing nature and sources of information about children shared during matching

Findings from my research indicate that the development of pre-meets can be seen within a broader expansion of methods used to share information about children during matching. Concurring with other studies, this includes the more frequent use of photographs and videos of the child than in the past (Grant & Lury, 2020; Dibben, 2018). It also includes a stronger emphasis on providing multi-perspective insights into the child, through the introduction of Understanding the Child Days, for example. These are intended to provide prospective adopters with a comprehensive picture of a child's background, needs, and experiences before placement, their attachment patterns and any support needs they may have.

3. Adoption Activity Days and other adopter-led developments

The third key influence on the evolving practice of pre-meets is the development of adopter-led approaches in linking and matching (National Adoption Service, n.d.). These enable prospective adopters to play a greater role in identifying their own potential matches than in traditional approaches, in which social workers take the lead. Adopter-led approaches are sometimes linked with the concept of 'chemistry' in matching (Department for Education, 2012; Narey, 2015). They include Adoption Activity Days, events at which approved prospective adoptive parents can meet children waiting for adoption (Simpson et al., 2024; Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013; Yap, 2016). These were introduced in Wales in 2017. Findings from my research

align with the views of Beaumont and Dibben (2017), that Adoption Activity Days have helped

normalise the possibility of prospective adoptive parents meeting children during the matching

process. This has created increased expectations and acceptance of such practices, including pre-

meets, among professionals and prospective adoptive parents alike. In 2024, the depiction of

Adoption Activity Days in the BBC drama *Lost Boys and Fairies* is likely to have further raised

their profile and normalised children and prospective adopters meeting before formal approval of

the match.

In the following sections I explore my overarching findings from across the three

participant groups. These relate to the following research questions:

1) *What are the perceived benefits associated with pre-meets?*

2) *What are the difficulties associated with pre-meets?*

3) *What difference do prospective adoptive parents feel pre-meets make to their experience of matching?*

4) *How do prospective adoptive parents experience pre-meets?*

5) *What are foster carers' experiences of pre-meets?*

6) *What role do foster carers perceive pre-meets play in relation to how children join their adoptive families?*

7.3.2 Building confidence in the match

Concurring with previous research and practice guidance (Triseliotis et al., 1997; Lowe et

al., 1999; Cousins, 2011; Beaumont & Dibben, 2017), participants in my research sometimes

viewed pre-meets and connecting with the child in person as a crucial opportunity to provide

reassurance and enhance confidence in their match. This occurred in a variety of ways, which I

explore below.

Bringing the child to life

As authors such as Argent and Coleman (2012), Quinton (2012) and Lowe et al. (1999) have written, social workers and foster carers face significant challenges when sharing information about children. Whilst they strive to provide objective information and accurate details about a child, their enthusiasm for securing a match might influence how they present this information. Meeting the child in person offers adopters a valuable counterbalance to third-party information (Argent & Coleman, 2012; Lowe et al., 1999).

Adopters are typically approved for children within a broad age range, such as three to five years old, but the specific needs and characteristics of children within these categories can vary greatly. Argent and Coleman identify inadequate preparation of adopters for the realities of parenting their matched child as a significant factor in adoption disruptions. They stress the importance of creating opportunities for prospective parents to 'learn the child' before introductions commence, although they do not specifically advocate for meetings to take place prior to formal matching. Similarly, Neil et al. (2018b), reinforce the value of early, informed engagement between adopters and their matched child.

In my research, participants across all groups highlighted the importance of meeting a child in person to understand more fully their personality and needs. While sometimes linked to specific medical or developmental concerns, most managers and foster carers considered pre-meets could significantly help prospective adopters develop a deeper understanding of any child. Managers and foster carers commented that sightings should focus on bringing the child to life, enabling prospective adopters to understand the child's individual characteristics - how they laugh, move, interact with others; look at a toy or play on a slide - the little details that make them who they are. Prospective adopters echoed these sentiments, viewing pre-meets as an

essential step in developing their understanding of the child. The difficulties of conveying a child's personality through written reports have been conveyed by authors such as Cousins (2011) and Thomas and Blackmore (2019). Prospective adoptive parents in my research found written reports, described as 'black and white' both literally and metaphorically, provided valuable information but were limited in comparison to real-life interactions. They sought to corroborate or contextualise information received through professionals and foster carers, with pre-meets offering an opportunity to develop a rounder understanding of a child, including their energy. Adopters viewed this through the lens of their family's norms, which helped them evaluate the suitability of their match.

Managers observed that environments such as parks or play centres provided a more natural setting for observing children compared to formal introductions at a foster carer's home. Likewise, adopters appreciated seeing the child in an unguarded state, unaffected by the awareness of their role in the process. In regions implementing the 'bump-into' model, managers believed that reducing the presence of social workers facilitated more organic interactions between all participants.

Foster carers emphasised that pre-meets could play an important role in alleviating worries related to the child's specific needs or background. These meetings often help prospective adopters see beyond concerns on paper and recognise the children's abilities and resilience. This perspective was corroborated by Chloe, a prospective adopter. Chloe described how written accounts of her matched child Emma's early trauma had raised fears about Emma's ability to interact with peers. After the pre-meet, Chloe felt reassured by seeing Emma play with other children – an experience of Emma she could hold in mind during introductions, when Emma presented very differently.

Two adoption social work managers suggested that videos might provide similar insights to a pre-meet, which may only present a curated snapshot of a child. However, most managers and all foster carers and adopters believed that meeting in person significantly enhanced prospective adopters' understanding of their matched child.

Testing the prospective adoptive parent's response to the child

Practice guidance published in 2020 (National Adoption Service & the Association for Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.) suggests a pre-meet may take place if a prospective adopter feels anxious about whether they will feel a 'connection' with a child (p.23). Testing the prospective adoptive parent's response to meeting a child is sometimes considered a primary function of pre-meets (Lowe et al., 1999; Triseliotis et al., 1997; Beaumont & Dibben, 2017). The impact of losses, such as fertility challenges, commonly faced by prospective adopters during their journey to becoming an adoptive parent is widely recognised and often shapes the emotional journey and adjustment process of adoptive families (see, for example, Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; Kirk, 1964; Wood & Tasker, 2021). In her study of adoptions which had disrupted, Cowan (2022) found a first meeting with their matched child may prompt responses in the prospective adopter unrelated to the specific child. She observes that many prospective adopters described meeting their child as *'a stark and unexpected reminder of their biological loss'* - a poignant realisation that life was not unfolding as they had envisioned (p.133).

Findings from my research reveal that participants across all groups valued pre-meets as a vital opportunity for prospective adoptive parents to test their response to meeting the child in person. Government policy (Department for Education, 2012) has advocated that 'chemistry' is an important factor in successful matching. In my research, some participants referred to the importance of testing the 'chemistry,' a perceived absence of which has sometimes been

associated with adoption disruption (Cowan, 2022). Managers in three of the five regions believed that 'chemistry' could influence matching decisions and may be experienced at a first meeting. 'Chemistry' could also develop over time. In contrast, managers in two regions found the term unhelpful. One of these highlighted that pre-meets allow adopters to reflect on their reactions to meeting their child, manage expectations, and understand that building a relationship takes time, as the child would initially be a stranger to them. She refuted ideas of 'chemistry.'

Prospective adoptive parents felt that 'chemistry' played a significant role in human relationships. Feeling that the match was 'right' was central to their pre-meet experience. Helen and Jake, who already felt a strong connection with Amy prior to meeting, associated 'chemistry' with shared traits, bonds, or a sense of destiny. Jake hoped to feel a sense of 'complete-ness' at the pre-meet, while Helen had no specific expectations. Chloe described only tentative feelings of connection with her matched child, Emma, prior to the pre-meet. Unsure of the appropriateness of the term 'chemistry,' Chloe hoped for feelings akin to a 'gut feeling' and a 'sense of ease' with Emma. After the pre-meet, Chloe felt drawn to Emma and felt a 'natural connection' leading her to conclude the match was 'meant to be.' Cautiously, she linked these feelings with 'chemistry.' Similarly, Helen and Jake's confidence in their match with Amy deepened after the pre-meet. It is striking that many months after she had joined her adoptive family, Jake imagined future conversations with his daughter, in which he told her that his family's decision to proceed with their match had been made *after* meeting her– the little girl who had lit up the room. This was to form a keystone of her entrance narrative of how she joined her adoptive family (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001; Kranstuber Horstman, 2011).

Foster carers emphasised the importance of adopters experiencing this initial response in person, asserting that the match needed to feel 'right' if it were to be successful. They valued

pre-meets for providing this opportunity earlier in the process than formal introductions. One foster carer, Carys, rejected the term 'chemistry' and preferred 'gut feeling' to describe this instinctive response, which she deemed crucial. Others felt the term was appropriate and stressed its importance. It is noteworthy how foster carers commented on the reassurance they found in seeing the prospective adopter/s and child's responses to one another at the pre-meet. This helped foster carers start to prepare emotionally for the child to move on. Across the groups, pre-meets were seen as essential for helping prospective adopters test their response to meeting the child, developing confidence in their decision-making process.

A relatable, human desire and need

Authors such as Lewis (2018); Neil et al. (2018b) and Selwyn et al. (2015) have described the anxiety felt by prospective adopters surrounding meeting their child for the first time. In my research, most adoption managers commented that taking part in a pre-meet helped relieve adopters' anxieties about their match, prior to introductions starting. It was striking that some managers reported having significantly changed their long-held views about pre-meets. Most described an adoptive parent's desire to meet their child before matching panel as a very relatable, human desire and need, which past social work practices had not taken account of.

Like most adoption managers, all foster carers felt pre-meets had an important role in reassuring adoptive parents about the suitability of their match. Sometimes, they spoke of the vulnerabilities inherent in adopters' routes to parenthood (Kirk, 1964; Wood & Tasker, 2021), which may be enhanced by any expectation to commit to an adoption without meeting their child. The reassurance adopters felt from attending pre-meets, as highlighted by foster carers, was also reflected in the experiences shared by the adopters themselves. For one couple, Jake

and Helen, the experience had deepened their confidence in their match with Amy, while Chloe described the experience as having a 'weight' lifted from her shoulders.

An opportunity to withdraw from the match if needed

In Mandi MacDonald's interpretive phenomenological analysis of parenthood and openness in adoption (2016), she observes how adopters experience a lack of agency throughout their journey to parenthood. MacDonald highlights how adopters consistently described themselves as *'recipients, with parenthood a condition that was conferred upon them,'* (p.35) which, the author observes, illustrates their subordination to the decision-making authority of social workers, adoption agencies, and the court. The professionals and the formal structures they operated within held the power to either facilitate or obstruct adopters' life goals of becoming parents. This lack of agency, as reflected in the language of adopters in MacDonald's study, provides a significant contextual lens through which to interpret the findings of my research.

In their research about adoption disruption, Selwyn et al. (2015) report that 26% of adoptive parents in their study (N = 70) had concerns following introductions with their child. These concerns stemmed from unexpected challenges or an absence of an immediate connection. Adopters making the difficult decision to withdraw from a match is considered far less disruptive than managing the consequences of a failed placement later (Argent & Coleman, 2012; Lowe et al., 1999; Burnell et al., 2009; Browning, 2015; Byrne, 1999). However, Selwyn et al. (2015) found adopters had felt unable to express doubts at the time due to the perceived commitment to proceed with the match. Byrne (1999) suggests the excitement and emotional intensity surrounding early interactions can inhibit adopters from voicing concerns. Adopters' feelings of subordination to decision-making authorities as described by MacDonald may also impact on adopters' capacities to raise concerns. Midway meetings intended to help facilitate time for

reflection during introductions, and the opportunity to raise any concerns, do not always take place (Selwyn & Meakings, 2015a).

In my research, pre-meets emerged as critical moments for reflection, raising concerns, and even withdrawing from a match if necessary. Adoption managers highlighted the importance of pre-meets in providing space for contemplation before formal panels, allowing for thoughtful decision-making that could prevent future disruptions. These managers also observed that pre-meets helped prospective adopters feel less constrained by their perceived commitment to the match, enabling them to make decisions based on the child's and their own best interests.

Foster carers were conscious of the emotional and procedural challenges adopters face during their journeys to adoptive parenthood and, specifically, when contemplating withdrawing from a match. They recognised that pre-meets helped facilitate an environment where adopters could feel more comfortable expressing concerns. Prospective adopters, too, valued pre-meets as opportunities to decide whether they wanted to proceed. They described the matching panel as a point of irreversible commitment, and they welcomed and were reassured by the opportunity to attend a pre-meet with their child before attending the panel. The confidence expressed by social workers after pre-meets also served as a significant source of reassurance for adopters, reinforcing their decisions.

In conclusion, findings by MacDonald (2016) relating to adopters' perceived lack of agency during matching resonate with the themes in my research. Pre-meets may offer a practical approach to empowering adopters, shifting the narrative from passivity to more active engagement in decision-making. Knowledge that they would have the opportunity to meet their matched child ahead of matching panel may encourage more potential parents to consider adoption. This is especially pertinent given the current shortage of prospective adoptive families

who can meet the needs of children waiting for adoption. The moments of reflection facilitated by pre-meets may not only uphold the best interests of the child but also help to address the broader systemic challenges in adoption identified by MacDonald.

7.3.3 Building relationships and connection

The grieving foster family

Studies investigating children's transitions to adoption from the perspective of foster carers reveal that these periods are frequently marked by profound grief, which often goes unacknowledged (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019; Hebert, Kulkin, & McLean, 2013). Doka (1984) describes this type of grief as 'disenfranchised'—a form of mourning that lacks societal recognition or support. This disenfranchised grief has been shown to contribute to a 'blind spot,' where the emotional losses experienced by children are overlooked (Boswell & Cudmore, 2017).

Concurring with the work of others (see, for example, Selwyn et al., 2015) findings from my research indicate that this emotional backdrop plays a critical role in shaping the relationship between the child and their prospective adoptive family. Addressing it is both a practical and ethical necessity—not only for the well-being of foster carers but also for the child and their adoptive family. Findings suggest that pre-meets may help reassure foster carers as they navigate the emotional challenges of children leaving their care. This study contributes to the small but growing body of evidence on foster carers' experiences of grief during children's transitions and the formation of relationships with prospective adopters. The findings indicate that pre-meets may assist foster carers in beginning to process their experiences and emotions, providing a valuable support mechanism during this difficult transition, for all parties.

Building the foster carer/prospective adopter relationship

Attachment theory is embedded in practice guidance related to children's transitions into adoptive families (see, for example, National Adoption Service & National Association of Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.; Beek et al., 2021; Fahlberg, 1994). Central to attachment theory—and models of transition—is the recognition that a child's attachment to their foster carer cannot simply be transferred to their adoptive parent, as was sometimes assumed in the past. Instead, attachment must be earned over time, through the sensitive and responsive care provided by adoptive parents, and depends on the child's readiness to accept this care (Schofield & Beek, 2018).

A crucial factor in the success of a child's transition is the quality of relationship and trust between a child's foster carer/s and their prospective adopter/s (Schofield & Beek, 2018; Byrne, 1999; Dunbar, 2009; Browning, 2015; and Lewis, 2018). This can either facilitate or hinder how the move is managed. Mutual approval between foster carers and adopters is essential for successful transitions, as authors such as Dunbar (2009) emphasise. Introductions which are strained or uncomfortable can jeopardise the success of the transition (Selwyn et al., 2015). This can also impact the formation of lasting positive relationships between the adults, ultimately affecting the child's contact with their former foster carer which plays a vital role in the child's adjustment to living with their adoptive family, their sense of security, and identity (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; 2017).

Byrne (1999) identifies the pre-placement phase as crucial for alleviating adult anxieties. However, evidence suggests that foster carers and prospective adopters often have limited opportunities to establish rapport before introductions, which can lead to tensions (Selwyn et al., 2015; Browning, 2015; Lewis, 2018; Neil et al., 2018b). Studies with adoptive parents highlight how introductions can be fraught with challenges, with some reporting feelings of intimidation,

being undermined, or feeling overly scrutinised by foster carers (Lewis, 2018; Selwyn et al., 2015).

My findings from Chapter 6 suggest pre-meets can help build the relationship between foster carers and prospective adopters and play a prominent role in trust-building. Without pre-meets, introductions often begin with both parties as complete strangers, heightening stress levels. Six of the seven foster carers felt pre-meets helped alleviate initial anxieties in both adopters and carers; to *'break the ice'* and build understanding. Once foster carers had met the prospective adopters with the child and felt reassured that the children would be joining a loving family, they found the transition process easier. One foster carer recalled seeing prospective adopters pacing nervously outside her home, struggling to knock on her door. She described pre-meets as making a 'huge difference,' helping address initial reservations and creating reassurance for both adopters and carers. This in turn helped the bond between the child and their prospective adopter/s to develop.

Like foster carers, adoption managers also suggested that pre-meets provided an opportunity for prospective adopters and foster carers to build their embryonic relationship. They helped them to become familiarised with each other, and presented an early opportunity to collaborate on small parenting tasks, such as discussing snacks to bring for the child. While interviews with prospective adopters underscored their desire to build positive relationships with their child's foster carer, this was not strongly associated with their views on pre-meets. However, adopters did emphasise how observing interactions between the child and their foster carer during pre-meets helped them become more familiar with both parties.

Building the child/prospective adoptive parent connection

Permanency planning is rooted in attachment theory, emphasising the need for a stable, one-to-one relationship with a caring adult in early childhood (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Schofield & Beek, 2018). Relational permanence prioritises connections with key attachment figures, reinforcing emotional and psychological stability (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2019). However, a review of children's social care in England identified significant gaps in policy and practice around sustaining these relationships (MacAlister, 2022). The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence report (2021) further called for a shift in adoption—moving from *'family finding'* to *'family building'* activities.

In my research, adoption managers indicated that pre-meets could help establish relational permanence, by forming an early connection between children and their matched child, for example, which they perceived to build resilience in the child's placement. An emotional connection with their matched child was evident in the prospective adopters' narratives. For example, at the pre-meet Helen and Jake noticed the strength of their feelings of connection to Amy. When she fell over, they wanted to be able to comfort her. Chloe also experienced an immediate sense of connection with Emma during the pre-meet. She described how Emma felt familiar to her, like someone who would seamlessly fit into her family. Reflecting on this experience, she attributed it to 'chemistry'—a feeling of being 'in sync' with Emma, even before truly knowing her.

Whilst developing their feelings of connection with their matched child, each prospective adopter was conscious that at this point and beyond, they were dependent on the judgement of others, to proceed with their match. Echoing Kirk (1964) and Solnit et al. (1973), participants conveyed how they needed to manage their feelings of a growing connection with their child while knowing that others would ultimately decide if their match would proceed.

Research with child participants indicates that their transition to a new family is a central and defining aspect of their adoption experiences (Morgan, 2012). Research by Thomas et al. highlights that children may find the process of joining adoptive families to be stressful, confusing, and even frightening (1999). Children have expressed a desire for more time to build relationships with their adoptive families before moving in with them, emphasising the importance of gradual introductions (Thomas et al., 1999; Morgan, 2006; 2012). Familiarising a child with their prospective adoptive family is acknowledged to be an important part of the pre-placement phase, prior to the period of introductions (Schofield & Beek, 2018; Byrne, 1999). Research I conducted during the early stages of my doctoral studies has shown that this is often facilitated by a child's foster carer through the sharing of photographs and sometimes videos provided by the prospective adoptive family (Blackmore et al., 2020).

During my doctoral studies, an increased emphasis on the process of familarisation and a more gradual approach to building connection before children move in with their adoptive families has taken place (National Adoption Service, Wales & the National Association of Fostering & Adoption, Cymru, n.d.; Beek et al., 2021). Six of the seven foster carers in this study highlighted how pre-meets helped facilitate the familiarisation process between children and their prospective adoptive parents. One foster carer remarked on the emotional connection developed during these meetings, recalling how a child's face lit up when he next saw his prospective adopters. Similarly, another foster carer described how pre-meets helped facilitate the natural progression in the child-prospective adopter relationship.

For many foster carers, a key aspect of pre-meets was witnessing how they allowed prospective adoptive parents begin 'claiming' the child as part of their family. Foster carers described moments where couples silently acknowledged, 'This is our child,' through shared

expressions or subtle gestures. These experiences, where emotional bonds began to form, were profoundly moving and carried great importance for both the prospective adopters and foster carers alike.

Conveying safety to the child and giving them permission to move on

Challenges during introductions can include foster carers' reluctance or inability to give a child psychological permission to move on (Neil et al., 2018b; Lewis, 2018; Selwyn et al., 2015; Selwyn & Meakings, 2015a). Such difficulties can lead to trauma, particularly during the child's move to their new family (Selwyn et al., 2015; Neil et al., 2018b). In the 'bump-into' model of pre-meets, low-key encounters are designed to allow foster carers to subtly communicate to the child that their prospective adoptive parents are safe and trusted adults (Beynon, n.d.; Burnell, Castell & Cousins, 2009). This is an essential component of children's transitions (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014). Findings in Chapter 6 suggest that pre-meets may provide early opportunities for foster carers to reassure children and help to mitigate divided loyalties and prepare children for their transition to the adoptive family. This aspect of pre-meets was not discussed in the interviews with prospective adoptive parents.

7.3.4 Psychological adjustment to parenting this child

The transition to adoptive parenthood is accompanied by distinct stressors, conflicts, and challenges, as highlighted by Brodzinsky and Schecter (1990), MacDonald (2016), Kirk (1964), and Wood and Tasker (2021). Their research underscores the complexities and emotional demands faced by adoptive parents during this significant life change. Kirk (1964) writes of the lack of markers signifying a route to parenthood which are present in parenthood through pregnancy, and the unpredictability of the timing of a child joining an adoptive family, compared with the relative predictability of the timing of a birth. Byrne (1999) warns against making

assumptions that the period of psychological adjustment needed by prospective adoptive parents adopting a baby or toddler may be shorter or easier than adopting an older child.

Wood and Tasker (2021) apply Mason's theory of 'unsafe uncertainty' to adoption (Mason, 1993). They write that the uncertainty faced by adoptive parents who have been matched with a child may be encapsulated in the question: '*What will family life be like?'* (Wood & Tasker, 2021, p.6). Cowan (2022) also highlights adopters' uncertainties and challenges in their route to parenthood. She notes the significant disparity between the theoretical preparation given to prospective adoptive parents—such as learning about the potential impacts of a child's early experiences—and their practical readiness for the realities of adoptive parenthood. This gap emphasises the need for preparation that bridges understanding and actionable preparedness.

Findings from my research indicate that pre-meets may play an important role in helping prospective adopters psychologically adjust to their new parenting role. Managers emphasised the significance of adopters being able to visualise their child as part of this adjustment process. They described how seeing the child can make it easier for the prospective parents to imagine the child in their lives, living with them and parenting them. These reflections highlight the value managers attributed to pre-meets in closing the distance between abstract understanding and the lived reality of becoming a parent to a specific child. Concurring with the views of managers, adopters' narratives revealed how pre-meets played a significant role in helping them picture the child as part of their family, aiding their transition into parenthood. They reflected on how swiftly the assessment and matching processes unfolded. After meeting the child, they were able to start to visualise family dynamics, such as interactions between the adopted child and other children, and felt this helped them emotionally prepare for the upcoming addition to their family. From my research, pre-meets may therefore be able to help adopters to envisage their future

family life, and move from a position of 'unsafe uncertainty' towards 'safe uncertainty' (Mason, 1993).

7.3.5 Managing change

Managers in adoption regions implementing changes related to pre-meets, as well as those considering such changes, recognised that this shift marked a significant departure from past practice. In these regions, managers described how the process involved challenging existing assumptions and practices regarding the timing and approach to first meetings between children and their prospective adopters. Managers described principles like those of a Secure Base model (Schofield & Beek, 2014) as central to managing concerns raised by individual workers or foster carers about pre-meets. This involved the creation of a safe space in which any issues could be discussed and resolved. Managers reported that, while most workers and foster carers embraced these practice changes, not everyone did. Difficulties could arise if any individual involved in a pre-meet disagreed with the approach, leading to tensions in its implementation.

Foster carers participating in my research were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about changes to pre-meet practices; however, their perspectives on how these meetings should be conducted did not always align with those of adoption teams. Foster carers strongly believed that children and their prospective adoptive parents should be able to interact during a pre-meet. In contrast, some managers reported instances where foster carers stretched the boundaries of pre-meet expectations, resulting in confusion and inconsistency in practice. Like the planning approach recommended by Browning (2015), one adoption region had introduced 'expectations meetings' for all adult participants before a pre-meet took place. These meetings helped establish

a shared understanding of the purpose and logistics of pre-meets, ensuring clarity among all involved.

Narratives of adopters highlighted their awareness that after a pre-meet, there are no guarantees that the matching panel or Agency Decision Maker will approve their match. Pre-meets take place at a time of vulnerability for prospective adopters, during which they must manage complex emotions. Furthermore, they were aware that they were being watched during pre-meets, and of the possibility of feeling judged during circumstances they found awkward. These factors need to be considered in terms of the support provided for prospective adopters attending pre-meets.

7.3.6 The positioning of children and pre-meets

Including other children in the family in matching and transitions

The task of integrating the lives of the adoptive child and their new family is a challenge and source of uncertainty for newly adoptive families (Wood & Tasker, 2021; Tasker & Wood, 2016; Meakings et al., 2017). Literature concerning the preparation of other children in the adoptive family appears sparse. Browning (2015) is one exception. He discusses the importance of the child to be placed meeting all family members early in the introductions, to enable the child to get a sense of the prospective family and for the new family (not just parents) to become familiar with the child's current world.

Narratives of prospective adopters in my research highlight how the whole family system needs to be considered during matching and transitions processes (Meakings et al., 2017). Adoptive parents felt that children already in their family were excluded and marginalised from these processes, and that the new siblings had insufficient time to get to know one another prior to living together, enhancing the difficulties of challenging relational dynamics that are common

in newly-formed adoptive families (Mooradian et al., 2011; Wood & Tasker, 2021; Meakings et al., 2017). In one family, the adoptive parents' birth child had expectations, both about her new sibling and the nature of their dynamic, which were not met. This little girl lacked a cultural script to becoming a sibling to a child who was not a newborn, like the lack of cultural script for adoptive parents, described by Kirk (1964).

The adoptive child and pre-meets

My findings indicate that debate around adoptive children's positioning and pre-meets is embedded within complex decision-making and moral considerations. In research by Farmer et al., (2010a) a children's guardian argued that pre-meets primarily benefit prospective adopters rather than children. Nonetheless, Farmer and colleagues concluded that any benefits to adopters ultimately also benefit the child. Similarly, interviews with participants in my research often revealed the inter-connected nature of the interests of children and their prospective families.

Pre-meets were seen as both beneficial and potentially risky for children. Professionals sometimes framed concerns within broader anxieties about the adequacy of children's preparation for adoption in general, which they sometimes found lacking. Below, I consider three themes in relation to children's position and pre-meets which were evident across the participant groups. Firstly, issues of honesty and transparency with children. Secondly, how pre-meets take place; how they are organised and the potential impact on the child. Thirdly, children's agency in relation to pre-meet practice.

Honesty and transparency with adoptive children

There is a notable absence in the literature regarding children's positioning in pre-meets, with limited exceptions such as Lowe et al. (1999) and Beaumont and Dibben (2017), who touch on honesty and transparency. The development of pre-meet practices has often involved keeping the child unaware of the prospective adopter's identity or even presence. This has led

professionals to consider it secretive and even dishonest (Cousins, 2011) with some inspection bodies disapproving of it (Lowe et al., 1999). My findings reveal that professionals often grapple with ethical dilemmas in relation to children. For example, they attempt to balance the need to protect children from potential rejection against the importance of being truthful. Across the participant groups, varying the approach taken to honesty and transparency with the child according to their age, stage and individual characteristics and circumstances was considered important.

Approaches to honesty and transparency with children varied across the five regions. In one region, children were not supposed to be aware of even the presence of their prospective adopters. In another, children were introduced to and informed of the identity of prospective adopters, according to their developmental readiness. In this region, preparation for the pre-meet was incorporated into a plan of direct work with the child. Other regions maintained ambiguity, introducing adopters as foster carers' 'friends.' This approach was intended to be in the child's best interests. For example, in one region utilising the 'bump-into' model of pre-meets, children were not told the identity of their prospective adopters as part of a deliberate strategy which aimed to reduce the child's anxiety about the meeting. However, some professionals questioned the ethics of such framing, suggesting it could undermine children's future understanding of relationships and erode trust. Furthermore, some recognised that a child may guess the identity of their prospective adopter, even if they had not been told. Some professionals expressed concern about the emotional toll on a child if their match did not proceed after a pre-meet and they had been aware of the nature of the meeting. Some professionals indicated that the ambiguity of the meeting's status—neither fully formal nor entirely casual—created challenges in preparing

children and recording the occasion as part of the child's narrative of how they joined their new family.

Two of the three adopter participants indicated that they felt children should only be told the identity of their prospective adopters once the adopters and professionals had agreed the match. Like some professionals' approaches, this approach was valued primarily to protect children from feelings of rejection, if the match did not proceed. The third adopter identified a greater risk to a child if they were not told, and then started introductions without being aware that they had met their adopter/s.

Foster carer participants reported experiences of pre-meets which related mostly to infants and toddlers. For such young children, foster carers did not view issues of honesty and transparency as problematic. Several commented that children they had cared for were used to meeting new people and that meetings in which the identity and status of the prospective adopter was ambiguous did not cause the child any difficulties. All foster carer participants commented on the greater risks for the child that they perceived, if a pre-meet had not taken place. These included a lack of opportunity for adopters and professionals to raise any concerns about the match before the match was formally approved. This was felt to increase risks for the child such as exposing them to rejection once formal introductions had started, or a match proceeding which may disrupt later.

How pre-meets take place and the adoptive child

Views differed between professionals on whether any interaction between a child and their prospective adopter should take place at a pre-meet. In one region, pre-meets were intended to be just a 'sighting' of a child. This position was thought to protect them from potential feelings of being overwhelmed or rejection following the pre-meet. However, it is not practice

which is supported by Beaumont and Dibben's guidance on pre-meets, on grounds of honesty with children. In regions where interactions were planned, they were seen as an important element of the pre-meet. For example, they were thought to help familiarise children with their prospective adopters, and enable feelings of connection between them and their prospective parents to start to develop.

Managers in each region emphasised the need for gradual and carefully-planned introductions between children and their adoptive families, as underlined in recent practice guidance regarding children's transitions from foster care to living with adoptive families. In some of the regions in which pre-meets took place, managers were concerned that foster carers and prospective adopters may be tempted to extend the time-frame of pre-meets impulsively if they appeared to be going 'well.' In doing so, they could overlook the child's need to have time to process what was happening, and potentially increase the risk of exposing them to feelings of overwhelm.

Adopter participants were acutely aware that, despite knowing a great deal about their child, they were still strangers from the child's perspective. This awareness shaped their actions and interactions during the pre-meet, as they sought to approach the child with sensitivity and care. Adopters also reflected on the significance of the setting in which the pre-meet occurred, emphasising the need for it to feel emotionally safe and appropriate for the child. One participant shared that he had unknowingly met his child in the same location where she had recently had a 'goodbye' visit with her birth family—an overlap he later recognised as potentially distressing for the child.

Foster carer participants were vociferous in their views that interactions between children and their prospective adopters at the pre-meet were in children's best interests. They indicated

that this was an essential aspect of testing how the child and adopter responded to one another. They wanted to see the child and adopter interacting, to feel reassured about the match. The benefits they attributed to interactions included developing feelings of connection between child and adopter, and both adopters' and foster carers' psychological adjustment to the child joining their adoptive family. Ultimately, these aspects were viewed to be in the child's best interest.

Foster carers expressed concern that their insights into children's needs were often overlooked during the matching process, potentially compromising the quality of matching decisions. One foster carer, for instance, noted that she was aware of a child's strong preference for adults of a particular gender—yet this information was never sought or considered. Carers highlighted that the risks to children arising from the disregard of their carers' knowledge, or from limited opportunities for children and prospective adopters to meet before formal introductions, were more significant than any risks associated with pre-meets themselves.

The adoptive child's agency and pre-meets

Across participant groups, there was shared recognition that pre-meets could offer children a valuable opportunity to engage naturally with prospective adopters—particularly when unaware of their identity. In these moments, children were seen not merely as 'cases' defined by others' descriptions, but as active participants in the matching process. Adopters, meanwhile, appreciated the chance to see children in relaxed, familiar environments, free from the pressures of formal introductions. However, some participants reflected that this ambiguity—especially when the child was not told who their prospective adopters were—could lead to confusion or speculation, particularly among older children.

Although literature such as Triseliotis et al. (1997) and Beaumont and Dibben (2017) advocates for involving children in post-meet reflections and decisions, this appeared to be rarely

implemented in practice. Foster carers described how pre-meets enabled them to closely observe the child's reactions to potential adopters, offering insights that could meaningfully inform matching decisions. However, they noted that their observations were not always sought or valued, despite their potential to enrich understanding of the child's experience.

A recurring tension emerged between the desire to protect children and the imperative to empower them in their own family finding journey. This underscores the need for thoughtful, child-centred approaches that balance emotional safety with meaningful participation.

7.4 Strengths and limitations

Strengths of this thesis

The findings of my research offer a clear rationale for the evolving practice of pre-meets. Grounded in current practice, the research provides a comprehensive view of pre-meets in Wales, offering insights that are applicable to other countries. Employing an interpretive phenomenological approach has assisted in the development of a deep exploration of the experiences and meanings prospective adoptive parents and foster carers associate with pre-meets. To my knowledge, no other studies have explored pre-meets in depth, or used an interpretive, phenomenological approach. My research has uncovered novel insights, particularly regarding the role of foster carers in offering early reassurance and trust-building and represents a shift from traditional practice, where such connections typically formed later in the process, after formal introductions had begun.

A strength of this study lies in the input of clinical psychologists, adoption professionals and families with lived experience of adoption at all stages of the design of this study, which has ensured its relevance to current issues of concern in the adoption sector. Furthermore, its triangulation of viewpoints, incorporating perspectives from professionals, adoptive parents, and foster carers has allowed for the identification of common ground, as well as divergence in perspectives.

By illuminating contemporary adoption practice in Wales, this study contributes valuable insights into how pre-meets can improve matching experiences and outcomes. Its findings have wider applicability, offering lessons that could inform practice in adoption services across the United Kingdom and beyond.

Limitations

In addition to the small sample sizes of adopters and foster carers in this study, I acknowledge three key limitations in the present study, the first two of which I have referred to in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3. The first limitation concerns the absence of child participation in the coproduction of the research design, as well as the decision not to interview children as part of the study. While this approach aligns with practical and ethical considerations, I recognise that child participation in research is a fundamental right enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989):

- Article 12 establishes children's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with due weight given to their opinions according to their age and maturity.

- Article 13 guarantees their right to seek, receive, and share information and ideas.

I had begun exploring the possibilities of involving children in the design of this study when the global Covid-19 pandemic emerged. However, restrictions on in-person meetings at the time severely limited these possibilities, as I felt conducting this process online would not be appropriate.

As discussed in Chapter 1, including children as participants would have necessitated substantial additional resources to ensure their involvement was ethically sound, adequately supported, and in compliance with the Research Governance Framework for Health and Community Care (Welsh Assembly Government, 2003). The ethical complexities surrounding informed consent, safeguarding, relationship-building and valuing children's perspectives would have required the development of a robust methodological framework to uphold their rights while preserving the integrity of the research.

The second limitation, detailed in Chapter 3, relates to the online nature of interviews conducted with professionals. While virtual interviews offered accessibility and flexibility, they shape interactions differently compared to in-person engagements. This could have influenced the depth of discussion, participant dynamics, and rapport-building, affecting data richness and the nuances of researcher-participant engagement.

The third limitation is that participant accounts of pre-meets in the present research relate to pre-meets involving infants and toddlers, rather than older children. Prospective adoptive parents and foster carers provided insights into how young children experienced pre-meets, yet there was limited representation of older children's perspectives within the study.

Despite these limitations, the research remains grounded in contemporary practice and offers a comprehensive perspective on the practice of pre-meets in Wales, with broader applicability to other jurisdictions.

7.5 Implications for practice.

My recommendations for policy and practice flow from my findings and are set out below:

1. **Creating a more standardised approach to pre-meets across the country**

   The current practice of pre-meets is inconsistent across the five adoption regions. This research aims to inform future developments to reduce disparities and provide a more equitable service for children and their families. Improvements must involve key stakeholders, including adoption teams, children's social workers, foster carers, prospective adoptive parents, Independent Reviewing Officers, adoption panel members, and Agency Decision Makers. A clear and accessible policy on pre-meets should also be available for prospective parents considering adoption.

2. **Preparing children for adoption and pre-meets**

   The preparation of children for adoption, particularly for pre-meets, requires further development. Existing guidance used for preparing children for Adoption Activity Days could serve as a foundation for a structured framework to help prepare children for pre-meets. Additionally, how pre-meets are recorded and integrated into a child's life story—including their 'entrance narrative'—needs careful consideration. The involvement of dedicated life journey workers could significantly enhance these activities.

3. **Establishing 'expectation meetings'**

   The introduction across the regions of 'expectation meetings'—involving professionals, foster carers, and prospective adopters—prior to a pre-meet, could promote a shared understanding of how a pre-meet will proceed. This includes setting boundaries and clarifying appropriate child-adopter interactions.

4. **Including and supporting children in adoption processes**

   Children in adoptive families need better preparation and ongoing support during adoption processes. Similarly, children in foster families need preparation and support and to be considered in plans for future contact (including digital communication) between the former foster family and child. Participants in this study reported that children in both adoptive and foster families felt excluded from the adoption process. For example, one child in an adoptive family was inadequately prepared and mistakenly expected their new sibling to be a newborn.

5. **Strengthening connections post-regionalisation**

   Regionalisation may have weakened ties between adoption social work teams and foster carers caring for children pre-adoption. Strengthening these connections and enhancing

communication is essential. Lead Foster Carers could play a pivotal role in supporting relationships between adoption teams and foster carers.

6. **Supporting foster carers' adjustment to children's transitions and addressing concerns they may have**

    The role of pre-meets in supporting foster carers as they adjust emotionally and psychologically to the child's transition needs consideration. Furthermore, pre-meets could provide opportunities to address any concerns foster carers may have about the match or transition at an early stage.

7. **Incorporating foster carers' expertise**

    Foster carers, who know the children in their care best, must have their insights fully integrated into the matching process. Current paperwork may not capture the depth of their understanding of a child's individuality, particularly for infants. Additionally, children's responses during pre-meets should be recorded and incorporated into matching decisions, with foster carers playing a central role. Providing pre-adoption placements is a specialised fostering role that demands unique skills and presents unique challenges. These should be recognised in the support provided by the supervising social worker and others, and documented in the foster carer's Annual Review.

8. **Addressing inconsistencies in sharing photos and videos**

    Significant inconsistencies exist regarding the sharing of children's photographs and videos during matching. In this study, prior to the pre-meet, one prospective adopter had only seen one photograph of their child's face. Photographs and videos of children may significantly help prospective adopters develop their understanding of, and feel a

connection with, a child. Resistance among some social workers to sharing these materials must be addressed.

9. **Timing and location of pre-meets**

   Pre-meets must be carefully timed and held in appropriate locations. For example, using venues previously associated with 'goodbye' meetings with birth families is unsuitable and should be avoided.

10. **Emotional support for prospective adoptive parents**

    Prospective adoptive parents need adequate emotional support during pre-meets, acknowledging the challenges of meeting the child they have been matched with. This includes navigating feelings of scrutiny and uncertainty regarding the match's approval.

7.6 Future research

There are three main areas for future research.

Understanding the child's perspective

The importance of conducting research *with* children, rather than *on* them, is well established in efforts to position children as social actors—subjects rather than objects of enquiry (Christensen & James, 2000). To better understand the factors most significant to children during matching and transitions, further research involving children affected by adoption is essential. This includes children being placed for adoption as well as other children in fostering and adoptive families. The latter includes adopted, birth and foster children.

Creative methodologies offer a proven means of engaging children meaningfully in such research. Techniques demonstrated in studies by Brown et al. (2016), McAuley et al. (2012), and Mannay (2015, 2017) have shown their effectiveness in sensitively and thoughtfully capturing children's perspectives and experiences.

The *Transitions and Early Support* Guide

The good practice model *Transitions and Early Support* Guide was introduced in Wales in 2020, to support children's transitions to living with their adoptive families. It focuses on the importance of relationships between children, adopters and foster carers and a more gradual approach to building them than has often happened in the past. Research could help establish to what extent new practice has been adopted and how this has changed all parties' experiences of the formation of adoptive families. Research could also help identify how pre-meets could be developed in relation to the good practice model.

The use of digital technologies in building and maintaining relationships in adoption: matching, transitions and beyond

The *Transitions and Early Support* Guide incorporates the use of digital technologies in the matching and pre-placement phases. The use and significance of such technologies in family life and friendship formation has grown exponentially over the last decade, and can support familiarisation, connection and a sense of belonging. Technologies offer children, including very young children, the opportunity to have agency to engage in spontaneous, reciprocal, dynamic relationship-building. They have the capacity to support a child's narrative about how they joined their adoptive family and thereby help develop their sense of identity. They can support children and their families to maintain and build relationships with people who are important to them, including their foster families. It would be useful to undertake research which explores the current usage and potential of digital technologies in the matching and transitions phases. It would also be valuable to explore their use and potential in maintaining relationships (for example, with a child's former foster family) and their role in supporting open communication within the family and the child's identity formation. Research needs to establish how digital

output may be stored safely to ensure it remains accessible for children and their families in the future.

7.7 Conclusion

In Wales, there have been significant developments in the practice of pre-meets since the creation of the National Adoption Service in 2014. These challenge long-held views in the adoption sector about whether children and their prospective adoptive parents should meet before formal approval of their match. Practice is developing inconsistently across the country. The importance of matching as a *process* and not an event (Quinton, 2012) underlies the evolving practice of pre-meets. They mark a broad shift towards the formation of adoptive families with the concept of family '*building'* at its heart, rather than family '*finding.'* This shift has underscored government policy (All-Party Parliamentary Group Adoption and Permanence, 2021).

Most participants in this study viewed pre-meets as a vital opportunity to build confidence in the match, addressing the relatable, human need for prospective adopters to connect with the child they had been matched with in person. Pre-meets allow the child to be 'brought to life,' enabling adopters to gain a deeper understanding of their personality and traits. Additionally, pre-meets give prospective adopters the chance to test their emotional response to the child, offering reflection and confidence in their decision. They help to create a space for adopters to voice concerns and, if necessary, withdraw from the match before making a final commitment. This provides adoptive parents with increased agency in the matching process. Pre-meets can help both prospective adoptive parents and foster carers make psychological adjustments to their changing roles in the child's life. For prospective adoptive parents, this may include being able to visualise the child and imagine them as part of their adoptive family; for

foster carers, enabling them to imagine the child moving on and joining their new family. Pre-meets can help relieve the anxieties of all parties before introductions begin. They can build trust between a child's foster carer and their prospective adoptive parent. Depending on how the pre-meet unfolds, it can help the child become familiar with their prospective adoptive parents and support the foster carer in reassuring them that their future adoptive parents are 'safe.'

First meetings of children and their adoptive families are extra-ordinary life events. Other scenarios in which human beings who are not biologically related meet for the first time with the expectation that they will have a life-long relationship are rare. The ethical implications of allowing children and their prospective adoptive families to meet before formal approval and how this is done must be carefully considered. However, it is also essential to address the potential risks for the child and their prospective family associated with initiating formal introductions without prior interaction. It is my hope that this research may contribute to finding this balance.

Bibliography

Adoption and Children Act 2002, c. 38. Retrieved from

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/38/contents.

Adoption England. (2015). *National practice standards for matching.* Retrieved from

https://adoptionengland.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-

05/Adoption%20England%20National%20Practice%20Standards%20for%20Matching.p

df.

Adoption England. (2024). *National Practice Standards for the Adopter Journey.* Adoption

England.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Bell, S. M., & Stayton, D. J. (1978). Patterns of attachment: A

psychological study of the strange situation. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

Associates.

Afka Cymru. (2022). *Trauma, Nurture, Timeline: Understanding the Child Day.* Retrieved from

https://afkacymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Trauma-Nurture-Timeline-

Understanding-the-Child-Day.pdf.

Alderson, P., & Morrow, V. (2011). *The ethics of research with children and young people: A

practical handbook.* London, England: SAGE Publications.

Allmark, P., Boote, J., Chambers, E., Clarke, A., McDonnell, A., Thompson, A., & Tod, A. M.

(2009). Ethical issues in the use of in-depth interviews: Literature review and discussion.

Research Ethics Review, 5(2), 48-54. https://doi.org/10.1177/174701610900500204

Anthony, R. E., Paine, A. L., & Shelton, K. H. (2019). Depression and anxiety symptoms of

British adoptive parents: A prospective four-wave longitudinal study. *International*

Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 16(24), 5153.

https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16245153

Anthony, R., Meakings, S., Doughty, J., Holland, S., & Shelton, K. H. (2016). *The Wales Adoption Study: Preliminary report.* Cardiff University.

Argent, H., & Coleman, J. (2012). *Dealing with disruption in fostering and adoption placements.* London, England: British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF).

Baginsky, M. (2022). *Strengthening the workforce: Retention in social work.* Research in Practice. Retrieved from

https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/jo2plmhz/strengthening-the-workforce-retention-in-social-work-sb-web.pdf.

Bailenson, J. N. (2021). Nonverbal overload: A theoretical argument for the causes of Zoom fatigue. *Technology, Mind, and Behavior, 2*(1). Retrieved from

https://doi.org/10.1037/tmb0000030.

Ball, B., Sevillano, L., Faulkner, M., & Belseth, T. (2021). Agency, genuine support, and emotional connection: Experiences that promote relational permanency in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 121*, Article 105852. Retrieved from

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105852.

Beaumont, S., & Dibben, E. (2017). *Best practice in meetings between prospective adopters and children prior to matching (Practice Note 64).* CoramBAAF. Retrieved from

https://corambaaf.org.uk/sites/default/files/Members%20Area/Resources/Practice%20Notes/PN64.pdf.

Beek, M., Neil, E., & Schofield, G. (2021). *Moving to adoption: Using the UEA model to help children move from foster care to adoption.* CoramBAAF.

Bell, A., & Kempenaar, M. (2010). *The support needs of adoptive families in Wales.* Adoption UK.

Berg, J. H., & Clark, M. S. (1986). Differences in social exchange between intimate and other relationships: Gradually evolving or quickly apparent? In V. J. Derlega & B. A. Winstead (Eds.), *Friendship and social interaction* (pp. 101–128). Springer Series in Social Psychology. New York, NY: Springer. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4880-4_6.

Best, J. I., & Blakeslee, J. E. (2020). Perspectives of youth aging out of foster care on relationship strength and closeness in their support networks. *Children and Youth Services Review, 108*, 1–8. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104626.

Beynon, R. (n.d.). *'Bump-into meetings' Evaluation of Introductions Method (unpublished).* Bradford: unpublished. Available from Rhian.Beynon@oneadoptionwy.leeds.gov.uk.

Bick, J., & Dozier, M. (2009). Effects of a foster parent training program on young children's attachment behaviors: Preliminary evidence from a randomized clinical trial. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal, 26*(4), 321–332.

Boell, S. K., & Cecez-Kecmanovic, D. (2015). *A hermeneutic approach for conducting literature reviews and literature searches*. Communications of the Association for Information Systems, 37, 257–286. https://doi.org/10.17705/1CAIS.03712

Campbell, K., Holderness, N., & Riggs, M. (2015). Friendship chemistry: An examination of underlying factors. *The Social Science Journal*, *52*(2), 239–247. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2015.01.005.

Campbell, K., Nelson, J., Parker, M., & Johnston, S. (2018). Interpersonal chemistry in friendships and romantic relationships. *Interpersona: An International Journal on Personal Relationships, 12*(1), 34-50. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.5964/ijpr.v12i1.289.

Cartwright, L. (2003). Photographs of 'waiting children': The transnational adoption market. *Social Text, 74*(21), 83-109.

Charlick, S., Pincombe, J., McKellar, L., & Fielder, A. (2016). Making sense of participant experiences: Interpretative phenomenological analysis in midwifery research. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 11*, 205-216. Retrieved from http://www.informingscience.org/Publications/3486.

Children Act 1989, c. 41. (1989). *An Act to reform the law relating to children; to provide for local authority services for children in need and others; to amend the law with respect to children's homes, community homes, voluntary homes and voluntary organisations; to make provision with respect to fostering, child minding and day care for young children and adoption; and for connected purposes.* Retrieved from: Legislation.gov.uk.

Christensen, P., & James, A. (2008). *Childhood Diversity and Commonality: Some Methodological Insights*. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (pp. 156–172). Routledge.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Routledge.

Copson, R., Murphy, A., Cook, L., Neil, E., & Sorensen, P. (2022). *Relationship-based practice and digital technology in child and family social work: Learning from practice during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Developmental Child Welfare, *4*(1), 3–19.

CoramBAAF. (n.d.). *Statistics - Wales*. Retrieved from

https://corambaaf.org.uk/resources/statistics/statistics-wales.

CoramBAAF. (2024). *First4Adoption glossary*. Retrieved from

https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/glossary.

Cowan, P. J. (2022). *Forever home: Understanding adoption transitions* [Doctoral dissertation,

University of Edinburgh]. Edinburgh Research Archive.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods

approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Dance, C., & Farmer, E. (2014). Changing lives and changing minds: The experiences of

adoptive parents from application to approval. *Adoption & Fostering, 38*(2), 101-114.

Dance, C., & Farmer, E. (2015). Family finding and matching in adoption: What helps make a

good match? *British Journal of Social Work*. Retrieved from:

https://www.cypnow.co.uk/content/research/family-finding-and-matching-in-adoption-

what-helps-make-a-good-match/.

Dance, C., & Rushton, A. (2005). Joining a new family: The views and experiences of young

people placed with permanent families during middle childhood. *Adoption & Fostering,

29*(1), 18-28.

Daniluk, J.C., & Hurtig-Mitchell, J. (2003). Themes of hope and healing: Infertile couples'

experiences of adoption. *Journal of Counselling and Development, 81*(3), 389-399.

Davey, S. (2020). *A failure of proportion: Non-consensual adoption in England and Wales*.

Oxford: Hart Publishing. Retrieved from:

http://dx.doi.org.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/10.5040/9781509929160.

Delve Team. (2021). *Delve* (Version 1.0) [Software]. Delve Software. https://delvetool.com/

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (1998). *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Department for Education. (2011). *Fostering services: National minimum standards*. London, UK.

Department for Education. (2012). *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay*. Retrieved from: Adoption action plan - GOV.UK.

Department for Education. (2015). *The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations and guidance Volume 2: Care planning, placement, and case review*. DFE 00169-2015.

Department for Education. (2023). Social work recruitment crisis highlighted as barrier to children's social care reform. *Professional Social Work*. Retrieved from https://basw.co.uk/about-social-work/psw-magazine/articles/social-work-recruitment-crisis-highlighted-barrier.

Department for Education. (2023). *Family finding, befriending and mentoring programmes: Application guide for local authorities*. Retrieved from: GOV.UK.

Doka, K. (1984). Expectation of death, participation in funeral arrangements, and grief adjustment. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying, 15*(2), 119-129. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.2190/HG24-EBR1-503H-C69V.

Donaldson Adoption Institute. (2013). *A family for life: The vital need to achieve permanency for children in care*. National Center on Adoption and Permanency (NCAP).

Dunbar, L. (2009). *Ten top tips on making introductions*. CoramBAAF, Adoption and Fostering Academy.

Eatough, V., & Smith, J. (2006). 'I feel like a scrambled egg in my head': An idiographic case study of meaning making and anger using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 79(2), 115-135.

Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1348/147608305X41100.

Edwards, R., & Holland, J. (2013). *What is qualitative interviewing?* Bloomsbury Academic.

Engward, H., & Goldspink, S. (2020). Lodgers in the house: Living with the data in interpretive

phenomenological analysis research. *Reflective Practice, 21*(1), 1-13. Retrieved from:

https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2019.1708305.

Fahlberg, V. (1994). *A child's journey through placement*. Coram BAAF, Adoption and

Fostering Academy.

Farmer, E., & Dance, C., with Beecham, J., Bonin, E., & Ouwejan, D. (2010a). *An investigation

of family finding and matching in adoption.* Draft report to the Department for Children,

Schools and Families, Centre for Family Policy and Child Welfare, School for Policy

Studies, University of Bristol (unpublished – copy provided by Elaine Farmer).

Farmer, E., Dance, C., Beecham, J., Bonin, E., & Ouwejan, D. (2010b). *An investigation of

family finding and matching in adoption – briefing paper*. Department for Education.

Farmer, E., & Dance, C. (2016). *Family finding and matching in adoption: What helps to make a

good match?* British Journal of Social Work, **46**(4), 974-992. Retrieved from:

https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcv095

Featherstone, B., & Gupta, A. (2020). Social workers' reflections on ethics in relation to adoption

in the UK: Everywhere but nowhere? *British Journal of Social Work, 50*(3), 833-849.

Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., & Mills, S. (2016). *The role of the social worker in adoption –

ethics and human rights: An enquiry*. British Association of Social Workers.

Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K., & White, S. (2018). *Protecting children: A social model*.

Bristol: Policy Press.

Fenton-Glynn, C. (2016). *Adoption without consent: Update 2016.* Study for the Petti
Commission, European Parliament.

Fielding, N., & Thomas, H. (2001). Qualitative interviewing. In N. Gilbert (Ed.), *Researching
social life* (2nd ed., pp. 123–143). Sage Publications.

Finch, J. (1993). It's great to have someone to talk to. In M. Hammersley (Ed.), *Social research:
Philosophy, politics and practice* (pp. 166-180). Open University/Sage.

Flick, U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research* (4th ed.). London: Sage.

Foster Wales. (2021). *National Fostering Framework Final Report 2018-2021*. ADSS Cymru.
Retrieved from: https://afkacymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/NFF-Final-
Report_E.pdf.

Gair, S. (2012). Feeling their stories: Contemplating empathy, insider/outsider positionings, and
enriching qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research, 22*(1), 134-143.

Garrett, P. M. (2018). Ending the 'cruel rationing of human love'? Adoption politics and neo-
liberal rationality. *British Journal of Social Work, 48*(5), 1239-1256.

Geen, R., Malm, K., & Katz, J. (2004). A study to inform the recruitment and retention of
general applicant adoptive parents. *Adoption Quarterly, 7*(4), 1-28. Retrieved from:
https://doi.org/10.1300/J145v07n04_01.

Goldberg, A. E. (2009). The transition to adoptive parenthood. In T. W. Miller (Ed.), *Handbook
of stressful transitions across the lifespan* (pp. 165–184). Springer.

Goldspink, S. & Engward, H. (2018). Booming clangs and whispering ghosts: Attending to the
reflexive echoes in IPA research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *16*(2), 291–304.
Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1543111.

Goldstein, J., Freud, A. & Solnit, A. (1973). *Beyond the best interests of the child*. Free Press.

Golombok, S., Mellish, L., Jennings, S., Casey, P., Tasker, F., & Lamb, M. E. (2014). Adoptive gay father families: Parent–child relationships and children's psychological adjustment. *Child Development, 85*(2), 456–468.

GOV.WALES. (2024). *Children looked after by local authorities, April 2023 to March 2024 (official statistics in development) [HTML].* Retrieved from https://gov.wales.

Graham, A., Powell, M. A., & Taylor, N. (2015). Ethical research involving children: Putting the evidence into practice. *Family Matters, 96*, 23-28.

Graham, H. (2008). Ethical issues in longitudinal research. In R. Thomson, L. Hadfield, & J. Holland (Eds.), *The longitudinal study of young people in England* (pp. 22–32). Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Grand, M. (2010). *The adoption constellation: New ways of thinking about and practicing adoption*. Dog Ear Publishing.

Grant, M., & Lury, K. (2020). In-between and beyond: Moving images and finding families – Using digital media in the adoption process. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture, 11*(3). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1386/iscc_00027_1.

Grant, M., Whincup, H., & Burgess, C. (2019). *Perspectives on kinship care, foster care and adoption: The voices of children, carers and adoptive parents*. University of Stirling. Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland. Retrieved from https://www.stir.ac.uk/media/stirling/services/faculties/social-sciences/research/documents/permanently-progressing/Children-Carers-and-Adoptive-Parents--Final-Report.pdf.

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and 'ethically important moments' in research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 10*(2), 261–280. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360

Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies. (2002). *Matching children and families in permanent family placement*. School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol.

Hanna, M., & McRoy, R. (2011). Innovative practice approaches to matching in adoption. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 5*(1), 45-66. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2011.545761.

Harf, A., Skandrani, S., Radjack, R., Sibeoni, J., Moro, M., & Revah-Levy, A. (2013). First parent-child meetings in international adoptions: A qualitative study. *PLoS ONE, 8*(9), e75300. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0075300.

Hassett, A., Adams, E., & Lumsden, V. (2019). They needed the attention more than I did: How do the birth children of foster carers experience the relationship with their parents? *Conference or workshop item*, Canterbury Christ Church University. Retrieved from https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/item/8w159/-they-needed-the-attention-more-than-i-did-how-do-the-birth-children-of-foster-carers-experience-the-relationship-with-their-parents.

Haynes, K. (2012). Reflexivity in qualitative research. In G. Symon & C. Cassell (Eds.), *Qualitative organizational research: Core methods and current challenges* (pp. 72-89). Sage Publications.

Hebert, C., & Kulkin, H. (2016). Attending to foster parent grief: Exploring the use of grief awareness training for child welfare workers. *Adoption & Fostering, 40*(2), 128-139.

Hebert, C., Kulkin, H., & McLean, M. (2013). Grief and foster parents: How do foster parents feel when a foster child leaves their home? *Adoption & Fostering, 37*(3), 253-267.

Hefferon, K., & Gil-Rodriguez, E. (2011). Methods: Interpretative phenomenological analysis. *The Psychologist*, *24*(10), 756-759.

Holland, S. (2009). Listening to children in care: A review of methodological and theoretical approaches to understanding looked after children's perspectives. *Child & Family Social Work, 14*(3), 276-284. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2009.00626.x

Holland, S., Renold, E., Ross, N., & Hillman, A. (2008). The everyday lives of children in care: Using a sociological perspective to inform social work practice. In B. Luckock & M. Lefevre (Eds.), *Direct work: Social work with children and young people in care* (pp. 119-134). London: BAAF.

Hood, R., Goldacre, A., Grant, R., & Jones, R. (2016). Exploring demand and provision in English child protection services. *British Journal of Social Work, 46*(4), 923-941.

Howe, D., Brandon, M., Hinings, D., & Schofield, G. (1999). *Attachment theory: Child maltreatment and family support*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Husserl, E. (1931). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (W. R. B. Gilson, Trans.). New York: Humanities Press. (Original work published 1913)

Husserl, E. (2011). Phenomenological epistemology. In T. Rockmore (Ed.), *Kant and phenomenology* (pp. 123-145). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226723419.003.0005.

Jewett, C. (1994). *Helping children cope with separation and loss*. Boston, MA: Harvard Common Press.

Jones, C., & Hackett, S. (2012). Redefining family relationships following adoption: Adoptive

    parents' perspectives on the changing nature of kinship between adoptees and birth

    relatives. *The British Journal of Social Work, 42*(2), 283-299. Retrieved from:

    https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr060 .

Kelley, H., & Thibaut, J. (1978). *Interpersonal relations: A theory of interdependence*. New

    York: Wiley.

Kidder, L., & Fine, M. (1997). Qualitative inquiry in psychology: A radical tradition. In D. Fox

    & I. Prilleltensky (Eds.), *Critical psychology: An introduction* (pp. 34-50). Sage

    Publications, Inc.

Kirk, D. (1964). *Shared fate*. New York: Free Press.

Kirk, D. (1984). *Shared fate: A theory of adoption and mental health* (Rev. ed.). Ben-Simon

    Publications.

Kohn-Willbridge, C., Pike, A., & de Visser, R. O. (2021). *Look after me too: A qualitative

    exploration of the transition into adoptive motherhood*. Adoption & Fostering, **45**(3),

    300–315. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759211050043.

Kranstuber Horstman, H. (2011). 'Instead of growing under her heart, I grew in it': The

    relationship between adoption entrance narratives and adoptees' self-concept.

    Communication Quarterly, 59(2), 179-199. Retrieved from:

    https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2011.563441d.

Krusiewicz, E., & Wood, J. (2001). 'He was our child from the moment we walked in that room':

    Entrance stories of adoptive parents. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 18*(6),

    785-803.

Kvale, S. (1994). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Sage

    Publications, Inc.

Lanyado, M. (2003). The emotional tasks of moving from fostering to adoption: Transitions,

    attachment, separation and loss. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 8*(3), 337-

    349.

Letherby, G. (2010). When treatment ends – the experience of women and couples. In Balen, R.,

    & Crawshaw, M. (Eds.), *Adopting after infertility: Messages from practice, research and*

    personal experience. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Lewis, L. (2018). Meeting my child for the first time: Adoptive parents' experiences of the

    period of adoption transition. *Adoption and Fostering, 42*(1), 73-84.

Lewis, S., & Selwyn, J. (2021). *The views and experiences of approved adopters in five regional*

    adoption agencies. The Rees Centre, Department of Education, University of Oxford.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications.

Lindblom, J., Flykt, M., Tolvanen, A., Vanska, M., Tittinen, A., Tulppala, M., & Punamäki, R.

    (2014). Dynamic family system trajectories from pregnancy to child's first year. *Journal*

    of Marriage & Family, 76(4), 796-807.

Lockerbie, S. (2014). Infertility, adoption and metaphorical pregnancies. *Anthropologica, 56*(2),

    463-471.

Lord, J., & Lucking, M. (2018). *The adoption process in England* (2nd ed.). CoramBAAF.

Lowe, N., Murch, M., Borkowski, M., Weaver, A., Beckford, V., & Thomas, C. (1999).

    Supporting adoption: Reframing the approach. London: BAAF.

Lushey, C., Hyde-Dryden, G., Holmes, L., & Blackmore, J. (2017). *Evaluation of the No Wrong*

    Door innovation programme. Department for Education. Retrieved from

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82c2c540f0b6230269c8f5/Evaluation_of_the_No_Wrong_Door_Innovation_Programme.pdf.

Lynes, D., & Sitoe, A. (2019). Disenfranchised grief: The emotional impact experienced by foster carers on the cessation of a placement. *Adoption & Fostering*. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575918823433.

Marre, D., & Bestard, J. (2009). The family body: Persons, bodies and resemblance. In J. Edwards & C. Salazar (Eds.), *European kinship in the age of biotechnology* (pp. 64-78). London & New York: Berghahn Books.

McAdams, D. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*(2), 100-122. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100.

MacAlister, J. (2022). *Independent review of children's social care. Final report.* Retrieved from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report.

MacDonald, M. (2016). *Parenthood and open adoption: An interpretative phenomenological analysis*. Springer.

Mannay, D. (2015). Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods: Application, reflection and ethics (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315775760.

Mannay, D., Staples, E., & Edwards, V. (2017). *Visual methodologies, sand and psychoanalysis: Employing creative participatory techniques to explore the educational experiences of mature students and children in care*. Visual Studies, **32**(4), 345–358. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2017.1363636

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1999). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mason, B. (1993). *Towards Positions of Safe Uncertainty*. Human Systems, *4*(3–4), 189–200.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

McAuley, C., McKeown, C., & Merriman, B. (2012). *Spending time with family and friends: Children's views on relationships and shared activities*. Child Indicators Research, **5**(3), 449–467. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-012-9158-2.

McDermid, S., Holmes, L., Ghate, D., Trivedi, H., Blackmore, J., & Baker, C. (2016). *The evaluation of Head, Heart, Hands: Introducing social pedagogy into UK foster care. Final synthesis report, executive summary*. Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University, & The Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation. Retrieved from: The evaluation of Head, Heart, Hands: Introducing social pedagogy into UK foster care. Final synthesis report, executive summary.

McSherry, D., & Fargas Malet, M. (2018). The extent of stability and relational permanence achieved for young children in care in Northern Ireland. *Children Australia, 43*(2), 124-134. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2018.18 .

McSherry, D., & McAnee, G. (2022). Exploring the relationship between adoption and psychological trauma for children who are adopted from care: A longitudinal case study perspective. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/2516103220908043.

Meakings, S., Coffey, A., & Shelton, K. (2017). The influence of adoption on sibling relationships: Experiences and support needs of newly formed adoptive families. *British Journal of Social Work, 47*(6), 1781-1799.

Meakings, S., Ottaway, H., Coffey, A., Palmer, C., Doughty, J., & Shelton, K. (2018). The support needs and experiences of newly formed adoptive families: Findings from the

Wales Adoption Study. *Adoption & Fostering, 42*(1), 58-75. Retrieved from:

> https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575917750824.

Morgan, R. (2006). *About adoption: A children's views report*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne:

> Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI).

Morgan, R. (2012). *Changing adoption – Adopted children's views*. Reported by the Children's

> Rights Director for England, December 2012.

Morrison, M. (2018). *Effective adoption and fostering panels in Scotland*.

Morse J. 'Perfectly Healthy, but Dead': The Myth of Inter-Rater Reliability. *Qualitative Health*

> *Research*. 1997;7(4):445-447. Retrieved from: doi:10.1177/104973239700700401.

Morse, J. (2001). Using shadowed data. *Qualitative Health Research, 11*(3), 291-292. Retrieved

> from: https://doi.org/10.1177/104973201129119091.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Murray, K., Williams, B., Tunno, A., Shanahan, M., & Sullivan, K. (2022). What about trauma?

> Accounting for trauma exposure and symptoms in the risk of suicide among adolescents

> who have been adopted. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Retrieved from:

> https://doi.org/10.1177/2516103220908043.

Narey, M. (2015) Retrieved from: 2015-05_ANoteOnAdoptionMatching_SirMartinNarey.pdf .

National Adoption Service. (n.d.). *Adopt Cymru* Retrieved from: https://adoptcymru.com/.

National Adoption Service. (n.d.). *National Adoption Service*. Retrieved April 24th, 2025, from

> After approval – National Adoption Service.

National Adoption Service for Wales. (2018). Quarter 4/End Year Performance Report 2017-18.

National Adoption Service & the Association for Adoption and Fostering Cymru. (n.d.).

Transitions and early support good practice guidance Retrieved from:

https://adoptcymru.com/good-practice-guides/.

National Fostering Framework. (n.d.) Final Report, 2018-2021. National Fostering Framework.

Retrieved from NFF-Final-Report_E.pdf..

Neale, B. (2021). *The craft of qualitative longitudinal research*. SAGE Publications.

Neil, E., Beek, M., & Schofield, G. (2018). *Moving to adoption: A practice development project:*

Research briefing (Research Briefings). Centre for Research on Children and Families,

UEA. Retrieved from: Moving to adoption: a practice development project: Research

Briefing - University of East Anglia.

Neil, E., Beek, M., & Ward, E. (2015). *Contact after adoption: A longitudinal study of post*

adoption contact arrangements. CoramBAAF.

Neil, B., & Howe, D. (2004). *Adoption: Emotional journeys and relational dynamics*. British

Journal of Social Work, **34**(5), 671–689.

Neil, E., & Morciano, M. (2020). Exploring links between early adversities and later outcomes

for children adopted from care: Implications for planning post adoption support.

Developmental Child Welfare. Retrieved from:

https://doi.org/10.1177/2516103220908043.

Neil, E., Young, J. & Hartley, L. (2018a) Adopters' experiences of assessment and matching.

Emotional challenges and power dynamics. *Adoption & Fostering, 42*(3), 245-260.

Neil, E., Young, J., & Hartley, L. (2018b). *The joys and challenges of adoptive family life: A*

survey of adoptive parents in the Yorkshire and Humberside Region. Norwich: Centre for

Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia (UEA).

Nelsen, D. (2024). *Relational permanence for individuals adopted from care* (Doctoral dissertation). Lesley University.

Nguyen, M. H., Gruber, J., Fuchs, J., Marler, W., Hunsaker, A., & Hargittai, E. (2020). Changes in digital communication during the COVID-19 global pandemic: Implications for digital inequality and future research. *Social Media + Society, 6*(3), 1–6. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948255.

Nizza, I. E., Farr, J., & Smith, J. A. (2021). Achieving excellence in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): Four markers of high quality. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 369–386. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1854404

Norris, V. (2012). *By your side: The Family Place*. The Family Place.

Nutt, L. (2002). *Foster carers' perspectives of loving the bureaucratised child*. Oxford Brookes University.

Nutt, L. (2006). *The lives of foster carers: Private sacrifices, public restrictions*. London: Routledge.

Nutt, L. (2012). Foster care in ambiguous contexts: Competing understandings of care. In C. Rogers & S. Weller (Eds.), *Critical approaches to care: Understanding care relations, identities and cultures* (pp. 210-221). London: Routledge.

Ofsted. (2024). *Regional adoption agencies – thematic inspection report*. GOV.UK.

O'Halloran, K. (2021). Adoption: Concepts, principles and social construct. In *The politics of adoption*. Ius Gentium: Comparative Perspectives on Law and Justice, vol 86. Springer, Cham. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65588-4.

O'Leary, P., & Tsui, M. (2021). The base of social work: Relationship, client, evidence or values? *International Social Work, 62*(5). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872819875.

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Collins, K. M. T. (2007). *A typology of mixed methods sampling designs in social science research*. *The Qualitative Report, 12*(2), 281–316.

Ormston, R., Spencer, L., Barnard, M., & Snape, D. (2014). *The Foundations of Qualitative Research*. In J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nicholls, & R. Ormston (Eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (2nd ed., pp. 52–55). SAGE Publications.

Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., & Gupta, S. (2023). *Foster carer recruitment and retention in England*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network.

Pace, C. S., Muzi, S., & Madera, F. (2021). *Emotional-behavioral problems, attachment, and verbal skills in late-adopted adolescents: The role of pre-adoption adversities and adoption variables*. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 130*(Part 2), 1–13.

Paine, A. L., Hay, D. F., & Cook, K. V. (2019). *A Pirate Goes Nee-Nor-Nee-Nor! Humor with Siblings in Middle Childhood*. *Social Development, 28*(3), 529–548. Retrieved from: https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/119426/

Palmer, C., Coffey, A., & Rees, A. (2023). The motivations and decision-making processes of parents who adopt older children. *Adoption & Fostering, 47*(2), 211–228. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759231174906.

Parker, R., Hill, M., & Feast, J. (2013). The life and work of John Triseliotis. *Adoption & Fostering*, *37*(1), 5-13. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575913477333.

Quinton, D. (2012). *Rethinking Matching in Adoptions: A Conceptual and Research Review*. British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF).

Quinton, D., & Selwyn, J. (2011). Adoption: Research, policy and practice. *Child and Family Law Quarterly, 18*(4), 459-477. Retrieved from: https://ssrn.com/abstract=1967539..

Randall, J. (2013). Failing to settle: A decade of disruptions in a voluntary adoption agency in placements made between 2001 and 2011. *Adoption & Fostering, 37*(2), 188–199.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Sage Publications.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., McNaughton Nicholls, C., & Ormston, R. (2013). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Roberts, L., Maxwell, N., & Elliott, M. (2019). When young people in and leaving state care become parents: What happens and why? *Children and Youth Services Review, 104*, 104387. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104387.

Román, M., Palacios, J., & Minnis, H. (2022). *Changes in Attachment Disorder symptoms in children internationally adopted and in residential care*. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 130*(Part 2), 105308.

Robinson, K., & Aronica, L. (2010). *The element: How finding your passion changes everything*. Penguin Books.

Robson, C. (1993). *Real world research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers*. Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Runswick-Cole, K., & Goodley, D. (2013). *Adoption Activity Days – Improving outcomes for children.* London, England: BAAF.

Rushton, A., & Dance, C. (2004). The outcomes of late permanent placement: The adolescent years. *Adoption & Fostering, 28*(1), 49–58. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590402800107.

Sandelowski, M. (2004). *Using qualitative research. Qualitative Health Research, 14*(10), 1366–1386.

Schofield, G., & Beek, M. (2014). *The secure base model: Promoting resilience and competence in child and family social work*. University of East Anglia.

Schofield, G., & Beek, M. (2018). *Attachment handbook for foster care and adoption (Second edition)*. CoramBAAF.

Selwyn, J., Meakings, S., & Wijedasa, D. N. (2015). *Beyond the Adoption Order: Challenges, intervention and disruption.* London: BAAF.

Selwyn, J., & Meakings, S. (2015a). *Beyond the Adoption Order (Wales): Discord and disruption in adoptive families*. Report to Welsh Government.

Selwyn, J., & Meakings, S. (2015b). 'She just didn't smell right!' Odour and adoptive family life. *Adoption & Fostering*, *39*(4), 294-302. Retrieved from:

https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575915612617.

Shelton, B. (2023). Making sense of family: A story completion study of birth children of foster carers. *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care, 22*(1) Retrieved from: https://www.celcis.org/application/files/3716/8329/6845/2023_Vol_22_No_1_Shelton_B _Making_sense_of_Family.pdf.

Shelton, K., Merchant, C., & Lynch, J. (2020). The Adopting Together Service: How innovative collaboration is meeting the needs of children in Wales waiting the longest to find a family. *Adoption & Fostering, 44*(2) Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575920920390.

Shklarski, L. (2019). Foster parent skills and dilemmas. *Child Welfare, 97*(2), 41-62.

Silverman, D. (1997). *Interpreting qualitative data*. London: Sage.

Simpson, A., Macey, E., Gallop, K., Wise, S., Henwood, M., & Joh, A. (2024). *Evaluation of development activity undertaken in support of the Adoption England Strategy: Family finding events*. Adoption England.

Smith, J. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretive phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology & Health, 11*, 261-271.

Smith, J. (2007). Hermeneutics, human sciences and health: Linking theory and practice. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health & Well-being, 2*(3), 3-11.

Smith, J. (2011). 'We could be diving for pearls': The value of the gem in experiential qualitative psychology. *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin, 12*, 6-15.

Smith, J., & Dunworth, F. (2003). Qualitative methodology. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *Handbook of developmental psychology* (pp. 603-621). Sage.

Smith, J., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretive phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London: Sage.

Smith, J., Harre, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (1995). Ideography. In J. Smith, R. Harre, & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking psychology* (pp. 59-69). London: Sage.

Smith, J., Jarman, M., & Osborn, M. (1999). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. In M. Murray & K. Chamberlain (Eds.), *Qualitative health psychology: Theories and methods* (pp. 218-241). Sage.

Smith, J., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to methods* (pp. 53-80). Sage.

Smith, J., (2015). *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*. Sage.

Soares, J., Ralha, S., Fonseca, S. M., Prego, J., & Barbosa-Ducharne, M. A. (2021). Why and how do parents decide to adopt? A study on motivations and the decision-making process in becoming an adoptive family. *Child & Family Social Work, 28*(5), 1-28. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13001.

Social Research Association. (2021). *Ethics guidance 2021*. Retrieved from: https://the-sra.org.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/Resources/SRA%20Ethics%20guidance%202021.pdf?form=MG0AV3.

Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, c. 4.

Spiegelberg, H. (1982). *The phenomenological movement* (3rd ed.). The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.

Stake, R. (1998). Case study. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. London: Sage.

Starks, H., & Trinidad, S. (2007). Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research, 17*(10), 1372-1380. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732307307031.

Stewart, D., & Mickunas, A. (1990). *Exploring phenomenology: A guide to the field and its literature* (2nd ed.). Athens: Ohio University Press.

Sunnafrank, M., & Ramirez, A. (2004). At first sight: Persistent relational effects of get-acquainted conversations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 21*(3), 361-379. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407504042837.

Swain, V. (2016). Keeping connected: Maintaining relationships when moving on. *The Fostering Network*.

Swann, W., Sellers, J., & McClarty, K. (2006). Tempting today, troubling tomorrow: The roots of the precarious couple effect. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 32*(1), 93-103. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167205279584.

Talbot, J., Bell, J., Mandal, A., (2024). *Arch Dis Child, 109*, 528-532.

Tasker, F., & Wood, S. (2016). The transition into adoptive parenthood: Adoption as a process of continued unsafe uncertainty when family scripts collide. *Clinical Child Psychology & Psychiatry, 21*(4), 520-535. Retrieved from: https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/14431.

Telfer, J. R. (1999). Relationship with no body? 'Adoption' photographs, intuition and emotion. *Social Analysis, 43*, 144-158.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence (APPGAP). (2021). *Strengthening families: Improving stability for adopted children*. Adoption England.

The Care Inquiry. (2013). *Making not breaking: Building relationships for our most vulnerable children*. The Nuffield Foundation. Retrieved from: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Care%20Inquiry%20-%20Full%20Report%20April%202013.pdf.

The Family Place. (n.d.). *The Family Place*. Retrieved April 19, 2025, from https://thefamilyplace.co.uk/

The Fostering Network. (2021). *State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021: Main report*. Retrieved from https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/state-of-the-nations/state-of-the-nations-foster-care-2021-main-report/

The Fostering Network. (2024). *State of the Nations' Foster Care 2024*. The Fostering Network Retrieved from: https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn24.

Thomas, C. (2013). *Adoption for looked after children: Messages from research*. British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF).

Thomas, C., & Blackmore, J. (2019). *An independent review of Scotland's Adoption Register.* Retrieved from Scotland's Adoption Register. Retrieved from: An Independent Review of Scotland's Adoption Register.

Thomas, C., Lowe, N. V., Beckford, V., Lowe, N., & Murch, M. (1999). *Adopted children speaking: A whole new world*. British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF).

Thomas, S., & Sohn, B. (2023). From uncomfortable squirm to self-discovery: A phenomenological analysis of the bracketing experience. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22*(1), 1-12. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231191635.

Thomson, L., & McArthur, M. (2009). Who's in our family? An application of the theory of family boundary ambiguity to the experiences of former foster carers. *Adoption & Fostering, 33*(1), 68-79.

Triseliotis, J., & Marsh, P. (1993). *Prevention and reunification in child care.* London: Batsford.

Triseliotis, J., Sellick, C., & Short, R. (2005). *The institution of foster care. In N. Frost (Ed.), Child welfare: Major themes in health and social welfare.* London, UK: Routledge.

Triseliotis, J., Shireman, J., & Hundleby, M. (1997). *Adoption: Theory, policy, and practice*. Cassell.

Twigg, R., & Swan, T. (2007). Inside the foster family: What research tells us about the experience of foster carers' children. *Adoption & Fostering, 31*(4), 49-61.

UK Parliament. (2013). *Memorandum submitted by Emma Lewell-Buck MP (CF 41)* Retrieved from:

https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmpublic/childrenandfamilies/memo/cf41.htm .

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations Treaty Series, **1577**, 3.

Walsh, R. (2003). The methods of reflexivity. *Humanist Psychology, 31*(4), 51-66.

Ward, H., Brown, R., Westlake, D., & Munro, E. (2010). *Infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm: A prospective longitudinal study.* Department for Education. Retrieved from:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182461/DFE-RB053.pdf .

Ward, J., & Smeeton, J. (n.d.). *It's a big deal, being given a person: A study of the links between infertility and adoption.* Nottingham Trent University. Commissioned by Family Care, Nottingham.

Welsh Assembly Government. (2003). *Research governance framework for health and social care.* Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government. (2024). *Adoption statistics for Wales 2024.* StatsWales. Retrieved from https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After/Adoptions .

Whincup, H., & Grant, M. (2019). *Permanently progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland*. University of Stirling.

Williams-Butler, A., Ryan, J., McLoyd, V., Schulenberg, J., & Davis-Kean, P. (2018). Relational permanence and psychological well-being among African American adolescents in foster care. *Journal of Child & Family Studies, 27*(10), 3277.

Williams, D. (2017). Grief, loss and separation: Experiences of birth children of foster carers. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(4), 1448-1455.

Wohlin, C. (2014). *Guidelines for snowballing in systematic literature studies and a replication in software engineering*. Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Evaluation and Assessment in Software Engineering, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1145/2601248.2601268

Wood, S. and Tasker, F. (2021) *Adopting minds: working with the Internal, Family and Systemic (IFS) issues in adoption. Working Paper.* CoramBAAF, London, UK. Retrieved from: https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/44718 .

Woodhead, M., & Faulkner, D. (2008). *Subjects, objects or participants? Dilemmas of psychological research with children*. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (2nd ed., pp. 10–39). Routledge.

World Health Organisation. (2004). *The importance of caregiver-child interactions for the survival and healthy development of young children: A review.* Department of Child and Adolescent Health Development.

Wright, K. (2014). Mental health practice. *Mental Health Practice, 18*(4), 23-27.

Yap, J. (2016). *An evaluation of Activity Days for Adoption*. CoramBAAF Impact and Evaluation

Team: London.

Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology & Health*, *15*(2), 215–

228. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/08870440008400302 .

Yeo, A., Legard, R., Keegan, J., Ward, K., Nicholls, C. M., & Lewis, C. (2013). *In-depth

interviews*. In J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. M. Nicholls, & R. Ormston (Eds.), *Qualitative

research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 177–208).

Sage.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Presentation (October 2024): *Experiences of pre-meets – the views of adoptive parents*. South West Adoption Consortium 'open session'

4.3: Adjusting to becoming a family
Familiarising the child with their prospective adopters

So, having met us already, and then photos on the table, so she could pick up and it sort of just puts it in her mind 'oh, okay, I've met them, they were [gentle tone, pause], nice. And you know, I think it helped (Helen, T3).

Adopters' experiences of pre-meets

4.4 Adjustment to becoming a family
'From the heart.'

*We can **genuinely** say it **genuinely** was from the heart. It wasn't us just reading a book and reading loads of reports to make a decision to adopt you, we actually met you, fell in love you as our child and wanted that process to continue (Jake, T3).*

Adopters' experiences of pre-meets

5.1: Experiences of 'the system'
Purpose of pre-meets

They've not talked about the process of [the pre-meet] and why they do it. The purposes behind it (Jake, T1)

[a pre-meet is] an observation [of the child] to see whether we're happy about progressing (Chloe, T1)

Adopters' experiences of pre-meets

5.2: Experiences of 'the system'
Ethical considerations

You wouldn't want a child [ ] ever to grow up thinking 'I've had 2 or 3 pre-meets and they never worked out. So, nobody wanted me' (Jake, T1)

If that happened and the child was not aware, the child would still be fine, and you've prevented that child being moved (Helen, T1)

Adopters' experiences of pre-meets

5.3: Experiences of 'the system' Feeling awkward, judged

We were going to a play centre to watch a child who didn't know us [ ] So, it did feel a bit of an awkward situation (Chloe, T1)

We felt like we couldn't be ourselves. Whatever the intention is of that process, you shouldn't judge the adopters because we felt like we weren't able to [ ] be there for her and kind of play with [her]. So, we felt a little bit like - guarded (Jake, T2)

And - conscious the match might not be formally agreed

Adopters' experiences of pre-meets

Discussion

Pre-meets may be able to:
- Move towards family **building**, rather than 'finding.' (*APPGAP report 'Strengthening Families, 2021*)
- Support **relational (or psychological) permanence:** a sense of connection, continuity, nurturance, security, trust, and safety in relationships with caregivers (Brodzinsky & Livingston Smith, 2019, p186).
- Help lessen adopters' anxieties before introductions start; provide reassurance for all.
- Help build the **foster carer /adopter relationship** at an earlier stage and help foster carers communicate to the child that their adoptive parents are *'safe' people* (e.g. Beek, Neil & Schofield, 2021; Browning, 2015; Family Futures, 2009).
- Assist the adopters' **psychological adjustment** to parenting this child (e.g. Kirk,1984).
- Build **confidence** in a match all round (e.g. Dance et al., 2010; Selwyn et al., 2014).
- Provide a pause to discuss any concerns and **stop the match if needed** (e.g. Triseliotis et al.,1997; Selwyn et al., 2014).

- However…

Adopters' experiences of pre-meets

Issues to address

- *Is the practice of pre-meets to increase/develop?*
- *If so, how can quality practice best be promoted?*
- The impact of having significant practice differences between (within) the Re...
- How children are prepared for and supported through pre-meets.
- How pre-meets are recorded and become part of a child's narrative about ho... they joined their new family.
- How *all* participants (foster carers, adopters, adoption social workers, children's SWs, Panel members, ADMs) are included in any practice changes.

Adopters' experiences of pre-meets

My next steps

Explore the experiences of a small sample of foster carers in relation to pre-meets.

Submit my thesis!

Adopters' experiences of pre-meets

Thank you to:

The parents and other participants, including social workers, stakeholders and members of focus groups who have contributed to the study

Elaine Dibben, Heather Freeman and Sarah Coldrick

My supervisory team:
Professor Katherine Shelton, Dr Cerith Waters, Dr Gemma Burns

Wales School for Social Care Research

To you for listening.

Please get in touch:
blackboxespt1@cardiff.ac.uk

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD

References

All Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence, 2021 report 'Strengthening Families – Improving Stability for Adopted Children.

Beek, M., Neil, C. & Schofield, G. (2021). *Moving to Adoption. Using the UEA model to help children move from foster care to adoption.* London: CoramBAAF.

Beynon, R. (unpublished). 'Bump-into' Meetings: Evaluations of Introductions Method. Via private correspondence.

Boswell, S. & Cudmore, L. (2014). The children were fine: acknowledging complex feelings in the move from foster care into adoption. *Adoption & Fostering 38*(1), 5–21.

Browning, D. & Smith, S. L. (2019). Commentary: Understanding Research, Policy, and Practice issues in Adoption Instability. *Research on Social Work Practice, 29*(2), 190–194.

Browning, A. (2015). Undertaking planned transitions for children in out-of-home care. *Adoption & Fostering 39*(1), 51–61.

CoramBAAF, (2017). *Best Practice in Meetings between Prospective Adopters and Children Prior to Matching. Practice Note 64,* London: CoramBAAF.

Cousins, J. (2011). *Making Matches.* London: BAAF.

Dance, C., Ouwejan, D., Beecham, J. & Farmer, E. (2010). *Linking and matching: A survey of Adoption Agency Practice in England and Wales.* London: BAAF.

Family Futures, (2009). Planning transitions for children moving to permanent placement: what do you do after you say 'hello'? *Family Futures Practice Paper Series.*

Kirk, D. (1964). *Shared Fate: A Theory and Method of Adoptive Relationships Shared fate: a theory and method of adoptive relationships.* Port Angeles, Washington: Ben-Simon Publications (2nd ed.).

National Adoption Service & Association of Adoption and Fostering Cymru, (2020). *Transitions and Early Support: Good Practice Guide 2.* Cardiff: National Adoption Service & Association of Adoption and Fostering Cymru.

Selwyn J., Wijedasa D., & Meakings S., (2014). *Beyond the Adoption Order: Adoption disruption and families in crisis.* London: Department for Education.

Smith, J., Flowers, P., and Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Theory, Method and Research.* London: Sage.

Triseliotis, J., Shireman, J. & Hundleby, M. (1997). *Adoption: Theory, Policy and Practice.* London: Cassell.

Appendix 2: Summary of key issues identified from scoping interviews.

- **The nature and inconsistency of matching practices,** as well as the potential effects of the regionalisation of adoption services.

- **The influence of foster care quality in pre-adoptive placements**, including the importance of training and supervision for foster carers.

- **The impact of transitions from foster care to adoptive placements,** focusing on the grief and loss experienced by the child during this process, and the dynamics between foster carers and adoptive parents.

- **Contact arrangements between children placed for adoption and key figures in their lives**, such as foster carers, birth parents, and siblings, including how and when these arrangements are made and reviewed.

- **Cultural and practice gaps between professionals,** such as child care and adoption social workers, particularly regarding their understanding of therapeutic parenting and attachment issues.

- **Recent adopter-led approaches to matching**, such as activity days, online databases, the National Adoption Register, and pre-approval meetings ('blind sightings') between children and prospective adoptive parents.

- **Perspectives of foster carers on adoptive placements,** specifically on why some placements succeed while others disrupt.

- **Adoptive parents' expectations during the initial stages of placement,** especially regarding bonding and the development of attachment with the child.

Appendix 3: 'Ethically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Scenario1

During my interview visit, a foster carer mentioned a friend who had received information about the study but was hesitant to participate. The friend had experienced a pre-meet with a prospective adoptive parent whom she felt was an unsuitable match, which deeply upset her. Due to her emotions, she might not take part. The foster carer believed her friend's perspective would be valuable and asked if she should encourage participation. I declined to avoid any pressure on her friend.

Scenario 2

Before this study, I knew one participant from my previous role as an Independent Reviewing Officer, where I conducted annual statutory reviews of foster carers. After receiving information about the study, the foster carer called me and recalled our prior professional interaction. I clarified my current role as a student and assured her of confidentiality. Despite it being some years after I had left children's services, I acknowledged the complexity of my past professional and current academic roles (Nutt, 2012).

Appendix 4: A summary of the differences in experiences of parenthood (adoptive and biological parents) adapted from Kirk's *Shared Fate* (1964)

	ADOPTIVE PARENTS	BIOLOGICAL PARENTS
Preparation for parenthood modelled most frequently is one of biological parenthood, resulting in expectations and the development of a 'script' of what it means to be a parent.	Belief in capacity to have biological child if desired	Belief in capacity to have biological child if desired
Assessment of the 'suitability' of individuals to become prospective parents	Adopting couple must demonstrate their eligibility for parenting status they seek eg psychological stability, stable relationship, economic factors etc.	No requirements.
Preparation for parenthood and parental roles	Preparation for parenthood tends to be abrupt with no clearcut timetable by which the parents can shape their feelings and thoughts about their hoped-for parenthood.	Pregnancy provides a relatively known timetable that moves parents towards progressive involvement in their coming parental tasks.
External/ visible signifiers of impending status as parent	There are few signs useful to either the prospective adopters for underscoring the changing status being anticipated and worked for. An agency's formal acceptance of an individual as a prospective adopter may serve as a sign.	Maternity clothes worn usually from mid-term often resulting in increased care of would-be mother
Dependence on others in the route to parenthood.	Parenthood is dependent on the services and involvement of others e.g. social workers.	Parenthood is possible without the services of others.
Characteristics of prospective parents	Parents tend to be older than their biological counterparts. Often had a long and frustrating time between decision to start a family and adoption implying that shift to parenting will involve greater difficulties of adjustment.	Parenthood tends to happen sooner in parents' relationship Leads to an easier transition in life which parenting involves.
	Expected to be qualified in the feeling-connection they make with a child in the period before legal adoption. Know that there is at least the possibility that they will not be accepted in the end or that for some	Obligation of unqualified acceptance of every child, seen to be 'desirable and a proper member' of the family for better or worse.

	other reason the child might not be theirs to keep.	
	Responsible once child placed for maintenance and safety but guardianship right remain in the hands of others who are still in loco parentis (birth parent and LA) until Adoption Order granted.	All rights, duties and privileges of parenthood are initiated during pregnancy and fully secured at birth.
	The considerable uncertainty associated with adoption frequently inhibits sharing plans with members of the wider family. Through barriers including a lack of knowledge/familiarity with adoption, members of the wider family may not be able the support that they would provide for the arrival of a baby born to the new parents.	Relative certainty of a child's coming and of timing makes sharing of the news with family leading to support, including rejoicing, which is likely to help through trying times which might be part of the pregnancy.
	In adoption, there are no ceremonies of this order to mark the new member's arrival in the family. Knowledge of the rupture of the family line precludes looking for family likenesses.	At the time of the child's birth, the family usually gathers around the new parent couple looking for family likenesses in the new born, remarking on the choice of name and they may participate in ceremonies, whereby the child's family membership is asserted.
	When an adopter loses a child prior to adoption order being granted, by death or is returned to care, they are unlikely to receive the level of support that they would if their biological child died.	If a parent's biological child dies, they are likely to receive support, understanding and sympathy from friends, family, and the community.

Adapted from Kirk Shared Fate (1964) Chapter 'Adoptive Relations in the Making' pp5-15.

Appendix 5: Member-checking: responses from research participants

Excerpt from email response received from adoptive parent March 2025:
... I was particularly struck by your observations on page 30, where you captured our reflections on the concerns around [child] meeting us at the same play centre where her birth parents had their goodbye visit. This moment was deeply significant and it was powerful to see it documented so thoughtfully in your work. Likewise, the discussion on page 47 regarding the video created by [birth daughter] to support [child's] transition into our home resonated strongly (complemented by your accurate and reflective field notes).

Your analysis of how [birth daughter] was not fully included in the adoption process/introductions was also particularly meaningful, highlighting a crucial aspect that we believe agencies and social workers should reflect on. I also value the way you used the themes to deconstruct our deep thoughts throughout the process (i.e. [child's] future life journey, the unexpected emotional impact of the separation from foster carers during the transition and the unique foster family relationship that we have since developed).
[ ] hopefully [your work will] help improve and transform future service

Excerpt from email response received from foster carer participant (1) February 2025:
I just had a quick read. Will read it again later on.
So far, it has made me cry. Reading in black and white, the feelings all come back.
As for the contributors, we're all quite similar in our ways, which surprised me (I don't know why!)
I can't see anything that I would want to change, and found it an interesting read.
Thank you for sending it to us/

Excerpt from email response received from foster carer participant (2) February 2025:
I received your work and found it very accurate, nothing needs to be changed. It was an interesting read. It must be hard on the adopters and frustrating for the carers when they can't physically meet during a bump in, how on earth can they get the 'feeling' that this child is right for them? They must get the matching right, and it's at this point, the physical meeting, that adopters get that 'feeling'. It should be the same physical bump in for all authorities.
Our children deserve the best possible chance of the right match, leading to a loving, nurturing, safe home.

Appendix 6: Interview schedule (adoption managers)

Interview schedule (ADOPTION MANAGERS)

Introduction

My name is Jenny Blackmore, and I am a doctoral student in the School of Psychology at Cardiff University. My research is funded by the Wales School for Social Care Research and aims to impact on social work practice.

My research is in two parts: the main part is about pre-meets: by that, I mean first meetings which take place between children and their prospective adoptive families *during* the matching process. These are sometimes called 'sightings', 'chemistry' or 'bump into' meetings. They may include playdates.

In the second part of the interview, I am interested in *your* perceptions and experiences of the role (or otherwise) of 'chemistry' in the linking and matching process.
So today I'd like to ask you some questions about:

- *Current **practice** in this Agency vis a vis pre-meets*
- *The underlying **theories, context, and rationales** for holding pre-meets*
- *The **factors that may help or hinder** a pre-meet*
- *The perceived **impact** of pre-meets*
- *Perceptions of the **meaning and role of chemistry** in linking and matching.*

Before we start, please can I just check you've received and read the consent form and information sheet?
Have you any questions?
If it's ok with you, I would like to digitally record the interview so that I don't miss anything you say. The recording will be kept securely, with a number to identify you, not your name, and deleted after the study has finished. I won't discuss anything you tell me with anyone else apart from members of the research team.
I anticipate that this interview may take up to 1.5 hours. Please is that okay with you? *Just say if you'd like to stop at any point, or pass on a particular question.*

Background

This section will help me understand a little more about your role and this adoption service, and how it is organised, before I ask you my key research questions about pre-meets and chemistry.

- **Can we just spend a few moments finding out a bit about you and your background:**
- *Please could you tell me your current job title, and main areas of responsibility?*
- *How long have you been qualified/ worked in children's services/ adoption?*
- *Briefly, what previous posts have you held, please?*
- *How long have you been a manager/ in this post?*

Thank you. Thinking about pre-meets now:

What is your Agency's current practice in relation to pre-meets?
- *Who are they used for [children/adopters with particular characteristics?]*
- *Frequency of use*
- *Who decides if a pre-meet should happen?*
- *When do they take place in the adoption timeline?*
- *Information shared about child at this point, level, by whom, format, e.g. Understanding the Child Day? Photos?*

- **Is this an area of changing practice? How, when and why has practice changed?**

- **Have there been any related practice changes during the pandemic?**
- **Is practice consistent across your team? If not, how does it vary?**

Please can you tell me about the reasons for holding pre-meets?
- **Has any theory, practice, guidance, or research changed your Agency's thinking on this?**

Can you describe what usually happens at a pre-meet?
- *Who is present?*
- *Activities planned.*
- *Location.*
- *Length of meeting.*
- *Children's awareness of the presence and identity of the adopters.*
- *Direct interaction between the child and the adopters.*

What's needed for a pre-meet to go 'well'?
- Preparation of adults and children
- Planning and who is involved.
- Opportunities/timing for foster carers and adopters to get to know one another.
- Key training of adopters, sws.
- Personal qualities of adopters, FCs, children, workers.
- Role and operation of the adoption service team.

What impact do you think pre-meets have on everyone involved?
- Benefits
- Limitations and concerns
- What makes a useful pre-meet?
- Factors that might prevent a useful pre-meet.
- Impact of pre-meets on how placements proceed.

Do you have any concerns or reservations about the practice of pre-meets?

- **On everyone involved/ the matching process**

Please tell me what happens after a pre-meet has taken place

- *[How] are participants' experiences sought/ shared? [adults, child]*
- *Timing? Shared formally/informally.*
- *Following through of any doubts or concerns.*
- *Do any more pre-meets take place? Reason?*
- *How flexible are plans and on what are they dependent?*

[check timing – comfort break?]

In the following questions I would like to explore your perceptions of the role of chemistry in linking and matching processes.

What do you think is meant when the term 'chemistry' is used in relation linking and matching?

What does it look like?
How is it experienced?
[How] do people talk about it?

Is there anything you'd like to add or ask?

[Thank yous, feedback.]

Appendix 7: Study information sheet for adoption managers

[Cardiff University and Wales School for Social Care logos].

Information sheet

for adoption managers to take part in our study:

Pre-meets between children and their prospective adoptive parents: their role in the matching process

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study about how children and their adoptive families are matched. In particular, the study will focus on the role of 'pre-meets'; meetings that take place between children and their prospective adopters *during* the matching process. 'Pre-meets' are sometimes called 'sightings', 'bump-into meetings' or 'chemistry meets'. Practice in relation to 'pre-meets' varies considerably across Wales, and little is known about these meetings, and the role they play in the formation of newly adoptive families.

This research is being funded by the Wales School for Social Care Research, and conducted by Jenny Blackmore, a PhD student in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University, supervised by Prof. Katherine Shelton.

We would really like to find out more about *your views* on:

- *Your Agency's current practice relating to 'pre-meets'*
- *What you consider to be the underlying theories, rationales, and contexts for 'pre-meets'*
- *The factors you believe may help or hinder 'pre-meets'*
- *The perceived impact of 'pre-meets'*
  and also
- *The role that you perceive 'chemistry' plays (or otherwise) in linking and matching children and their prospective families.*

If you are willing to take part in an interview, the interview will last up to 1.5 hours, subject to your availability. You will be free to withdraw consent to take part at any point, without giving a reason. This includes being free to withdraw permission to use anything you have said in our interview, up until the time of publication.

Everything you say will be confidential, unless we are worried about the safety of a child, in which case Jenny would let you know and would discuss this concern with Prof Katherine Shelton.

Other strands of the research will include interviews with prospective adopters with experience of 'pre-meets', childcare and adoption social workers, other stakeholders in the adoption sector and foster carers. These interviews will explore relevant developments in policy and practice relating to 'pre-meets'; participants' direct experiences of being involved in 'pre-meets' and perceptions of the role of 'chemistry' in linking and matching.

The results of this study will be written up in research paper format and submitted to Cardiff University, School of Psychology as part of Jenny Blackmore's doctoral thesis and may later be published in a relevant journal, such as Coram BAAF's *Adoption & Fostering*. We hope to share our findings with stakeholders, in relation to policy and practice decisions for service provision, for example. Direct quotes may be used in written reports, but these will never contain the names of any individual or organisation and care will be taken to remove identifying information.

One of the outputs of the research will be a chart/map of current practice relating to pre-meets in Wales. Any direct quotes from you that may be used will be shared with you before we publish any research. You will be free to make changes or withdraw permission to use the data. We will not name individuals or Services in the research.

Jenny Blackmore can be contacted before or following the interview at blackmoreja1@cardiff.ac.uk or 07557 905175. Please be in touch if you would like any further information about the study at any time.

Thank you for taking the time to read this, and for being willing to take part in an interview. We are very much hoping that this study will ultimately help inform the ways in which newly adoptive families are formed.

Full ethical approval has been granted for this study by Cardiff University, ref: EC.21.10.12.6426. If you have any concerns about the way this research was conducted, please contact the School of Psychology Ethics Committee, Cardiff University:

Secretary of the Ethics Committee, School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Tower Building,

70 Park Place, Cardiff,

CF10 3AT. Tel: +44 (0) 029 208 70707. Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

The following people are involved in this project:

Jenny Blackmore	Prof. Katherine Shelton	Dr Cerith Waters	Dr Gemma Burns
Postgraduate Student	School of Psychology	Clinical	Clinical
Cardiff University	Cardiff University	Psychologist	Psychologist
Blackmoreja1@cardiff.ac.uk	Sheltonkh1@cardiff.ac.uk	ABUHB	ABUHB

Appendix 8: Consent form for adoption social work managers

[Cardiff University and Wales School for Social Care Research logos inserted]

Consent Form

Interviews with adoption managers

- I understand that my participation in this project will involve taking part in an interview with Jenny Blackmore (PhD Student, Cardiff University) and that this will involve questions relating to 'pre-meets'. There will also be questions relating to my perceptions of the role of 'chemistry' in the linking and matching process.

- I understand that if I give permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed by Jenny Blackmore or by a professional transcriber approved by Cardiff University. I understand that the audio recording will be destroyed following transcription and the interview transcripts will be kept for five years following the interview. The audio recording will have an identifier, not my name, allocated to it.

- I understand that the information provided by me will be stored confidentially. I understand that this means the researchers working on this project will allocate me a code and my answers will be associated with this code rather than my name. I understand that consent forms containing my name will be stored separately to the answers I provide.

- I understand that information I provide will be used as part of Jenny Blackmore's PhD doctorate, may later be written up in research paper format and published in a journal such as *Adoption & Fostering* and may also be viewed by stakeholders in the relevant Local Authorities.

- I understand that direct quotes may be used in written reports based on the information I provide, but that these will never contain the names of any child, adult or any other identifying information.

- I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and I can withdraw my participation at any time, without giving a reason.

- I understand that if I do not wish to answer any questions, I can simply inform the interviewer and we

  will move on to the next question.

- I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I understand that I can discuss any concerns with Jenny Blackmore or her supervisor, Prof Katherine Shelton (SheltonKH1@cardiff.ac.uk).

I, _____(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Jenny Blackmore, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of Prof   Katherine   Shelton.

Signed: _____ (consent may be audio recorded if interview takes place via phone or on-line)
Date: _____

Privacy Notice:
The information provided on the consent form will be held in compliance with GDPR regulations. Cardiff University is the data controller and Matt Cooper is the data protection officer (CooperM1@cardiff.ac.uk). This information is being collected by Jenny Blackmore. This information will be held securely and separately from the research information you provide. Only the researcher will have access to this form and it will be destroyed after 7 years. The lawful basis for processing this information is consent.

Appendix 9: Excerpt from coding output using Delve software (data from adoption social worker managers)

Coded text highlighted with surrounding text kept to retain context.

Participant: […] and I've been back and I've chaired these meetings now, for feedback […] and the foster carers [say] I wish we'd been doing introductions this way all time. I can't – and like I said, I never want to go back to doing introductions the way we used to. And I said …

> JB: no, that's not going to happen?

> R/AM: It's just not natural is it. Now when you look back it just feels so unnatural and social workers, everything we embed in relationships, it just you know, and we weren't promoting those relationships, were we, we just sort of stuffing them all in a pot, bless them, and […] very, very odd.

[coding: change from past practice; building relationships; reflective practice; challenge to self; natural vs unnatural practice; disconnect between values and practice].

Appendix 10: Thematic chart template: analysis of interview data from adoption managers.

Theme	Pre-meets as a changing and evolving practice	Ethical concerns relating to pre-meets	Issues relating to preparation and planning	The role of pre-meets in helping to build connection	The role of pre-meets in helping to build confidence in a match
Sub-themes and (sub-sub) themes	**The key drivers of recent change.** Research about more gradual transitions, relationship building; NAS Good Practice Guidance, Moving to Adoption; Bump-in model from Bradford. Moving away from 'there has to be a reason' for a pre-meet to having one for all matches, including infants. Enthusiasm and commitment of individual managers. Requests for pre-meets from other agencies who have them as 'standard'; Some adopters expecting to meet child during transitions –	**Openness and honesty with the child.** Different approaches taken. Perception there are fewer ethical concerns when child is an infant. **Unease about adopters 'viewing' a child.** **The child's future understanding of how they joined their adoptive family.** How are pre-meets recorded, how do they inform the child's narrative about how they joined their adoptive family?	The preparation of the child for moving to their adoptive family. Planning a pre-meet. Setting boundaries.	Relationship-building at an early stage. The foster carer's role in conveying to the child that their adoptive parents are 'safe.'	Developing adopters' understanding of the child and their needs. Consolidating adopters' feelings about a match. An opportunity to raise any concerns or for the match to 'go wrong.' 'Testing the chemistry' - or otherwise.

happens at Activity Days). **Creating a culture supportive of change**. Empathy of managers; reflections on own past practice. Acknowledging historical anxieties about pre-meets and respecting different belief systems Individual discussions with workers about concerns. **Developing the practice of pre-meets with professionals.** Developing a shared understanding of the purpose and practice of pre-meets. Developing and delivering training, policy, guidance. Involving other professionals who need to be on board.				

	Developing the practice of pre-meets with foster carers. Practice changes around valuing and involving foster carers. Resistance from some long-standing foster carers. Potential for the new role of Lead Foster Carers to support practice changes.				

Appendix 11: Sample of charting analysis from interview with adoption managers in one region

Theme and sub-themes	Notes from transcripts
1.3 Creating a culture supportive of change a) Empathy of managers; reflections on own past practice. b) Developing a shared understanding of the purpose and role of pre-meets. c) Discussions within team meetings and developing practice with other parts of the service. d) Acknowledging historical anxieties about pre-meets and respecting different belief systems. e) A collaborative approach; individual discussions with workers and foster carers about concerns about having a pre-meet (examples of resistance).	1.3 a - *the more time you reflect on it, the crazier it seems that we used to move a child in with a family they hadn't met before etc.* p22 1.3 b - emphasis on developing understanding amongst all involved of what they're trying to achieve through a pre-meet, everyone needs to know what to expect etc. [this section more about FC/ PA understanding than with workers]. Also: [what's needed for pre-meet to go well question]: says it's the *'willingness, the vision of all professionals involved to see the benefit of it.'* 'you need buy in from the LA' - and that they can '*see what helps'*. Have developed matching guide in consultation with LA. p21 1.3. b - comment that FCs are key to pre-meets, transitions etc going well. They have the capacity to *'scupper'* introductions. Perhaps they want to keep the child – when the reality of meeting the adopters comes things can come to a head. Empathy towards FC shown in comments – ie acknowledging that FC have often fought for the child to get them the things they've needed, they may have had several changes of SW, lost faith and trust; they've often been let down by professionals. So sometimes they can come to the process if there might be resistance. P25 the sense of *'well, they won't have got this right.'* And 'the adopters won't have all the right skills they need.' So we try and forewarn adopters if we know the FC is nervous about child moving on, and forewarn adopter's worker, so they can offer support in that P24-25. 1.3b - guidance document on matching has gone to the LA for consultation and response has generally been positive. Now in a position of being able to guide people who are unsure. Says a more regular training programme is probably more challenging due to capacity issues. P24 1.3.c - have regular team meetings, a whole service meeting but also individual meetings for sep parts of the service and they're *'much more about the development of ideas.'* They have developed a matching document that has been pulled together from various discussions within the team where there's diff practice in the diff LAS they can now be referred to *'here's our guidance …'* - previously had lots of verbal guidance but not in one place. Have written guidance on matching with input from Las. The adoption team are also now developing guidance on pre-meets P23

	1.3.d Most LAs and most CC SWs are interested in pre-meets and not particularly worried about them, or happy to be guided by what the adoption SWs suggest, so if we say this is something we do now most people are happy to take that guidance because this is what we do day to day as opposed to them. Q: *We have [a]few practitioners who are very wary of them – I don't know why they don't agree with them, they haven't given a reason other than I think it just represents a change from what they do. That tends to go along with practitioners who have a very cautious approach to anything to do with adoption, matching and decision making and goes along with workers who are wary of sharing photos of a child too soon and leaving information with adopters too soon – same people who are worried about how much information we give out anyway.* 'Very risk averse.' It's a minority of workers but it's there. P4

Appendix 12: Table of key characteristics of pre-meet practice (by adoption region)

Region	Terminology	Frequency of use	Key features	Professionals' input into pre-meets	Recent changes in practice	One off or part of a series?
1	Sightings	Every match	An established practice. Adopters generally observe children, from a distance, in a soft play area, park or other public space. One off meetings. Practice embraced and instigated by the adoption team.	Childcare social worker is actively encouraged to attend, primarily to ensure boundaries are maintained vis a vis any interaction that may take place between the child and their would-be adopter.	More interactions between children and their adopters are happening, although these are not intended/planned.	*One off*
2	Bump ins	Working towards having a 'bump in' meeting for every match, either as part of the matching process or transitions.	Case by case approach. A 'bump in' meeting, in which a prospective adopter 'bumps in' to the child with their foster carers may be held during the matching process or after the match has been formally approved, as an early stage of the child's transition to living with their adoptive family. Not all prospective	An adoption social worker is usually discretely in the vicinity, to offer support to participants if needed. Adult participants are kept to a minimum to ensure that the pre-meet is as 'low key' as possible.	Practice has been actively developed by the adoption team over the last 6 months. Change from past use of occasional 'blind sightings' when there was a specific 'purpose' e.g. child being placed was older, part of a sibling group or had specific behavioural, emotional, or medical needs. Changes are being	*May be one-off or part of a series, decided on case-by-case basis as part of a fluid plan depending on the needs of the match. Multiple meetings may take place e.g. to include other children in the adoptive family or in circumstances where formal*

			adopters want to meet their would-be child until the match has been formally approved. The meeting takes place in a public place such as a park. The adopters are introduced as 'friends' of the foster carers. Children are not told the identity of their would-be adopters, who are introduced by their first names. Interaction between child and adopter is intended. Interactions are child-led and naturalistic. The prospective adopter may push a child on a swing or kick a ball with them, for example. Practice change is being actively promoted and driven by the adoption team, embedded in other practice changes reflecting		developed in the context of	*introductions are delayed, e.g. birth parents registering an appeal against the child's placement. Virtual meetings may take place in the lead up to formal introductions, sometimes between pre-meets where multiple meetings are held.*

			recent research and good practice guidance around children's transitions from foster care to adoption.			
3	Bump intos or (less frequently, pre-meets or chemistry meets.)		Bump intos are instigated and promoted by the adoption team. Children are prepared in much the same way as they would be for an Adoption Activity Day. Depending on age and stage, children are told the identity of their adopters before meeting them.	Children's social workers are actively discouraged from attending, due to the impact that their presence is perceived to have on the dynamic of the meeting. However, as the Local Authority has Parental Responsibility for the child, ultimately the social worker the authority to make this decision. The adoption service employs a transition worker to help prepare children for moving in with their adoptive family.	Change from past use of occasional 'sightings' or 'chemistry meets'	*One off or part of a series*
4	chemistry meets Pre-meets	'ad hoc' 'occasional' 'variable' – held for approximatel y 1 in 20		Social worker presence is negotiated between the adoption and children's	The region is being asked by other agencies to arrange pre-meets more	

		matches, only when requested by other agency or an adoptive parent (check).		social worker teams, and a worker from one team attends. One example was given of a pre-meet which had taken place without any professional presence. On this occasion, the adopter and foster carer had met multiple times and professionals shared their confidence in their capacity to have a pre-meet without a social worker present.	frequently than in the recent past. The manager envisaged the possibility of a 'shift in mindset' from 'they don't happen' except in 'special cases' to 'it should happen. Unless there's a reason why not.' Keen to be cognisant of evidence, guidance and research which supports changes in practice.

Would welcome a national approach to pre-meets. | |
| *5* | N/A | None at present. | | | Requests from outside agencies to facilitate pre-meets (e.g. 'bump intos' and 'chemistry days') are increasing in frequency. Currently rejecting all requests on the grounds that the team does not know enough about the | |

					logistics or ethics of pre-meets, or their rationale to proceed with confidence. Would welcome a scenario in which children were introduced to their prospective adopters more gradually, in a public place, before formal introductions started.	

Appendix 13: Interview schedule for prospective adoptive parents (first interview, T1)

Interview schedule (PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS T1)

T1 - BEFORE pre-meet takes place
[share invite/information sheet and consent form in advance of interview, with full details of confidentiality etc].

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study. As you know, I'd like to talk to you about the meeting that you are going to have with a child, as part of the 'matching' process. Meetings that take place before the match has been formally approved are sometimes called 'pre-meets,' 'sightings' 'chemistry meets' or 'bump ins', for example. Little is known about adopters' experiences of these meetings – which is why I've come to talk to you, to find out about your views and experiences.

If it's ok, I'd like to record what you say, using this digital voice recorder. The recording will be kept securely and transcribed by either myself or by a professional transcriber. Everything you tell me will be confidential.

Before we start, do you want to ask me anything?
Please remember, if there's anything you don't want to answer, please let me know, and I'll move on. Also, please remember you can stop the interview at any point without giving a reason [double check availability – when do they need to leave etc. Please let me know if you would like to take a break at any point.

Journey to adoption
Please can you tell me a bit about your adoption journey so far?

Linking and matching
Please could you describe the kind of child who you feel would be a good match with your family?
Do you feel all your views and feelings about the kind of child who *you* think would be a good match have been taken on board?
How easy or otherwise has it been to be open and honest about the characteristics of the child that you are hoping will be part of your family? *(prompt: social workers, family, friends, each other; characteristics such as child's character, medical, emotional, behavioural needs, physical appearance, past experiences?)*

Your match with [child]
Thinking back, what were your initial feelings when you first heard or read about [child's name]?
Have your feelings about your match with [x] changed over time?
If so, why do you feel this change came about?

Which sources of information about [child] do you think have most helped you to understand them most fully so far (written, verbal, visual).

To what extent do you think you have a sense of [the child's] character/personality/'spirit'?

How confident do you feel about the match with [child]?

(prompt: that you understand the child, their character and needs).

Anything you're unsure about?

The pre-meet

How and why has the meeting come about?

(who prompted it?)

What do you think are the most important reasons for having a pre-meet?

Prompt: for you; for the child; for others

Please tell me about your hopes for the meeting.

Any concerns or worries?

Prompt: for you; for the child; for others; practicalities?

Have you been able to voice these with anyone?

How would you have felt about proceeding to Panel with the match without having met [child]?

'Chemistry'

In relationships generally, what does the term 'chemistry' mean to you?

Is 'chemistry' - or are any of the things you've described above - something you've thought about privately, or talked about at all, in the context of matching and adoption? *With each other? With professionals?*

Please tell me about any hopes or expectations you may have about your response to meeting [child] for the first time.

- *How do you anticipate you might feel when you first meet [child]?*

Is there anything you thought I would ask you that I haven't mentioned, or anything you would like to add?

If you think of something in the coming days that there was something you wanted to mention but didn't as part of our conversation, then please contact me by phone or email – details are on the information sheet that I am leaving.

Thank yous, timescales for feeding back research, how it will be used, okay to contact after pre-meet to see whether they would be willing to take part again?

END

Appendix 14: Interview schedule for prospective adoptive parents (second interview, T2).

Interview schedule (PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS T2)

T2 – soon AFTER pre-meet takes place
BEFORE interview – note any areas not covered or to be probed following previous interview*.*
Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me again. As you know, I'd like to talk to you about the meeting that you have recently had with [child]. [brief recap on last interview – e.g. 'you were planning to talk with the FC the day after, and then meet [child] the following week. ' If it's ok, I'd like to record what you say, using this digital voice recorder. The recording will be kept securely and transcribed by either myself or by a professional transcriber. Everything you tell me will be confidential.

Before we start, do you want to ask me anything?
Please remember, if there's anything you don't want to answer, please let me know, and I'll move on. Also, please remember you can stop the interview at any point without giving a reason [double check availability – when do they need to leave etc. Please let me know if you would like to take a break at any point.]

Preparing for the meeting
Please can you tell me about the preparations that were in place for the pre-meet?
Prompt: what happened? Who was involved?
Prompt: how well prepared were you for meeting your child for the first time?
What kind of contact had you had with the foster carer before the pre-meet?
Probe: how did you feel about this?
Are there any other preparations for the pre-meet that would have been useful?

The pre-meet
Please could you tell me about your experiences of the pre-meet?
Firstly, how did you feel travelling to the pre-meet?
What happened once you were there?
Who else attended?
What was their role?
What did they do?
How did it feel them being there?
What did you think about the venue's suitability for the pre-meet?

What are your memories of seeing [child] for the first time?
Prompt: what was the child doing?
How were they interacting with people around them?
What impressions did you have of them?
How did you feel?

To what extent did [child] appear as you had imagined?
differences? / similarities? / surprises?

Did you have any interaction of any kind with [child]?
Planned/ unplanned/ eye contact?
[if no interaction] Do you feel [child] responded to you at all/ knew/sensed that you were there?
How did it feel to interact/ be in the presence of [child]?
Did you record the day in any way (writing, photos, mementoes)

After the pre-meet
How do you feel about your match with [child] now?
How easy or otherwise was it to share your feelings about your first meeting with [child] with your social worker? Each other?
Do you think there is any more information about [child] that you would find useful?
 e.g. behaviour, needs, character, temperament, how they are settled?
What impact do you think the meeting has had on everyone involved?
[you/your partner, child, foster carers, professionals?]

Reasons for having the pre-meet
With hindsight, have your views on the rationale for having the pre-meet changed at all?
Do you have any concerns about any aspect of the pre-meet? – before, during or since the meeting?
Do you think the meeting could have been done differently in any way?
If so, have you shared these with anyone?
Do you think your views on the potential role of 'chemistry' in the matching process have changed at all since before the pre-meet?

Plans moving forward
What are the next steps in terms of [child] joining your family?
Prompt: any more pre-meets planned;
Prompt: involvement of any children in adoptive family
Prompt: any more information -sharing planned – e.g. Understanding the Child Day, trauma-nurture timeline?
Prompt: plans for transition
Is there anything you'd like to add?
> **If you think of something in the coming days that there was something you wanted to mention but didn't as part of our conversation, then please contact me by phone or email – details are on the information sheet that I am leaving.**

Thank yous, timescales for feeding back research, how it will be used, okay to contact after approx. 10 months, to see whether they would be willing to take part again?
END

Appendix 15: Interview schedule for prospective adoptive parents (third interview, T3)

Interview schedule (PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS T3)

T3 – 9-10 months after placement
[CHECK DETAILS OF T1 and T2 INTERVIEWS IN ADVANCE AND IDENTIFY ANY 'GAPS']

Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me again. Today I'd like to talk to you about your experiences of caring for [child], and any reflections that you may have on that first time you 'met' (or 'saw') child in person.
If it's ok, I'd like to record what you say, using this digital voice recorder. The recording will be kept securely and transcribed by either myself or by a professional transcriber. Everything you tell me will be confidential.
Before we start, do you want to ask me anything?
Please remember, if there's anything you don't want to answer, please let me know, and I'll move on. Also, please remember you can stop the interview at any point without giving a reason
[double check availability – when do they need to leave etc. Please let me know if you would like to take a break at any point.]

Child's introductions with your family
Please can you tell me about what has happened since we last met?
Prompt: - any virtual contact with child, sharing of videos, photos etc prior to introductions?
Prompt: What were your experiences of the 'introductions' between you and [child]?
Prompt: what went well, what was difficult, anything unexpected?
Prompt: how did you feel about the match with [child] at the start of introductions?

How do you feel [child] responded to you during the 'introduction' phase?
Prompt: Do you think the child recognised you?
How able did you feel to share your experiences with each other, with your social worker?
Did you feel you were able to ask for help when you needed it?

Since moving in
Please could you tell me about your experiences of caring for [child] since they moved in? (first few days, weeks)
How quickly and well do you feel they have settled?
What do you feel has gone well, what's been difficult?
Have there been any surprises for you in terms of [child] – personality, needs, temperament, behaviour etc?

Becoming a family
People's experiences of becoming a family may vary greatly, and it may take a considerable time after a child and their adoptive family move in together that they start to feel like a family.

Please can I ask, to what extent do you feel like [child] is now part of your family?
Prompts:
Have there been any key points or markers in the process of becoming a family?
Anything that has or could help the feeling of becoming a family?
Anything that has or could hinder the process?
Have you thought about how, in the future, you will talk to [child] about how you became a family/met?
(probe)
Are there key points, or events, that you have recorded, or you plan to record to share with [child] in the future?
How will you do this? writing, photos, objects, other mementoes.

Reflections on the pre-meet
How significant do you think the pre-meet was amongst the other activities/matching processes that you were part of?
Have you any concerns about the pre-meet, or could it have been done differently?
To what extent do you feel that the pre-meet played a role in your understanding of [child]?
Prompt: character; needs, including how to settle.
Do you think there were any other benefits of having the pre-meet?
Is there anything you'd like to add?

END
> **If you think of something in the coming days that there was something you wanted to mention but didn't as part of our conversation, then please contact me by phone or email – details are on the information sheet that I am leaving.**

Thank yous, timescales for feeding back research, how it will be used.
END

Appendix 16: Study information sheet for adoptive parents

[logos, Cardiff University and Wales School for Social Care Research].

An invitation

for prospective adoptive parents to take part in our study:

'Pre-meets between children and their prospective adoptive parents: their role in

the matching process'

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study about how children and their adoptive families are matched. In particular, the study will focus on the role of 'pre-meets'; meetings that take place between children and their prospective adopters *during* the matching process. 'Pre-meets' are sometimes called 'sightings', 'bump-into meetings' or 'chemistry meets'. Practice in relation to 'pre-meets' varies considerably across Wales, and little is known about participants' experiences of these meetings, and the role they play in the formation of newly adoptive families. This research is being funded by the Wales School for Social Care Research, and conducted by Jenny Blackmore, a PhD student in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University, supervised by Prof. Katherine Shelton.

We would really like to find out more about *your views* on:
- The reasons for taking part in a 'pre-meet' (or 'sighting').
- How your 'pre-meet' is organised.
- Your expectations and experiences in relation to the 'pre-meet'.
- The impact that you think the 'pre-meet' will have or has had on you and your prospective family.

If you would be willing to take part in the research, you will be invited to take part in an interview at three time points:
1) In the week or two before you are going to meet your prospective child for the first time.
2) In the week or two after you have met your prospective child.
3) 6-12 months after your first meeting.

Interviews would be on a date and at a time to suit you. We could speak by phone, via Teams or in person, if you would prefer. You would be free to withdraw at any point, without giving a reason.

Other strands of the research will include interviews with adoption professionals, childcare social workers and foster carers. These interviews will explore relevant developments in policy and practice, as well as participants' direct experiences of being involved in 'pre-meets'.

The results of this study will be written up in research paper format and submitted to Cardiff University, School of Psychology as part of Jenny Blackmore's doctoral thesis and may later be

published in a relevant journal, such as Coram BAAF's *Adoption & Fostering*. We hope to share our findings with stakeholders, in relation to policy and practice decisions for service provision, for example. Direct quotes may be used in written reports, but these will never contain the names of any child or adult and care will be taken to remove identifying information

If you are willing to take part, please contact Jenny Blackmore (blackmoreja1@cardiff.ac.uk or 07557 905175) or, if you prefer, ask your adoption social worker if they could pass on your contact details to Jenny.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. We are very much hoping that this study will ultimately help inform the ways in which newly adoptive families are formed. We understand that this can be a challenging and emotional time and emphasise that if you agree to take part in an interview, you will of course be free to withdraw your consent at any time, without giving a reason.

The following people are involved in this project:

Jenny Blackmore	Prof. Katherine Shelton	Dr Cerith	Dr Gemma
Postgraduate Student	School of Psychology	Waters	Burns
Cardiff University	Cardiff University	Clinical	Clinical
Blackmoreja1@cardiff.ac.uk	Sheltonkh1@cardiff.ac.uk	Psychologist	Psychologist
		ABUHB	ABUHB

If you have any concerns about the way this research was conducted, please contact the School of Psychology Ethics Committee, Cardiff University:

Secretary of the Ethics Committee, School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Tower Building, 70 Park Place, Cardiff,

CF10 3AT. Tel: +44 (0) 029 208 70360. Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix 17: Consent form for prospective adoptive parents

[logos, Cardiff University and Wales School for Social Care Research].

Consent Form
Interviews with prospective adopters

I understand that my participation in this project will involve taking part in an interview with Jenny Blackmore (PhD Student, Cardiff University) and that this will involve questions relating to my thoughts about and experiences about 'pre-meets', which are sometimes known as 'sightings', 'bump-into meetings' or 'chemistry meets.'

I understand that if I give permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed by Jenny Blackmore or by a professional transcriber approved by Cardiff University. I understand that the audio recording will be destroyed following transcription and the interview transcripts will be kept for five years following the interview.

I understand that the information provided by me will be stored confidentially. I understand that this means the researchers working on this project will allocate me a code and my answers will be associated with this code rather than my name. I understand that consent forms containing my name will be stored separately to the answers I provide.

I understand that information I provide will be used as part of Jenny Blackmore's PhD doctorate, may later be written up in research paper format and published in a journal such as *Adoption & Fostering* and may also be viewed by stakeholders in the relevant Local Authorities.

I understand that direct quotes may be used in written reports based on the information I provide, but that these will never contain the names of any child, adult or any other identifying information. I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntary and I can withdraw my participation at any time, without giving a reason.

I understand that if I do not wish to answer any questions I can simply inform the interviewer and we will move on to the next question.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I understand that I can discuss any concerns with Jenny Blackmore or her supervisor, Prof Katherine Shelton (SheltonKH1@cardiff.ac.uk).

I, _____(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Jenny Blackmore, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of Prof   Katherine   Shelton.

Signed: _____ (consent may be audio recorded if interview takes place via phone or on-line)

Date: _____

Privacy Notice:

The information provided on the consent form will be held in compliance with GDPR regulations. Cardiff University is the data controller and Matt Cooper is the data protection officer (CooperM1@cardiff.ac.uk). This information is being collected by Jenny Blackmore. This information will be held securely and separately from the research information you provide. Only the researcher will have access to this form and it will be destroyed after 7 years. The lawful basis for processing this information is consent.

Appendix 18: List of super-ordinate themes and themes for one prospective adoptive parent at

time of first interview

(See Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p100).

Loss
Bereavement; Infertility; Shock; Daughter's grief; Children in need, 'heartbreaking stories'; Child they couldn't save vs one they could; Adopting a child means losses for foster carer; Loss of agency over becoming a parent; Potentially denying child relationship with foster carer; The child's past.

Temporal elements/haste
Started hearing stories of kids needing help; 'Flung into the world of adoption'; Went in with very little knowledge; 'Crazy summer, whirlwind;' Taken a good time to be matched

An incomplete family/creating a family
Daughter missing sibling; 'saving' a child; Creating something good out of loss; Matching process - starting with a tick box; 'Bearing your soul;' Trusting social worker judgements; 'Selling'/promoting yourself; Seeking /identifying similarities in behaviour; Shared family traits; Wanting to make a child 'safe;' Red tape; Thinking about impact on birth daughter

Belief in fate
Being matched at the 'right' time

Relationship with social workers/the authorities
Influence on family formation; Not allowed to say child's name; Social worker driving matching decision; Interrogation, getting to know adopters inside and out; Know you better than friends and family; Faith in support, relationship with SW; Asks questions no-one else would; Child care social worker knows child well; Accepting 'the rules' and professional advice' Doesn't know how child's been prepared for adoption; Having to trust timeframes and process set by others.

Understanding the child/getting to know them
The CAR B report; Family finding social worker and childcare social worker share information about child; Medical information; Developmental stage; Routine, eating, sleep

Appendix 19: Table of super-ordinate themes, themes and illustrative quotations - prospective adoptive parents, first interview.
(Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp.101-103).

Themes	Participant quotes
1: THE ADOPTION SOCIAL WORKER/ PROSPECTIVE ADOPTER RELATIONSHIP	
Feeling listened to, understood, 'known,' instincts and feelings valued	**Chloe**: *our social worker has worked with us for a year now and she knows us inside and out.* **Helen**: *[she] listens, knows exactly what, and [has] our back, 100% yes!* **Jake:** *And she said this, you've got to just go, [...] be honest, go with what your heart says.*
Experiencing challenge and growth in the assessment process	**Chloe**: *they grill you and in the best way, because it's needed.* **Helen:** *[they ask] the type of questions you don't really discuss in your household.* **Jake**: *it made me re-evaluate my own life and I reached out [... I] traced my father and my half brother and sister.*
Entrusting the social worker with the matching decision	**Chloe**: *my social worker is the person I know and trust for me and my husband what is best.* **Helen**: *xx* **Jake**: *I think they what they do behind the scenes do, the matching, definitely a firm believer*
2: 'MEANT TO BE'? ADOPTERS' RESPONSES TO EARLY INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHILD	
Reacting to the child's photograph	**Chloe**: *Seeing her little face [...] makes the story real, you know?* **Helen**: *And we looked and every single one of us went 'aaah!'* **Jake**: *[laughing] yes, [we went] straight to the photo!*
Trusting the system	**Chloe**: *the information we had was excellent* **Helen**: *the [CAR B] form is very, very thorough* **Jake**: *I can see the, the reasoning, I think, yeah, [...] it is clear as day, why they chose her*
Responding to the child's background	**Chloe**: *it's quite a heavy amount of information to take in, to us it's not normal* **Helen:** *just thinking about our life experiences, we've been through a lot, yeah* **Jake**: *we would definitely have an insight, because of our own life experiences*

Feeling cautious	*Chloe*: We picked holes in [the CAR B], we discussed it, we were very negative towards it at the start *Jake*: I read [the CAR B] that night. And I'm a very analytical kind of mindset. So literally, [...] I was highlighting, questioning *Helen*: he did a map and all sorts
Sense match is 'meant to be'	*Chloe*; so, it's been fate I believe that we've been matched at the right time. *Helen*: we all thought the same, we all thought [...] *Jake*: so it was, it was uncanny. You really think 'wow!'

3: DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE IN THE MATCH	
Identifying familial similarities and 'traits': points of connection:	*Chloe*: [foster carer said Amy is] 'a really busy bee, constantly on the go, constantly wanting to be played with, constantly climbing' – [...] so that would match our little girl. *Helen*: she's very similar *Jake*: Amy's likes and dislikes, what she's experienced with the foster carers and the things she likes is very similar to Lois
Humour as a source of connection and resilience	*Chloe*: she likes to crack jokes and tease people and that's a big part of our family *Helen*: We're a fun family. full sense of humour. Gotta have a laugh *Jake*: I'd agree with Helen
Identifying shared physical resemblance	*Chloe*: they've got very similar hair and both got blue eyes and stuff so it's very [pause] fitting *Helen*: she's got brown eyes, blonde hair [like me] *Jake*: So [...] immediate family, they look at [the photo], and go, 'Wow, [...] she looks like she's your child!'
Visualising child as part of the family	*Chloe*: it's nice to hear how she is generally and how we would all fit into each other's lives as well *Jake*: I can't wait to [...] do all kinds of the stuff that we did with Lois when she was younger *Helen*: [nodding in agreement] yes!
Extent they feel the child feels real, is known to them	*Chloe*: it'll just be nice to see her as a real person rather than a very small photo that is very fading in my head *Helen:* We sort of have got the whole picture, [speaking slowly] even from the womb, [...] haven't we? *Jake:* We feel like we know her incredibly well, because we've read so much and seen so much already [...] But at the same time [...] we haven't actually seen her, so it's very bizarre

Trusting social workers' judgement, feeling reassured	***Chloe:*** *So, as long as their social worker is happy with what we can offer then every meeting is a sort of tick, ok, we're moving forward to the next meeting.* ***Helen:*** *Our social worker and Amy's social worker met, they both agreed, then that [we] were a match* ***Jake:*** *I genuinely do believe in the process*
THE ADOPTION CONSTELLATION	
Psychological presence of the child's birth family	***Chloe***: *[…] what she's been through and what she's been subjected to at home* ***Helen:*** *xx* ***Jake:*** *I literally had to do a […] family tree on paper because there wasn't one in the CAR B just to map out and understand the dynamics of a family*
Recognising the child's grief and losses in adoption	***Chloe:*** *she has grown an attachment to [the foster carer] and we want to keep that there* ***Helen***: *Amy, unfortunately for her, she's the only child out of the siblings that's been adopted outside the family* ***Jake:*** *So, we're excited to adopt her but in her mindset she is facing another kind of removal*
Building a relationship with the foster carer	***Chloe***: *she seemed really easy to talk to* ***Helen***: *we get on, don't we?* ***Jake***: *you've got somebody who's potentially grieving the loss of their child they've developed a bond with*
The impact of the match on the family system	***Chloe:*** *how's she going to cope with what she's gone through?* ***Helen:*** *the process, seems like no one really wants to know how Lois feels* ***Jake:*** *xx*

Appendix 20: Interview schedule for foster carers.

Interview schedule (FOSTER CARERS)

[share invite/information sheet and consent form in advance of interview, with full details of confidentiality etc].

Introduction
*Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study. As you know, I'd like to talk to you about **your** experiences of meetings between children and their prospective adopters that take place <u>before their match</u> <u>is formally approved.</u>*
*Meetings that take place before the match has been formally approved are sometimes called 'pre-meets,' 'sightings' 'chemistry meets' or 'bump ins'. Little is known about foster carers' **experiences** of these meetings – which is why I've come to talk to you, to find out about your views and experiences.*

If it's ok, I'd like to record what you say, using this digital voice recorder. The recording will be kept securely and transcribed by either myself or by a professional transcriber. Everything you tell me will be confidential.   The recording and transcript will be kept for a maximum of two years after the end of the study.
In this interview, I'd like to explore:
- Your expectations and experiences in relation to 'pre-meets.'
- The impact that you think the 'pre-meet' had or will have on everyone involved.

Before we start, do you want to ask me anything?
Please remember, if there's anything you don't want to answer, please let me know, and I'll move on. Also, please remember you can stop the interview at any point without giving a reason [double check availability – when do they need to leave etc.]
Please let me know if you would like to take a break at any point.

1   First, please could you give me a *brief* overview of your role as a foster carer?
(special interest in adoption? Age range of foster children? When did they start fostering?)

2   Please can you tell me what happens at pre-meets?
Eg Logistics, e.g. location, activities
Who attends?
Any interaction planned/ took place between child and adopter?
Anything that goes particularly well? You'd like to change?

3   Please tell me *your understanding* of why pre-meets ('sighting' 'chemistry meet' or 'bump into' meeting) take place?
Have you been given an official rationale?

4	**What are your own thoughts and feelings about pre-meets?**
Any concerns?
Have your thoughts and feelings changed?

5	**What do you think is [the child's] understanding of pre-meets?**
[depending on age and understanding of child]
What were they told? By whom?
Were they told the identity of their adopters, or what the meeting was about?
How did [the child] respond during or after the [pre-meet]?
How did you or anyone else talk to [the child] about the pre-meet after it had taken place?

6	**Please can you tell me about your own expectations and experiences of 'pre-meets'**
What do you think went particularly well, if anything?
Was there anything that you felt could have been done differently/better?

7	**Please can you tell me about the impact that you think the 'pre-meet' had or will have on everyone involved?**
Child?
You?
Prospective adopters?
What difference do you think the timing of the pre-meet – BEFORE formal approval of the match – has [on everyone]?

8	**Sometimes, policy documents about adoption have referred to the importance of 'chemistry' in successful adoptions.**
Would you say you have you any experience of 'chemistry' in the adoption process?
Examples?
Do you think it's a helpful term?
(any other terms that may be alternatives?)

9	**Do you have any final comments about your experience of pre-meets?**
Is there anything you'd like to add?

If you think of something in the coming days that there was something you wanted to mention but didn't as part of our conversation, then please contact me by phone or email – details are on the information sheet that I am leaving.
Thank yous, timescales for feeding back research, how it will be used.

END

Appendix 21: Study information/invitation sheet for foster carers

| An invitation for **foster carers** to take part in research about |
| how children and adoptive families are matched |

Have you

Taken part in a pre-meet (such as a 'sighting' or 'chemistry meet' i.e., met with prospective adopters before their match had been formally approved) in the last 2 years?

Or

Are you going to take part in a 'pre-meet' with prospective adopters in the next few weeks?

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study about how children and their adoptive families are matched. In particular, the study will focus on the role of 'pre-meets'; meetings that take place between children and their prospective adopters during the matching process. 'Pre-meets' are sometimes called 'sightings', 'bump-into meetings' or 'chemistry meets'. Practice in relation to 'pre-meets' varies considerably across Wales, and little is known about participants' experiences of these meetings, and the role they play in the formation of newly adoptive families.

This research is being funded by the Wales School for Social Care Research, and conducted by Jenny Blackmore, a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at Cardiff University, supervised by Professor Katherine Shelton.

We would really like to find out more about *your views* on:

- The reasons for your foster child taking part in a 'pre-meet' (e.g. a 'sighting' 'chemistry meet' or 'bump into' meeting).
- How the 'pre-meet' was organised.
- Your expectations and experiences in relation to the 'pre-meet'.
- The impact that you think the 'pre-meet' had or will have on everyone involved.

If you would be willing to take part in the research, you will be invited to take part in an interview with Jenny Blackmore. The interview will last approximately one hour or less. You will be asked to take part in a short follow-up interview with Jenny, if you have been interviewed before the pre-meet takes place.

The interview would be on a date and at a time to suit you. We could speak by phone, via Teams or in person, if you would prefer. You would be free to withdraw at any point, without giving a reason.

Other strands of the research will include interviews with adoption professionals and prospective adopters. These interviews will explore relevant developments in policy and practice, as well as participants' direct experiences of being involved in 'pre-meets'.

The results of this study will be written up in research paper format and submitted to Cardiff University, School of Psychology as part of Jenny Blackmore's doctoral thesis and may later be published in a relevant journal, such as Coram BAAF's *Adoption & Fostering*. We hope to share our findings with stakeholders, in relation to policy and practice decisions for service provision, for example. Direct quotes may be used in written reports, but these will never contain the names of any child or adult and care will be taken to remove identifying information.

If you are willing to take part, please contact Jenny Blackmore via email blackmoreja1@cardiff.ac.uk or call/text message on 07557 905175. If you prefer you can ask your fostering social worker to pass on your contact details to Jenny.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. We are very much hoping that this study will ultimately help inform the ways in which newly adoptive families are formed. We understand that children's transitions can be a challenging and emotional time and emphasise that if you agree to take part in an interview, you will of course be free to withdraw your consent at any time, without giving a reason.

The following people are involved in this project:

Jenny Blackmore	Prof. Katherine Shelton	Dr Cerith	Dr Gemma
Postgraduate Student	School of Psychology	Waters	Burns
Cardiff University	Cardiff University	Clinical	Clinical
Blackmoreja1@cardiff.ac.uk	Sheltonkh1@cardiff.ac.uk	Psychologist	Psychologist
		ABUHB	ABUHB

If you have any concerns about the way this research was conducted, please contact the School of Psychology Ethics Committee, Cardiff University:

Secretary of the Ethics Committee, School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Tower Building, 70 Park Place, Cardiff,
CF10 3AT. Tel: +44 (0) 029 208 70707. Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix 22: Consent form for foster carers

[logos, Cardiff University and Wales School for Social Care Research].

Consent Form
Interviews with foster carers

I understand that my participation in this project will involve taking part in an interview with Jenny Blackmore (PhD Student, Cardiff University) and that this will involve questions relating to my thoughts about and experiences about 'pre-meets', which are sometimes known as 'sightings', 'bump-into meetings' or 'chemistry meets.'

I understand that if I give permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed by Jenny Blackmore or by a professional transcriber approved by Cardiff University. I understand that the audio recording will be destroyed following transcription and the interview transcripts will be kept for five years following the interview.

I understand that the information provided by me will be stored confidentially. I understand that this means the researchers working on this project will allocate me a code and my answers will be associated with this code rather than my name. I understand that consent forms containing my name will be stored separately to the answers I provide.

I understand that information I provide will be used as part of Jenny Blackmore's PhD doctorate, may later be written up in research paper format and published in a journal such as *Adoption & Fostering* and may also be viewed by stakeholders in the relevant Local Authorities.

I understand that direct quotes may be used in written reports based on the information I provide, but that these will never contain the names of any child, adult or any other identifying information. I understand that my participation in this project is entirely voluntary and I can withdraw my participation at any time, without giving a reason.

I understand that if I do not wish to answer any questions I can simply inform the interviewer and we will move on to the next question.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I understand that I can discuss any concerns with Jenny Blackmore or her supervisor, Prof Katherine Shelton (SheltonKH1@cardiff.ac.uk).

I, _____(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Jenny Blackmore, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of Prof   Katherine   Shelton.

Signed: _____ (consent may be audio recorded if interview takes place via phone or on-line)

Date: _____

Privacy Notice:
The information provided on the consent form will be held in compliance with GDPR regulations. Cardiff University is the data controller and Matt Cooper is the data protection officer (CooperM1@cardiff.ac.uk). This information is being collected by Jenny Blackmore. This information will be held securely and separately from the research information you provide. Only the researcher will have access to this form and it will be destroyed after 7 years. The lawful basis for processing this information is consent.

Appendix 23: List of super-ordinate themes and themes from one foster carer interview
(See Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p100).

Sarah:
Reassurance about match
Opportunity to withdraw from match if needed, easier before panel
Lots of responsibility for adopter; need to give adopters more control/chance of success
Test adopter's response to child – needs to be feel positive

FC/adopter relationship
Empathy for adopters - being in a stranger's home for intros is stressful, adopters are
vulnerable - pre-meet helps to relieve anxieties, makes everyone happy, builds confidence
'Strangers' meeting
Pre-meet - *'breaks the ice,'* a relaxed, enjoyable experience, good 'chemistry' with the adopters
Improve the FC/PA dynamic, make child feel more comfortable therefore
Opp for the PA to ask questions, reduce misunderstandings, establish expectations
PAS start intros more open if they have had a pre-meet with the FC etc
FC 'allows' PA to hold child etc – builds trust –
FCs and PAS - easier getting to know each other of you're not being watched by a SW.

Child/adopter relationship
Helps familiarise child with adopter, alongside photos, build recognition and relationship
gradually
An informal situation – more relaxed than intros
Bump ins pre-and post-meet seen as a continuum in building relationship

Understanding the child
Child/adopter interaction at pre-meet important
Form for FC to fill in about day-to day life with child doesn't fit babies well.
Bump in gives adopter better feel for the child. Written info can be misleading eg ethnicity/ in
relation to physical appearance, *'drug'* baby.
Needs to be able to trust PA enough to share honest info with them about child

Views of /relationship with the system
Has little input in match though they know the child best – info in formulaic way, with a form,
much of which doesn't apply to babies; Fcs have no say if they don't think match is right
FCs not consulted in practice changes, including pre-meets, not given same guidance as
adopters.
Would like adoption role to be part of the A/R

Breaking the rules/ FCs determining what happens at pre-meet
Length of meeting – always last longer than are supposed to.
FCs determine what happens in pre-meet – eg lets adopter feed child

Risks
Risk? – once pre-meet takes place need to keep up momentum eg even if court processes stop

Psychological adjustment
PA starts claiming the child, (/start to enable FC to let go, visualise child's future life)
FC gives PA *'permission'* to PA to hold child etc, showing acceptance of PA - give blessing *'have a cwtch – this is going to be your child.'*
Pre-meets help prepare adopters for the emotions of intros - FC is more relaxed, reassured, getting over initial unease

Impact on child
Nothing detrimental
Children have a sixth sense, can pick up on who their parents are
Adopters are very mindful of children's needs - don't 'grab' them

The system
Final contact with birth family may take place just before pre-meet
The optics driving decisions eg pre-empting court decisions
Pre-meets are part of 'new ways of thinking' about adoption

FC grief
Cry in private – *'children don't need to see 'that' '*
Children pick up on grief/stress/ stress

The fostering role
View that it's up to adopters whether they stay in touch. No sense this is the child's right.
'*We've done our job'.* Pride in fostering role.

Chemistry
Feels important but doesn't know how - may relate to babies picking up on body language?

Appendix 24: Table of super-ordinate themes, themes and illustrative quotations - foster carers
(Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp101-103).

Experiencing grief and loss		
	Grieving	**Kirsty:** *[we] try not to show [grief], but it's just human nature, isn't it?* **Tony:** *It's really hard for us to let them go [ ] they're your children, aren't they? Then all of a sudden, they're going to be uprooted again* **Paula:** *it is very painful when they go.* **Sarah:** *you do your crying in private;* **Becky:** *I became the birth mum in my head, so that's why I was so attached when he moved on.* **Graham:** *you come in here and it's like someone had died [ ] 'that child's not your child anymore, that child's moved on'* **Carys:** *see them through that awful time, to make them feel safe and secure and know that you're always there for them*
	'Not that I want to cling to her': Managing uncertainty around future contact with the child	**Kirsty:** [*children may feel*] *abandoned* **Tony:** *(X)* **Paula:** *it's well over a year I've spent healing her and getting her to attach. I don't want someone to ruin that, and just cut me off* **Sarah:** *[contact] purely on their terms* **Becky:** *They just want that child, they'll say anything to social workers'* **Graham:** *You can get rid of [photographs of us] in a couple of weeks [ ] part of their regime is that they don't have to ring us, you know?* **Carys:** *I didn't get rid of my old furniture for about ten years after the first one left*
Strangers meeting: the foster carer/adopter dynamic		
	'Breaking the ice:' building trust, reducing anxieties	**Kirsty and Tony:** *building up that relationship starts at Day 1 [the pre-meet] it's important for us to bond with them as well, to bond with the prospective adopters* **Paula:** (X) **Sarah:** *some adopters that you could see shaking as they come through the door* **Becky and Graham:** *nervous [ ] are they going to get on with you? [ ] You get a rapport with them* **Carys:** *it's just breaking that first initial ice bit*
	'I need to make sure they're okay!' : Seeking reassurance about the match, showing acceptance	**Kirsty:** *instinct, we definitely know if it's going to be right or not.* **Tony:** *we're giving away something really precious* **Paula:** *I need to meet them, to make sure they're okay [ ] I need to have a picture in my head* **Sarah:** *I always say to them, 'Have a hold of the baby, because this is going to be your child [ ] '* **Becky and Graham:** *he was really sociable and I said 'how weird is that? He won't go to anyone else*

		Carys: *As long as that dad is doing everything that he can for that baby, in terms of care, protection, play, loving, as long as you can see all those things there*
Building the adopters' confidence in the match		
	Feeling 'right'	**Kirsty and Tony:** (X) **Paula:** *they were going in blind, basically, which is not the right way to do things* **Sarah:** *I always say to them, 'if it doesn't feel right, please tell me.'* **Graham:** *Is it a bump in for them to kind of, like the child, as well?* **Becky:** *They could say 'no,' I suppose* **Carys:** *you don't really know the gut feeling until you meet that child, you hear that child [ ] yeah, this is the baby, this is the one for us" or "oh gosh no, I couldn't cope, it's screaming far too much, I cannot cope with this"*
	'To actually, physically see this child'	**Kirsty and Tony:** (X) **Paula:** *[seeing in person] is completely different from what is written on a piece of paper* **Sarah:** (X) **Becky and Graham:** *They can get a sense of a child straightaway* **Carys:** *you can tell a lot about a child by the way they play and interact with others*
Supporting the child/adopter bond		
	'A real natural start'	**Kirsty and Tony:** *When they came it was a natural thing and they instantly bonded with him* **Paula:** *It should not just [be] a 'viewing.' It should be the start. It's that bond, forming. But it's not, at the minute.* **Sarah:** *it prepared him for somebody new coming in and it just became a familiar face.* *[ ] his face would light up when he saw them* **Becky and Graham:** *they know their face then, don't they? [ ] We thought he'd struggle moving on, but brilliant* **Carys:** *when they do come in, the child already knows them and it's like 'oh, I know you, okay, let's play.'*
	'I'm giving him permission to leave me': building the adopter/child bond, conveying safety	**Kirsty and Tony:** *I'm showing him, telling him, and just making him feel I'm giving him permission to leave me in a way* **Paula:** *that ball should start rolling [but does not]* *But if they built on that slowly, even if the child doesn't know at that stage, they're getting familiar with those people and then further down the line they can say 'oh, this is your new mummy, actually' [laughs] It's not so scary then, is it? They already know them a little bit [ ] to be that's how it should work.* **Sarah:** *You can see the relationship builds then, they do enjoy it and they are relaxing and they're looking forward to the next time* **Becky and Graham:** *He sat with them for an hour, sat on their laps, playing [ ] at the bump into, and he wouldn't go to anyone else usually.*

		Carys: *I pick the baby up and put the baby on the table. Just side on and I'm still holding onto the baby, so the baby still feels safe and is okay.*
	'This is our child': claiming behaviours	**Kirsty:** *for them to get it [a surge of love] they need to be close to the baby when they 'sight' the baby,* and it's important for me to see it and feel it as well. **Tony:** (X) **Kirsty:** *You know if somebody wants to [hold baby], don't you? You know if somebody wants to have that baby* **Paula:** *Reading it on paper is all head stuff, isn't it? It's not heart stuff. You need to see them to start that heart stuff forming.'* **Sarah:** *It's lovely because you can see them, if it's a couple you can see the look between them as if to say, "This is our child."* **Becky and Graham:** *As soon as we met them, we said he just fell into their family* **Carys:** *as soon as they saw the photo, they knew this was their baby and then when they saw her in the café and you know, they carried on, "Yes, this is our baby"*
Experiences of 'the system'		
	Feeling marginalised	**Kirsty and Tony:** *'I want to say a lot of things but you can't, we're not professionals.* *they expect us to do all these things, but they don't consider us.* **Paula:** *I only know about changes to adoption because I'm an adopter* **Sarah:** *we're just told to get on with [the match] once it's happening.* **Becky and Graham:** **Carys:** *I give my opinion anyway, whether it's asked for or not – but these days, it is asked for.*
	Perceptions of risk to the child	**Kirsty and Tony:** *They don't think every stranger is going to be their prospective parent* **Paula:** *I really don't see why in the park you can't have a chat with the child that's with you.* **Sarah:** *at this age they don't understand. It's just a new face talking to her.* **Becky and Graham:** (X) **Carys:** *think they just sort of understood that we're meeting up with friends and everybody's happy and smiley and they get cuddles [ ]. Perhaps they might have to observe from a distance with an older child.*
	Pre-meets as part of positive practice changes	**Kirsty and Tony:** (X) **Paula:** *It's only really the last couple of years that ours have moved on [ ] saying, [ ] foster carers need to stay in touch [ ] but that is something I've had to fight for.* **Sarah:** *They are moving towards this century, they're not stuck in stone like they used to be. [ ] now they are moving forwards and we are getting results with it I think.*

		'the best thing that's come out of adoption for a long time.' **Becky and Graham:** *[more contact between children and their former foster carers] is a lovely thing now, because that didn't happen with the first one we had* **Carys**: *It does make me emotional because it makes me be cross that they weren't started sooner, earlier, years ago, they should have been happening years ago*
	Understanding the rationale for pre-meets	**Kirsty:** *It should be about how the child interacts with the prospective parents and it should be about how the parents interact with the child. I know that's not what it's meant to be, it's just meant to be for them to see the child.* **Paula:** *I've never been given [ ] anything, what they're for* **Sarah:** *no-one has really explained why, they just rolled it out [ ]* **Becky and Graham:** *I don't think foster carers get that update of how things have changed* **Carys:** *I thought 'that's strange, it hasn't been to panel yet.'*
	Approaches to 'the rules'	**Kirsty:** *each worker is different and whatever they interpret the rules are that day.* **Tony:** *[I said] 'we're going to struggle not to let them interact with him.' [ ] [The baby's social worker] actually said in that scenario 'you take the lead.' So, [ ] they realise we understand the baby best* **Paula:** *It'd be nice to have more interaction. That's what I would like to see. A lot more interaction. Especially - we mostly deal with babies, I really don't see the problem.* **Sarah:** *Because I've done it a long time I pretty much do what I think is right. [ ] Very often I've said to them, "Would you like to feed them, would you like to hold them?" They've said, "Are we allowed?" I said, "Yes, you are, you can, I'm saying you can."* **Becky:** *You don't want to do something and they go 'you shouldn't have done that.'* **Graham:** (X) **Carys:** *they don't think I'm actually going to say, "you can hold her now if you like", because they don't expect it at that stage. They just think they've come to observe the baby and to talk some more about the baby.*

Appendix 25: Images of Research photographic competition entry (2019).

Photo credit: Kelsey Frewin