

Adoption Support Plans

Exploring the processes

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this thesis is upon the Adoption Support Plan (ASP), one of the documents constructed for new adoptions of children in the UK. The Adoption and Children Act, 2002, made provision for support in adoption through the right to request an assessment of support.

The recognition of support for adoption has emerged as the nature of adoption has changed with fewer children being relinquished at birth. Children adopted from social care are generally older and more likely to have experienced trauma and broken attachments. The 'closed' nature of the adoption of babies has become more 'open' with arrangements such as contact with birth families and access to birth records (Lowe, 1999). It is now understood that adoption is associated with life-long periods of adjustment which can require different levels of support. However little is known about how support is assessed and introduced for new adoptions.

A documentary analysis method explored the ways in which the ASP operated within the wider adoption context. Qualitative interviews were also undertaken. The findings highlight that the ASP focused mainly on the matching arrangements concerning the child's past and present needs, with little consideration of potential future support that might be required. Adopters were largely unaware of the existence and purpose of the ASP to support the adoptive family and their future.

Two proposals are made to raise the status and visibility of the ASP during the arrangements for adoption. Firstly, the document should be redesigned and it should be 'co-produced' following the placement, allowing the Review to agree the negotiated support requirements. Secondly, a strategic interagency commitment to space for adoption support within mainstream family support services should be established, requiring a programme of information for the public and training for all providers regarding the normative aspects of adoption and the value of support.

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1.1 The research focus

This thesis aims to explore how support is introduced into new adoptions through the construction of a document entitled the Adoption Support Plan (ASP). The process of arranging an adoption can be described as consisting of two parts, the pre and post phases, which are defined variously as pre-placement and post-placement, or pre-adoption order and post-adoption order, with each stage being significant in terms of support needs. A referral to an adoption agency signals that the child's permanence plan¹ is intended to be adoption, which is the beginning of the adoption process for the child. This is the point at which the ASP and other documents relating to the adoption come into being. The focus of this study is upon the ASP document itself and the ways in which support becomes a 'social reality' through the construction of the ASP (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011:80).

Since the 1990s, the UK government has been concerned with ensuring that where it is in children's best interests, more children who are looked after² in public care should be adopted (PIU, 2000). Although adoption is not a new concept, historically, in the UK, adoption was associated with childless couples, illegitimate babies and secrecy (Allen, 2003). Increasingly adoption has become politicised (Allen, 2003) and is associated with the adoption of non- infants and older children (Selwyn et al, 2006). The significance of support in adoption today has emerged as the nature of the children being adopted has changed (Rushton, 2004). Quinton (2012) describes adoption today as providing 'a family for developmental recovery' for the child (2012:13). The continuing drive to increase and reform adoption by the governments in England and Wales has brought renewed political and policy recognition that support is important. Thus the arrangements for and the provision of support should become more transparent (DfE, 2012; Ottaway et al, 2014).

This qualitative study took place across local authority areas in west and south Wales. It is significant and timely given the legislative changes in Wales; the

¹ Permanence is associated with obtaining secure, long term placements for children not able to live with their immediate birth family and was formalised in the Adoption and Children Act, 2002, to reduce delay in planning for children's wellbeing (Thomas, 2013).

² Children Act 1989 used Looked After to replace 'in care' terminology.

Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act, 2014 and the launch of a National Adoption Service in November 2014 placed the arrangements for adoption and support under review.

1.2 Locating the research and its contribution

The Adoption and Children Act, 2002, implemented in 2005, essentially replaced the Adoption Act 1976 and included the conditional strengthening of the principle of support, specifically through an entitlement to request support for those affected by adoption (Sect 3, ACA, 2002). Section 3 of the 2002 Act envisioned the involvement of other agencies and mainstream local authority services in the provision of support for adoption. Adoption support services are defined by section 2(6) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 as counselling, advice and information. Other support services prescribed by Regulation 3 fall into two categories: the 'basic' provision, such as groups where discussions between those affected by adoption can occur, and the provision that is contingent on assessments and resources, such as some therapeutic provision (ASSR, 2005).

Adoption is a significant life event for all involved. The adoption order achieves the permanent legal transfer of parental responsibility of a child from their birth parents to their adoptive parents. Simmonds (2012) likens adoption to heart transplant surgery due to its importance for the individuals involved, and the potential for the adoption relationship to heal the early trauma that many children who are adopted have experienced. However he also notes that adoption practice is different to heart transplant surgery in that there is no comparable evidence base or equivalent financial investment and that the metaphor 'doesn't quite capture the profound working out of feelings of love, loss, and change that are so much a part of adoption' (Simmonds from Preface in Quinton, 2012: x).

My interest in the ASP, and its role, grew from when I was working for a voluntary adoption support agency, based in south Wales, when the Adoption and Children Act 2002 was implemented. The agency had a number of service partnerships with local authorities to provide adoption support services. Subsequently I worked as an Independent Reviewing Officer within a local authority and was involved in several adoption review meetings. In both of

these roles I developed an interest and curiosity about how the ASP was produced during the arrangements for adoption and how it functioned in terms of providing support. This thesis suggests that, whilst many agree that adoption today requires support (Rushton, 2004; Biehal et al, 2010), there seems to be a gap in the literature with regard to exploring how support is introduced into new adoptions. Drawing on the ideas of Payne (2009) this study investigates the process of introducing support into new adoptions. Payne suggests that the concept of process in social work can be understood as a way of doing things that connects the complexity of the actions with the people and these contexts over a period of time; a process has structure and tends to be organised, thus producing an outcome (Payne, 2009). Focusing upon the ways in which the ASP operates, and produces an outcome for the provision of support for a new adoption forms the basis of the unique contribution of this study.

1.3 Research Design

The research is situated in the pre-adoption order phase. A sample of twelve Adoption Support Plan documents forms the foundation for the study together with a number of semi-structured interviews. The data is drawn from the documents, from practitioners involved in constructing and using ASPs, as well as from the views of adopters for whom the ASPs have been provided. The data information may be found in Appendix E. Three broad questions underpin the documentary analysis approach (Prior, 2003) to exploring how the ASP comes into being and the ways in which it represents support for a new adoption.

The first area interrogates the structure of the ASP document and its content. Here the relationship between the ASP design and the text is explored, foregrounding the ways in which support is formulated through the ASP. The second level of enquiry focuses on the ASP's position and role within the adoption arrangements, which are likened to a journey. The purpose here is to examine the 'background expectations' of the ASP within the adoption system (Taylor and White, 2000:143). The third part of the enquiry considers how support for adoption is understood from the perspectives of practitioners and adopters and how it is articulated in the ASP itself. The data analysis draws on approaches from social constructionism, critically interpreting the ways in which the ASP document may be seen to function in introducing support into a new adoption arrangement (Burr, 2003).

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis follows a conventional format. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature surrounding the context of adoption today. The chapter outlines the ways in which changing social circumstances have led to adoption becoming a preferred option for some children in local authority care. The early adverse circumstances of many children adopted today leads to consideration of support for adoption in general and what expectations there might be of support as new adoptions are arranged. Outlining the adoption system concludes the literature review chapter, setting the scene for the research process.

Chapter 3 details the research process. Initially the theoretical perspectives underpinning the research are introduced. The subsequent sections describe the methods undertaken for accessing and gathering data, the ethical considerations involved and the strategies for data analysis. Using a reflexive social constructionist approach to the analysis, the findings are presented as a different way of 'knowing' about the ASP and how it functions (Burr, 2003; Taylor and White, 2000).

The next three chapters present and develop the research findings. Chapter 4 focuses on the design and layout of the ASP structure, and explores how the content actually 'does' support. Chapter 5 centres upon the operational context of the ASP document. The ASP's journey through the adoption system identifies seven stages for the arrangements of the adoption during which the ASP is constructed. The influences of the two sets of Regulations upon the ASP production are also explored. In Chapter 6, the last findings chapter, the focus is upon the practitioners' and adopters' perspectives on support within and beyond the ASP. From the adopters' perspective, the ASP was largely invisible, with information and support being experienced as separate from the ASP document. The practitioners' perspective was characterised by ambivalence emerging from competing narratives within the adoption discourse. The principle of support for adoption was recognised, but ways to overcome the difficulties in achieving this were found to be undeveloped.

Chapter 7 discusses the research findings and proposes recommendations for policy and practice. The research concludes that the ASP is often overshadowed by the adoption arrangements. The significance of support for

adoptions today should be taken as a given and the first recommendation focuses on proposals for legitimising the space and profile of adoption support within Family Support Policy. The second recommendation concerns redesigning the ASP document and reframing its role, value and place within the adoption system, acknowledging Lowe's (1997) idea that 'adoption is not the end of a process, but an on-going and often complex process of family development' (1997:16).

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the relevant literature that shaped the context and themes for this study (Aveyard, 2007). The decision to focus the research on the Adoption Support Plan (ASP) emerged from my experiences of working in adoption related jobs, as discussed in Chapter 1, but the literature review highlighted that little is known about the role and function of the ASP in the adoption process. The purpose of undertaking a literature review is seen as establishing what is already known about a topic so that a theoretical framework for the current research questions may be developed, thus also informing the methodological approach. Additionally the review also sets the context for locating the research contribution and the findings (O’Leary, 2004).

Kumar (2005) suggests that the process for undertaking the literature review requires a strategy for searching the existing literature. Initially my approach was guided by using broad search terms (Cronin et al, 2008), such as ‘adoption’, ‘support’, ‘adoption support’, ‘plans’ for searching general databases held at the university library, such as the *Online Research @ Cardiff* (OCRA), the *Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts* (ASSIA) and Google Scholar as well as various journals, in particular the *British Journal of Social Work* (BSJW), *Adoption and Fostering* journal (BAAF) and the *Children and Youth Service Review*. Drawing on the technique of ‘snowballing’ references from relevant articles and books helped in developing and refining the literature search (Aveyard, 2007:69).

The study was located in Wales and as the UK literature also referred to sources from Europe and America, this literature too was seen as relevant. The first adoption legislation, in the UK, was in 1926 and to gain an overview of some of the developments of support in adoptive practices I searched for literature from the early 1930s to the present time. To assist the process of organising the ideas emerging from this literature I used the software package, Endnote, together with continual reflective reading and the crafting of many drafts. This chapter sets out some of the key issues selected as affecting the

relationship between support and adoption, identifying the following themes as a context for this study.

Initially this chapter explores the history of the changing nature of adoption within the wider context of social welfare. Adoption legislation and practice had not been updated for over twenty five years; the Adoption and Children Act 2002 was intended to modernise adoption practice to reflect the needs of children requiring adoptive families (PIU, 2000). For children being adopted, this legislation promised to strengthen the entitlement to support for those involved in adoption, namely the adoptee, the adopters and the birth family (Coleman, 2003).

The second section explores the themes from the literature relating to the changing characteristics of the children who are adopted today and includes literature that provides insights into the aspects of adoptive family relationships potentially requiring support. These psychological factors involve concepts such as building and integrating secure attachments, the relationships between the child and their adoptive parents, as well as allowing for the presence of the birth family (Kirk, 1981; Neil, 2011).

The third part draws on literature relating to the theoretical nature of support and the ways in which adoption support fits within mainstream provision. Here ideas are introduced regarding how adoptive families and non-adoptive families interface with wider family policy concerns. The final section locates the study within the system of how adoptions are arranged and the place of the Adoption Support Plan (Adoption Agency Regulations, 2005).

The conclusion of this chapter selects the main arguments that led to the research design and choice of methods, which are developed in Chapter 3.

2.2 Historical overview of adoption

The practice of baby adoptions in Britain beyond the first Adoption Act in 1926 was seen as being sustained by a combination of factors; couples wanting a baby, the power of professionals involved in the adoption institutions, and the belief that illegitimacy was a stigma for both child and birth mother (Ryburn, 1995). During the last forty years there have been significant changes regarding adoption. In the 1960s and 1970s social attitudes towards the perceived

disadvantages of illegitimacy and the role of women shifted (Garrett, 2002). Social and Health services in Britain, during the 1970s, made available welfare benefits, contraception and abortion; changes in housing policy and preventative services contributed to the 'possibility' of babies being cared for by their birth mothers, rather than being adopted (Parker, 1999).

Alongside the changing moral climate there were developments in the nature and purpose of public welfare services for children and families. The place of the family in society and how the family should function is seen to have become more political, generating media interest and public debates; adoption has been caught up in these developments (Allen, 2003). Allen (2003) notes that the review leading to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 can be seen as such an example. It was led by the Prime Minister's office, even though the Adoption Law Review had recently been undertaken by the Department of Health and published in 1992 (Allen, 2003:2).

2.2.1 Developments in adoption policy, practice and planning

The literature highlights that adoption has been influenced by the tensions within policy for achieving improved outcomes for children's wellbeing and future stability (Stein, 2009). On the one hand, the intention of social welfare legislation, policies and practices is to promote children and families remaining together. These approaches both seek to sustain family functioning and aim to prevent the need for children to be removed from their birth families (Lewis, 2004). However, on the other hand, steering the balance between prevention and protection is complex and is influenced by wider factors such as child deaths, the media, ideology, economics as well as government policies and legislation (Rushton, 2003). Tunstill (1995) sees the 'pulls' in policy and legislation as existing in the relationship between the state, the family and the child and also in terms of how family support is weighted, preventative or protective. She describes these trends as having a 'cyclical' feature that also reflects the particular economic, political or social circumstances at the time (Tunstill, 1995:652).

Where preventative services were seen as being insufficiently resourced, delays in implementing protective measures could lead to children's extended exposure to adverse environments. When they did become looked after they were older; this in part, added to their subsequent difficulties in their new

living environments (Biehal et al, 2010). Furthermore, cautionary and protective practices were seen to result in more children being placed in care with no clear plans for their future being made (Bryer, 1988). Beyond the difficulties of disentangling cause and effect between preventative and protective welfare approaches, there is a history of UK Governments being concerned about the persistence of the difficulties of securing placement stability for children's wellbeing (Sinclair, 1987). These coalesce around the length of time taken to make and implement permanent plans for children in public care (PIU, 2000; DfE, 2012).

One of the earlier UK studies that raised the issue of children waiting was undertaken by Rowe and Lambert (1973), involving 2,812 children who had been in care for over six months. They were all under eleven years of age and were from across thirty-three voluntary and statutory agencies in Britain. Whilst some of the children did return home during the first six months, the study found that three quarters of them had been in care for at least two years with half of this number having been in care for four years. Several factors were identified at this time as acting as barriers to considering adoptive placements for these children:

- where children had less parental contact this created problems in obtaining the parent's consent for the child to be adopted;
- sibling groups;
- children from a non-white ethnic background;
- those waiting longer were seen as having a lower IQ

Rowe and Lambert note that among the children involved there were more boys, although they do not suggest why this should be the case. Their findings shocked many and the authors note:

...the findings are depressing...because so many of the old problems are still with us. ...In recent years all the social services have suffered from a curious blend of rapid change and the dragging weight of tradition (Rowe and Lambert, 1973:99).

The Rowe and Lambert report came at a time when wider reforms were taking place; the Seebohm reforms for personal social services were taking place in England and Wales together with local government reorganisation. Separate services for children and adults were becoming rolled into the generic social service departments. Additionally there was the tragedy of the non- accidental

death of a child, Maria Colwell (Dickens, 2011). The Children Act, 1975 and the Adoption Act, 1976, were seen as intending to develop an adoption service to prioritise adoption as the preferred permanency option for children in care, but these were not implemented until later, in 1988 (Thomas, 2013). Children in public care, it was said, needed clear plans for permanent, settled, secure and stable living arrangements (Fitzgerald et al, 1982). The permanency concept, which came originally from America, gained currency in Britain as a pathway for planning for children in care (Thoburn et al, 1986). Ryburn (1995) suggested that the political drive behind the permanency movement was attributable to ideas of professional incompetence and birth parents' lack of responsibility, bringing adoption practice into the frame of general children's services, with a loss of entitlement for birth parents (Ryburn, 1995).

A change of policy ideology was seen in the Children Act 1989, which sought to emphasise the principle of partnerships with parents and families, introduce ideas of shared care and place less of a focus on time limits (Ryburn, 1995). Ryburn (1995) suggests that the Children Act 1989 indicated that the links between poor parenting and concerns for children had shifted, and were now attributed to the families' impoverished circumstances, rather than a failure of commitment. Following the implementation of the 1989 Act in 1991 there was a fall in the number of children adopted (Parker, 1999). The recognition that the presence of a permanency plan in itself may not lead to the desired stability was suggested, with Thoburn et al (1986) sounding notes of caution that having a 'permanence' plan may still mean the child experiences disruption or impermanence - families can separate and placements be disrupted. The permanency concept was now being seen to be "'good' or 'bad'" depending on the degree of consensus or compulsion in how plans were formulated and progressed (Thoburn et al, 1986:10).

In the 1990s the criticism of how the practice of social work seemed to delay the implementation of permanency planning resurfaced through the Performance Innovation Unit Report (2000), drawing together the concerns of the outgoing Conservative government and the incoming New Labour government regarding adoption practices. Whilst rehabilitation to the child's birth family was often noted as the plan to secure the future stability for the child, the PIU Report stated, that where this became unfeasible, there was no contingency planning in evidence (PIU, 2000:25). The PIU report (2000) also

highlighted wider factors that caused delays in securing permanence for a child, such as court processes, the local authority systems for finding adopters and delays in the completion of reports. Renewed efforts were made to bring the adoption service into the mainstream children's services, again with the intention of strengthening strategic planning to reduce delays, and decreasing repeated failed attempts at rehabilitation (DOH, 2000a). Delay continued to be attributed to children developing additional behavioural difficulties (Biehal et al, 2010). The Adoption and Children Act, 2002, implemented in 2005, aligned the adoption and children legislation and signalled further efforts to address the persistent concerns about planning and delay. Adoption was perhaps now viewed as the option of first choice, in the hierarchy of the substitute family placement choices, for those children not able to safely live within their birth families (Ryburn, 1995).

Garrett (2002) hits a critical note, suggesting that, in the 1990s, New Labour's approach to adoption reform fell into their wider 'paternal' ethos regarding welfare services, which he saw as part of an:

'arid managerialism and the 'target setting' orientation seeking to 'modernise' the public sector and combat the 'forces of conservatism' as opposed to 'the new approach of being attentive and alert to the inevitable complexity of *individual* children in need of permanent substitute care' (Garrett, 2002:189, italics in original).

He also suggests that New Labour viewed adoption as an 'one- off event', due to their use of language such as, adoption provides a child with 'a fresh start', in contrast to underscoring the life-long aspects of adoption (Garrett, 2002:190; DOH, 2000a:3).

The Department for Education and Skills and then the Department for Education, commissioned seven research studies in order to evaluate the implementation of the objectives of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Thomas, 2013). These studies focused on permanence planning, matching, support for adoptive placements and the costs of adoption (www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org). The overview report on the messages from the Adoption Research Initiative suggested 'that significant progress has been made towards the development of an adoption system that is suited to the needs of looked after children' (2013:88) although Thomas also recognises there were some gaps in the research programme, for example, in relation to

‘the organisation of adoption support services’ and that there were no studies involving adopted young people (Thomas, 2013:11).

In the wider context beyond adoption, during the 2000s initiatives were introduced by the English and Welsh governments to strengthen placement stability and improve outcomes for looked after children (Thomas, 2013). However, in the early 2010s, the UK Coalition (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) government revisited the issues of delay and planning. It published an Action Plan for Adoption (www.gov.uk/government/policies) and also introduced the Family Justice Review, a review of the child protection system by Eileen Munro and a review of the social work profession (Thomas, 2013). The Coalition government stated on its website that their ‘adoption reforms are simplifying the adoption system to encourage more people to adopt and make sure children are placed swiftly with a family where this is in their best interests’ (www.gov.uk).

In Wales, during 2013-2014, approximately 6% of the children in local authority care were adopted [345 adoptions from a looked after population of 5,756] (www.gov.wales). Whilst the numbers are broadly similar to those in England, the Welsh Government has sought to establish a distinctive national policy context for adoption in Wales in three specific areas: to reduce delays in placement; increase choice of placement; and achieve improvements in assessment and training of adopters, for matching and in the overall quality of the adoption service (WAG, 2015).

The Welsh Government published a report in 2011 signalling their intention to restructure adoption services in Wales as part of a wider strategy to reconfigure more sustainable arrangements for social services across Wales (WAG, 2011). These intentions became law through the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act, 2014 (part 9), with Directions for the adoption service issued in March 2015 (WAG, 2015). The Directions address the aims and structure for an all Wales adoption service whilst preserving coherence with the existing Adoption and Children Act (2002). The governance and strategic functions of the adoption service are to be located centrally. The operational aspects of the national adoption service are to be arranged through local authorities gathered into five regional collaborations. The more detailed

arrangements for adoption support are still to be settled in the new all Wales adoption service.

The benefits of adoption were explored through a meta-analysis of 270 studies by van Ijzendoorn and Juffer (2006). Their study involved over 230,000 adopted and non-adopted children and highlighted that adoption secures benefits for children's development in the domains of physical growth, basic trust, cognitive development, school achievement and self-esteem. Their analysis includes domestic and international adoptions and they note that children who were adopted early [aged less than 12 months old] were able to catch up with their non-adopted peers. Older adopted children were said to lag behind in some areas. In Britain, Biehal et al's (2010) study involved 347 children (the sample was made up of two groups of children, an earlier 'census sample' and a 'survey' sample of 196 children). This study provided a longitudinal perspective, using mixed methods for data gathering, and an analysis that focused mainly on success in terms of security, stability and positive outcomes for the children. Their study notes that adopted children and those in other permanent placements made little developmental and emotional progress. However, with regard to factors relating to belonging and permanence, adopted children felt more secure. The issue of age and adoption remains problematic. Ijzendoorn and Juffer (2006) suggest that ethically adoption is justified where structural efforts are undertaken to enable the birth parents to 'rear their own' (2006:1239). However, others consider adoption to be a last resort, given the permanent legal severing of birth family connections, often without their consent, which of course does not necessarily sever the emotional connections (Wrobel and Neil, 2009). Recent studies have highlighted that although for many adoptive families their life is positive, some experience extreme difficulties and as discussed above a small number do not last (Selwyn et al, 2014; Wijedesa and Selwyn, 2014).

This overview illustrates important 'pulls' in the history of adoption policy and practice with regard to how best to provide for children who are seen to be in need of alternative permanent families. Dickens (2011) suggests that in social work the 'core debates and dilemmas come round again and again' (2011:23), echoing the 'cyclical' metaphor from Tunstill (1995) above. The flurry of the activity by the Coalition government to reform adoption in England and the

recent legislation³ in Wales for a national adoption service, perhaps show that adoption is seen to have ‘won’ through as an enduring objective for securing permanency for children in public care, as well as providing the expected economic benefits for society (Bonin et al, 2013). Today, adoption in Britain mainly involves non-infant children from public care, whose adverse early experiences are seen as being linked to subsequent adjustment difficulties in their permanent families (Biehal et al, 2010). Identifying these characteristics is the focus of the next section.

2.3 Characteristics of the children adopted

There is general consensus within the wealth of adoption research literature regarding the difficulties children who are adopted from public care bring with them (Parker, 1999; Selwyn et al, 2006, 2014; Rushton, 2003; Brodzinsky et al, 1987). The problems are attributed to their early, adverse birth family care, coupled with the impact of waiting for a permanent family, perhaps involving numerous changes of placements. These delays in the planning and implementation of a permanency plan⁴ are seen to be key factors for how the child and adoptive family settle (Golding, 2008; Schofield and Beek, 2006).

Selwyn et al (2006) explored the case files of 133 children adopted in the early 1990s, noting that their birth parents had a range of difficulties including episodes of domestic violence, substance misuse and significant mental health problems. The children’s early lives were described in the records as being neglectful and impoverished, with more boys tending to be rejected by their birth parents. The children in this study had also experienced an absence of stability, being cared for by different people or a range of family members. Delay was seen to lead to children being more upset and confused. Children who were older when they first became looked after struggled to settle into new families. Following several failed episodes of returning to their birth parents, the children were said to understandably feel rejected, emotionally confused and some behaved violently and angrily (Selwyn et al, 2006).

³ The Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act, 2014, section 170.

⁴ The Adoption and Children Act 2002 affirmed timescales within which children in public care should have a permanent plan for their future.

Studies focusing on how adoptions have worked out have drawn on the adopters' perspectives of the difficulties. The stresses in adoption have been attributed by adopters to the child's behaviour, which has affected the quality of their relationship, particularly due to the complications of managing a child's challenging behaviour (Rushton, 2003; Sturgess and Selwyn, 2007). However, Parker notes that there is 'considerable difficulty in unravelling the effect of so many influences' (Parker, 1999:15). The follow-up interviews, six to eleven years later, in Selwyn et al's (2006) study, revealed that adopters experienced higher levels of difficulty compared with the first year of the adoption. The adopters described the problems in terms of the 'child's difficulties affecting the relationship' (Selwyn et al, 2006:253). Putting to one side for the moment factors associated with the parenting style and family life, children's behaviours that were identified as presenting difficulties within the adoptive family may be summarised as:

- emotional and behavioural issues such as non-compliance, aggression, over activity, lying, stealing, anxiety, fearfulness
- relationship issues in terms of problems in showing warmth, expressing feelings, regulating emotions, entering close relationships
- educational obstacles such as learning problems, lack of basic skills, communicating and concentrating problems, obstructive behaviour, poor relationships with peers and staff (Rushton, 2003; Sturgess and Selwyn, 2007).

Selwyn et al's (2014) recent study focuses on adoption disruption but also includes adoptions that are continuing. This study used a mixed methods approach, drawing data from official statistics, adopters and practitioners. The data were gathered in two phases commencing in 2012 and focused on adoptions over an eleven-year period, from 2000 to 2011. All adoption agencies in England were included. The data set, which comprised 37,335 adoptions from details held by the Department for Education, included 210 returned survey questionnaires, 70 interviews with adoptive families, 12 young people, 12 adoption managers and 10 telephone interviews with social workers. Attempts to study case files were seen as difficult due to missing data, particularly around the introduction and early placement periods (2014:25). The focus of their study was 'to explore the experiences of families where relationships were fractured'. Thus it is not surprising that the report includes

a striking catalogue of difficulties experienced, with many of the children's behaviours being said to have been linked to diagnosed physical and emotional disorders (2014:20). Additionally, significant levels of aggression and violence from the children towards their adoptive parents were reported. Coping within these relationships was seen to have become more difficult in adolescence (Selwyn et al, 2014). This study confirms findings from earlier studies that link the developing stress within family relationships with the age of the child when adopted and their length of exposure to early adverse experiences. Such findings do seem to point to the need for a range of support, which will be discussed later. Now it is useful to turn to the literature relating to the psychological aspects of the adoption relationship. Factors relating to delay and early experiences are only part of the complex features involved in grappling with issues of support and adoption.

2.3.1 Psychological perspectives

This section explores psychological themes that highlight various dimensions seen as relevant within adoptive relationships for healing and promoting resilience where fragility remains (Howe, 2009). The themes highlighted include the adopters' preparation for adoption and the psychological significance of information. Expectations of the adoption are seen as a further factor that can potentially impact on many aspects of individual and family life. Recognising a child's emotions in an adult driven system and the ways in which child-parent relationships and family dynamics may be strengthened are also identified. Some research has recognised the possibility of parents suffering from depression following the adoption placement (Senecky et al, 2009).

Preparing and assessing prospective adopters is a key activity in adoption arrangements. Parker's (1999) overview of studies showed that the composition of the adoptive family household and parenting styles were factors that affected progress made by the family (Parker, 1999:15-16). It has been suggested that the inclusion of prospective adoptive fathers and other children in the adoptive home could be over looked but these should be seen as significant for the preparation in terms of assessing adopters' ability and capacity for the adjustment to the placement (Selwyn, 2006).

Rushton and Monck (2009) focus on the preparation experiences of 38 adopters (from the main study of 178) in the UK who planned to adopt three to eight-year-old children with known serious difficulties. Adopters from this study reported that the material presented in the preparation meetings was too global. The study reports that they wanted input that moved beyond describing a child's difficulties to providing skills and strategies for managing the child's aggressive behaviour and attachment problems and handling the child's peer relationship difficulties. Additionally adopters reported that the reality of their child coming to live with them was more of a shock and more difficult than they expected (Rushton and Monck, 2009). In this study the adopters were reflecting with hindsight on their preparation. Recognising that the adopters' views towards the preparation may have been different at the beginning of the process, the study notes that there are limitations to being able to be effectively prepared for placements. The concept of 'readiness for placement', Rushton notes, needs further investigation, taking into account the attachment experiences and styles of adopters (Rushton, 2003:21).

The process of ensuring that adopters understand as fully as possible the implications of the child's early information and the potential impacts of their experiences is seen to require the provision of specialist medical assessments. Exploring the likelihood of anticipated future problems for the child in respect of their mental health and emotional difficulties is regarded as an expert task (Rushton, 2003; Selwyn et al, 2006; NAW, 2012). Woolgar (2013) suggests that research relating to neuroscience and the ecology of abuse provides important information regarding the unexpectedly different responses that children can show. As an example, he notes that in seemingly positive environments, a child can react in surprisingly and confusingly negative ways; these negative behaviours towards apparently good environments are perplexing for adopters and professionals to understand. He discusses the notion of 'differential susceptibility', which may help us to understand that, for some children 'if their environment is not precisely personalised to their needs, they may struggle to benefit from this goodness' (Woolgar, 2013:248). These ideas can be seen to link with several other important aspects of adoption, such as the preparation, the matching and the understanding of the child's information in the specific context of the adoptive family and the adopters' styles of parenting.

Adopters' hopes of how the adoption, and their child, will meet their expectations of family, is another theme that is seen as important in terms of understanding immediate and future adjustments. Kirk (1981) developed a list of adoptive issues, which he termed *role handicaps*, relating to the differences he saw between the biological and non- biological connections within these forms of family. He suggested that how these differences were perceived lay along a continuum with a *rejection of the difference* at one end and an *acceptance of the difference* at the other. His theory sought to explain the significance of adoptive parents' underlying feelings of satisfaction regarding their adoption, which in turn were seen to influence their capacity to create *dynamic stability* within the *relative permanence* of the adoption relationship. The adopters' fulfilment, and their acceptance of differences, were seen as linked to communication styles that were identified as empathic, open and promoting trust within the parent-child relationship:

...stability requires rules of conduct. Families not regulated by tradition must depend for internal order on the interpersonal skills of their members. In adoption, such empathy and communication necessarily refers to the child's original parents and other aspects of the child's background (Kirk, 1981:49).

Though this work is dated, these ideas are regarded as being influential and relevant for professionals and adopters today in terms of delineating sensitive support services (Brodzinsky, 2005). Kirk cautions that where an adopter may feel an entitlement to the adopted child they may not be open to accommodating the implications of the 'acknowledgement of difference' mind set when they have been waiting for a child for a while; if the child is very young there may appear to be no need to acknowledge these differences at that time (Kirk, 1981:53). These issues are seen as remaining relevant for support in new adoptions today for promoting adopters' capacity for reflection of their feelings of difference within the adoptive relationship over time (Brodzinsky, 2005).

Loss is seen as affecting many involved in adoption and although the focus of this study and this section in particular is on factors affecting the child and the adopters, this should not be understood as a denial of the significance of loss for birth families (Charlton et al, 1998). Boswell and Cudmore (2014) identified the potential of a 'blind spot' where adults were so busy with the arrangements and emotions of the adoption that acknowledgement of the child's feelings of loss for their birth family or foster carers could become

overlooked (2014:15). For children, adoption is seen as being inherently stressful with potentially various ambivalent feelings emerging over time. Neil (2012) notes several significant themes related to loss that affect children. Although they have gained a family they have also lost a family and perhaps feel different to their peers. There is also the impact of not having a biological link with their adoptive family and feelings of sadness, anxiety, rejection and anger may emerge as the full understanding of adoption develops through adolescence. Children also need to reconcile difficult information from their background history where their early memories may be confused, remembered incorrectly or even suppressed. This can add difficulty to the development of their identity, and perhaps has additional complexity in transracial placements (2012:410).

Foli and Gibson (2011) undertook a survey with 45 adoption professionals to explore their responses to post-adoption depression in adoptive families. The participants were located following contact with three large web-based adoption organisations in the USA. 25 surveys were completed and 15 were partially completed with many participants identifying themselves as adoptive parents. Most of the participants who responded were social workers, white and female, with an average age of 48 years, between 3 and 20 years' experience, and described themselves as 'very or somewhat religious' (2011:464). The researchers found that the screening for post-adoption depression should be done by 'adoption smart' health professionals who are able to open up conversations during the child's clinic attendance. There was strong agreement that an effective intervention was counselling by mental health or adoption professionals with value being seen in a range of pre-and/or post adoption responses. Interventions having low value were those involving medication and the passage of time (Foli and Gibson, 2011:465). Where mother and child are more in the foreground, for example in the context of difficult adjustments to parenting, adoptive fathers can easily be over looked (Senecky et al, 2009).

Howe (1992) suggests that adoptive families are presented with a range of psychological issues relating to adoption involving issues of trust, the rejection of difference, insistence of difference, identity and separation, which have significant impact over time within and upon adoptive family life. Brodzinsky (1987) identifies that these factors of trust etc. affect the interaction between

the child's developmental adjustment to adoption and the family's experiences during the different stages of the child's life. He considers that such factors give the adopters and the child, as a family '... a unique set of psychosocial tasks that interact with and complicate the more universal developmental tasks of family life' (1987:30), which needs to be taken into consideration for support. There are many therapeutic approaches that are regarded as significant for the parent-child relationship. Some approaches focus on the child using story-stems, life story work as a way to shift how the child can build trust in their adopters. Other approaches focus on the adopters' attachments and ways of relating. The intention is to promote ways for the adopters to see the child's internal world more clearly as a pathway for building the desired positive relationships for a secure base for the child. Such interventions are underpinned by attachment theory and research; they also often highlight the significance of the relationship between the provider of the service and the adopter (Lawler et al, 2011:478).

The two sections above have set out some of the issues within adoption that are identified as potentially challenging for adoptive families. The rhetoric relating to support seems to frequently attribute a relationship between support and difficulties experienced. However, the relationship between support and success in adoption has not been established (Quinton and Selwyn, 2006). The next section considers the ubiquitous notion of support, moving on to explore support within the context of adoption.

2.4 Exploring the concept of support

The terminology of support, services and social support is used loosely and in an overarching general sense within welfare provision, tends to be associated with positive implications (Quinton, 2003; Hupcey, 1998). Theoretically support is seen as a multifaceted and 'fuzzy' concept (Hupcey, 1998:1231). The aspects of support have been gathered together and depicted in Table 1 below, to serve as a typology for exploring the literature of support and the wider context relating to support for adoption. Disentangling the aspects of support in this way is of course artificial, as much of the literature relating to support and adoption reflects the inter-related nature of the simple but

complex concept of support (O'Neill, 2003). The aim here is to explore some of the main themes identified in the literature relating to support and adoption.

Support types

The term support can be represented through different types or forms, such as informal, semi-formal or formal (Quinton, 2003), general or clinical (Wind, 2007) and also as social networks (Hupcey, 1998; Penrod and Hupcey, 2005) as illustrated in Table 1 below. However it is less clear what, if any, relationship exists between support and services, with there being implications that there is a symbiotic link (Hupcey, 1998).

SUPPORT TYPES	NATURE OF SUPPORT
Informal	Values
Social networks	Exchange
Semi-formal	Motivation
Formal	
COMPETENCIES IN SUPPORT	SUPPORT CONTEXT
Knowledge	Thresholds
Skills	Accessibility
Relationships	Costs

Table 1 Typology illustrating aspects of the concept of support

Pennington (2012) in her on-line survey of adopters from Adoption UK⁵, lists the services most often used by adopters as counselling, advice and information, educational support services, therapeutic services, groups, training, financial provision and CAMHS⁶. These services were experienced by some as positive, whereas similar provisions were described by other adopters in the studies by Ottaway et al (2014) and Selwyn et al (2014) as inaccessible, inadequate or absent or they were seen as implicating adopters as the problem.

⁵ Adoption UK is a membership charity registered as an Adoption Support Agency www.adoptionuk.org.

⁶ CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

In an American study, Houston and Kramer (2008) followed up 34 adoptive families from an earlier study, over a three year period. The focus of their study was to explore the formal and informal 'support resources' used by the families to promote their stability and well-being (2008: 145). The study used telephone interviews and questionnaires to establish measures of satisfaction, and child and family well-being. The findings indicated that adopters used a range of forms and types of support, such as emotional, informational and tangible support flexibly. This helped them to cope although it did not necessarily equate with any perceived reduction in the problems. Furthermore, the findings were thought to be associated with adopters feeling that they understood more and could thus handle issues for the time being (2008:148).

Nature of support

The values and motivations (incentives and reasons) underpinning the ways in which support is exchanged are seen to be inter-related and significant, with the receiver said to value qualities, such as being listened to, reassured and not judged (O'Neill, 2003). Hupcey (1998) suggests that the intentions of the provider of the support are important in the dynamics of the support exchange. These intentions or motivations are seen to be influenced by the amount of reciprocity in the support relationship, which is described as 'a complex, dynamic and fluid concept that involves interactions between recipients and providers' (Hupcey, 1998:1237). Power in the nature of the support relationship may be unequal, engendering feelings of obligation and guilt, which can muddy the waters of the support exchange (Shumaker and Brownell, 1984).

The nature of support may be illustrated by some adopters' comments in the study by Selwyn et al (2014). This study (referred to above) focused upon adopters who were experiencing significant difficulties and some of the adoptions in the study had been disrupted. Some of the adopters described feelings of not being listened to and guilt due to their needing support. Others noted that they felt blamed, dismissed and patronised when seeking help. The ethos of the support relationship exchange is, arguably, perhaps most tested in challenging circumstances.

Competencies of support

The knowledge, skills and relational capabilities within the provision of support are seen to be as important as the structures facilitating or inhibiting access to the support (O'Neill, 2003). The idea of 'adoption smart' professionals (Foli and Gibson, 2011) being able to engage adopters and discuss issues of support was referred to above, suggesting that the support should consist of the combination of these competencies.

Some adopters in Selwyn et al's study (2014) believed their difficulties were beyond the competencies of the professionals and the provision available:

'They [Adopters] read everything they could find and often thought they were more knowledgeable than the professionals who visited....some adopters described social workers as 'not having a clue' about children who had foetal alcohol syndrome' (from report Selwyn et al, 2014:183).

Context of support

Monck and Rushton (2009) explored adopters' experiences of accessing support. This was part of their larger study, referred to above, involving 178 adopters participating in a parenting support programme. Adopters had accessed and used services, but for just under half, the services did not help them and some waited over a year before receiving a response from a specialist service. This highlights the need for services to be available and relevant.

Ryan et al (2009) focused on three regions in one state in America and what adoption professionals see as the barriers to adopters seeking help. They drew their data from a sample of 27 adoption practitioners using a concept mapping method. These findings were compared with adopters' views detailed in the literature, which highlighted that adopters were less likely to value support where they believed the professional did not understand adoption or the circumstances of their individual family, or if they felt not listened to or excluded from the 'team' (Ryan et al, 2009:586). The study found that there were many similarities in the adopters' and practitioners' perspectives regarding barriers to seeking help. Additional barriers identified by adoption practitioners related to problems of sharing information across boundaries, and the fact that adopters may feel blamed or fear being seen as incompetent if

they asked for help. The practitioners considered that adopters would also be resistant to seeking help if their child was unwilling to accept support. Additionally, where adopters did not recognise problems and continued to believe that adoptive and biological parenting were similar, they were seen as not being amenable to support. These findings resonate with O'Neill's (2003) comments regarding the complexities of help seeking motivations.

Establishing the ways in which support services may be effective are also seen to be complex and contested in terms of how outcomes may become recognised and the length of time for which the improvements are sustained (O'Neill, 2003). Adoptions perhaps require support at different times and at different levels, given the range of different adjustments for all those involved throughout their lives (Brodzinsky, 2013). The next section explores the place of adoption support within the wider context of mainstream support provision.

2.4.1 Locating adoption support within Family Support Policy

This section turns to the ways in which support for adoption is able (or not) to find a place within the mainstream family support services, where government policy wishes to locate it. The literature here describes the tensions surrounding support for adoption, which are seen as having their roots in the contradictions created through the changes in adoption; once adoption was a means for securing a family (closely resembling a biological family) and now adoption is a way of securing a permanent family for some children who are in local authority care (Lowe, 1997).

The contemporary adoptive family is described as a distinct way of 'doing' family, occurring through the 'enforced transitions' following the involvement of the local authority (Luckock and Hart, 2005:133). These authors argue that it is this distinctiveness that leads to adoptive families requiring support. Additionally, the increased profile of adoption as the government's prioritised option for some looked after children is regarded as emphasising that adoption is now part of the care system (Lewis, 2004). The relevance of, and the need for, support are thus seen to arise from the ambivalent expectations from adoption today; it is both acting as an intervention for some children from local authority care, with adopters seen as providing 'restorative parenting', as well as forming a family similar to others, independent and autonomous, albeit with parental responsibility gained through the court (Luckock, 2008:10).

Luckock (2008) also outlines wider ambivalences within the Family Support Policy, which have perhaps affected adoption support. He argues that the policy holds twin objectives for the family: one is to provide security and belonging, and the other is to promote the child's well-being in order to become an independent citizen. He suggests that the general concerns of the New Labour government, to improve parenting, have raised demands for service effectiveness and professional skills. Whilst these increased demands were to be a vehicle to modernise services, there were worries relating to the competence of the existing workforce (Luckock, 2008).

All qualities of parenting (failing or responsible) are, according to Luckock (2008), drawing upon services that have become more targeted and focused in order to address the concerns about some children's behaviour, for example the concerns about anti-social behaviour. The fulcrum balancing the triggers for intrusive and supportive interventions thus shifts, although Henricson (2012) sees this balance of protection and promoting care as being one of the roles of Family Policy. In the context of these particular tensions and ambivalences, Luckock and Hart (2005) argue that the provision of adoption support should be resolved locally, in partnership with all agencies and adopters. The new role of the Adoption Support Services Advisers (ASSA), introduced through the 2002 Act, is seen to be relevant here, although the literature seems limited with regard to how this role has developed. The intention was that an ASSA would be a named person, who would promote support, advice, information and co-ordination within the locality and across areas, including advocacy with other agencies such as education and health services to facilitate the provision of a range of support services. Secondly, ASSAs were expected to respond to requests for support and liaise with the Head of Service to inform the strategic planning for adoption support (ASS Regulation and Guidance, 2006:13).

Adoption support thus appears to have no specific place within the mainstream family support agenda. Indeed the idea of Family Support Policy is seen 'as having the potential to encompass most of public policy or very little of it' and is seen to be a concept with possibilities for manipulation across different political spectrums (Henricson, 2012:3). Henricson sees many of New Labour's Family Policies continuing in the Coalition government administration, although given the present financial constraints and cuts to services, she

argues that the current context for Family Policy seems to be in a period of ‘fallow thinking’ (Henricson, 2012:75). The limited steer on the policy direction for family support could be problematic with regard to the English and Welsh governments’ intentions to increase the number of adoptions for children in public care, given what is perceived as a Family Support Policy vacuum (Henricson, 2012).

2.4.2 Forming adoptive families - the adjustments

The literature about adoption support is concerned with factors relating to take up, targeting, the importance and relevance of support, and types of support (Brodzinsky, 2013; Houston and Kramer, 2008; Dhami et al, 2007; Pennington, 2012) but there appears to be little literature regarding the introduction of support around the time when the new adoptive family come together. Quinton (2012) notes the importance of support for the adoption ‘process’, where ‘adopters come to meet the children’s needs and their own [needs,] seems a necessary part of the re-conceptualisation’ of support for the formation of the new family following matching (2012:101).

The research literature frequently draws on the experiences of existing adoptive relationships gleaned only in hindsight. The value of this knowledge should nevertheless not be understated and forms a relevant basis for the strategic planning of support, as well as for mediating or negotiating support for new adopters by drawing upon the experiences of others. However, to address the gap in exploring how support may be introduced into the process of forming a new family, the discussion now turns to exploring theoretical ideas about the family. The adoptive family becomes a reality following the matching⁷ and introductions. Ensuring there is privacy and space to form the new adoptive relationships may act to inhibit considerations of support during this period. Quinton (2012) suggests that maintaining support to develop family skills and capacities should be seen as promoting an ‘ecology of parenting’ (2012:101). This idea is drawn from his work, *Supporting Parents: Messages from Research* (Quinton, 2003). The notion of an ‘ecology of parenting’ suggests that support looks beyond what services do as interventions

⁷ Matching is the process whereby the adoption agency seeks to ‘match’ the child’s needs with the adopters’ parenting capacities (Quinton, 2012).

and become seen as a 'range of supports to help cope' with the individual, family and community levels of parenting (Quinton, 2003:14).

The concept of 'family' has become more fluid with extending boundaries of what may be described as a family and the ways in which families interact having changed (Williams, 2004). The nature of 'the family' has been evolving and rather than considering the structure of the family as the defining property, the idea of 'family practices' is seen to have value for understanding how families function (Morgan, 1996:188). These activities or practices that families engage in are seen as the ways in which families 'display' the quality of their relationships with others:

Display is the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships (Finch, 2007:67).

The ways in which family practices form individual and family identities, which are then able to be displayed privately, (within the family) and publicly, (outside of the family), present useful concepts for thinking about how support may be constructed and introduced for new adoptive families. Morgan suggests that relationships are not only shaped by past or present considerations, but are also affected by the expectations and 'images of the future' (1996:92). In adoption, two past and present threads are drawn together, that of (i) the child and (ii) the adopters. Adopters require particular skills to understand their child and develop an 'emotionally responsive child-parent relationship' (Lawler, et al, 2011:473). Providing information requires more than making it available. The adopters may need specialist help to make sense, for themselves, of the implications of their child's social and medical history, to prepare them for the future unknowns (Jones, 2008; NAW, 2012).

Closely linked to the notion of developing and displaying family practices is the idea of 'openness in adoption',⁸ referring to an attitude that adopters bring to their adoption (Brodzinsky, 2005:149). Like other families, the ways in which the adoptive family communicate with each other and those in their kinship

⁸ 'Openness refers to the continuum of contact and communication among members of the adoptive kinship network' (Grotevant et al, 2005:168).

network,⁹ across the lifespan of the adoptive relationship, is regarded as more significant for a child's psychological well-being than the structural aspects of the adoptive family. The adoptive family's developmental process is acknowledged as having periods of harmony, conflict and reciprocity; the value of support is seen as providing an understanding of these processes, potentially enhancing the psychological adjustment for child, adopter and birth parent (Brodzinsky, 2005).

Preparing for the adoption involves exploring the place of the child's birth history and their birth family in the adoptive relationship and the adopters' stance (Rushton and Monck, 2009). The adopters' and adoptive family's task of managing the processes of the child belonging to the adoptive family and learning to differentiate between birth and adoptive family life are matters that take shape as the adoptive family settles into their new family (Neil, 2012; Biehal et al, 2010). Telling and talking about adoption, and thus also communicating about the birth family, is seen to be a continual process, as the child's cognitive and emotional capacity develops, presenting opportunities for different questions and responses at the child's pace (Brodzinsky et al, 1984). However, children are seen to be sensitive to their parents' level of comfort with the topic, which can present issues if this is not recognised (Beckett et al, 2008). Curiosity about adoption is seen as a normative experience for adoptive children of all ages, although the extent of this curiosity may vary. Adopters require updated information about the birth family to be able to discuss and respond to their child's questions (Wrobel and Dillon, 2009).

Building the skills to form and shape the new adoptive family is known to present specific additional challenges for the parenting tasks, especially when the child is older, and during times of transition, for example when adolescence kicks in (Rosanti, 2005; Brodzinsky, 1987). This next section draws on Jones and Hackett's (2011) work to develop a model for introducing and negotiating support as the child and adopters settle into their new adoptive family life.

⁹ Adoptive kinship network refers to members of the child's adoptive family and birth family (Grotevant et al, 2005:168).

2.4.3 Conceptualising a model of adoptive family support

The literature review thus far has considered some of what is known about adoption today and the nature of the challenges, presenting a background for how support may be understood theoretically and in practice. This section draws the ideas of ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996:11) and ‘doing and displaying family’ (Finch, 2007: 65) together by using the ideas in the work of Jones and Hackett (2011) on how support can be structured and introduced during the arrangement of new adoptions. The notion of ‘family practices’ offers an inclusive discourse beyond the structure of a family, drawing in for example ideas of ‘emotional labour’ and the role of routines (Morgan, 2011:113). The language and the concepts of ‘family practices’ offers an accessible bridge to discuss and identify support to nurture the practices of care and family building (Jones and Hackett, 2011). Finch (2007) suggests that how families ‘display’ their ways of ‘doing’ family, both to themselves and to the outside world, provides different ways to understand how families form their sense of belonging and identities, in the context of the changing patterns shaping families today. What constitutes a family may have become more fluid, but the term is seen as being deeply embedded in individual and society expectations (Williams, 2004), presenting various challenges for those affected by adoption (Jones and Hackett, 2011).

Jones and Hackett’s (2011) study involved the analysis of records from a voluntary adoption agency in England and biographical interviews with 22 adoptive parents. The adoptions occurred between 1997 and 2001 with the children’s ages ranging from 7 to 31. The intention of their study was ‘to provide conceptual insights into the lived experiences of adoptive parents’ (2011:45). Jones and Hackett (2011) identified three stages in the forming of family:

- ‘gaining’ their child and thus their family
- the subsequent longer phases of ‘maintaining’ the family
- the task of ‘retaining’ the connections with the child’s birth family as well as forming an adoptive family identity (Jones and Hackett, 2011:45).

The ‘gaining’ of a family catapults the adopters into a phase that moves from the imagined child to the real child (Rosnati, 2005). This phase is significant

for the transition into adoptive parenthood, perhaps presenting familiarity and strangeness together. New adoptions are described as 'risky', involving many inter-related aspects for the 'transition to adoption parenthood' (Rosnati, 2005:189).

'Maintaining' family relationships moves the new family into forming their routines and patterns. Linking to Finch's (2007) ideas of the family developing their individual ways in which they demonstrate their sense of family, provides a framework for adoptive families to consciously reflect upon the ways in which their family is functioning, thus facilitating consideration of whether there is a need or a place for support (Walker, 2008).

The stage of 'retaining' the child's birth history and promoting the child's developing sense of their personal identity is perhaps more complex. Brodzinsky's (2005) notion of 'openness in adoption' involves the 'willingness of individuals to consider the meaning of adoption in their lives... and to explore adopted related issues in the context of family life' (2005:149). In the context of considering how support may be introduced into the new adoptive family life, promoting the child's belonging in their adoptive family and their understanding of their birth family will probably require sensitive discussions at different times and places between adoptive family members (Quinton, 2012). Once the placement becomes a reality, opportunities for considering if or how support can foster communicative 'openness' to promote confidence in using the life story book and information, as well as for managing the contact arrangements, can be revisited. Concerns regarding contact permeate the arrangements for adoption. Adult interests, fears and confidence can influence the issues for adopters; they can kindle uncertainty about their role as a parent (Selwyn et al, 2006a). Significant to understanding the issues emerging through contact is 'accurate and detailed information about all the possible risk and protective factors' (Neil, 2009:17).

Little is known about the effects of contact on children, although young people in a group discussion about adoption felt that both contact and having information about the reasons for adoption were important to them (www.rights4me.org). Biehal et al (2010) note that children's experiences of contact were, in part, determined by their birth parents' behaviours towards them and the sense the young people made of such behaviours. Additionally,

the attitudes of adopters to contact and their willingness to support it, were also seen to be important, particularly where the adopters were previously foster carers and contact was already established.

Selwyn et al (2006a) explored the views of the users of an indirect contact post box service administered by one local authority adoption service in England. The study included 35 new post box arrangements relating to 47 children with information being exchanged between 85 adults. Of relevance here is that the findings indicate that the adopters would have valued more time to reflect on the implications of the contact, and they would also have liked to receive more guidance. Some adopters have regarded openness in their approach to contact as an investment for later when their child grows into adolescence (Neil, 2009). Preparing for adolescence in the adoptive relationship, and having support, emerges as a crucial theme in Selwyn et al's (2014) study. However, building support into the beginning of the phase of forming the new family does not make the family immune to future challenges but potentially it can prepare them and help promote strategies for building resilience (Ungar et al, 2013).

Laying strong support foundations must include anticipating known potential triggers and identifying possible avenues of help for any member of the family, or indeed for the family together (Grotevant et al, 2005). Palacois and Sanchez-Sandoval (2005) undertook a longitudinal study, between 1987 - 1993, that took place in a region of Spain, and involved 393 families who had adopted 484 children. They note the significance of taking into account children's cognitive capacities and that typically there are two sensitive periods around the ages of 6 and 7 and then around the ages of 12 to 13. The authors argue that this first period also includes the child's realisation that belonging to a family involves biological links and the implications of this for them. The second period generally heralds a period of emotional and physical development as the young person resolves concerns about their identity. Children's development is affected by 'many interrelated biological and environmental factors' and it is not suggested that children's development should only be linked to one factor such as contact (Neil, 2009:12).

Periods of unsettledness can occur during the life time of the adoption (Jones and Hackett, 2011) and it should be noted that some practices within families

may be experienced as oppressive or abusive (Morgan, 2011), and for some adoption may not be right. Here the form of support would have a different focus. The realisation that for some, this family may not be in the child's best interest should be faced honestly and not be denied (Kanuik, 2010).

Through the ideas of gaining, maintaining and retaining adoptive family life, it is suggested that support for new adoptions can be introduced based on these shared concepts (Jones and Hackett, 2011). Drawing the outcomes of such discussions into an Adoption Support Plan creates the opportunity for the notion of support to be normalised, to focus upon the family's future wellbeing, and for the plan to be co-constructed and potentially relevant for all in the adoptive family.

2.5 The system for arranging adoptions

Luckock and Hart (2005) asked a set of questions regarding: 'exactly what is it that adoption support is supposed to be achieving? Who might be expected to have a claim on that support? How in practice should support be provided?' (2005:126). A further question is whether the form of support should be seen 'as educational rather than as a social work process?' (Lowe et al, 1999:436). The suggestion of an emphasis on an educational support approach would reflect the learning that adopters and children need to embrace, thus creating a different approach to that taken by social work. Lowe et al (1999) see the main outcome of adoption as the 'promotion of secure attachments for the children' (1999:59). In this context the first aim of support is to ensure the appropriate level of parenting for the child to develop secure relationships and attachments, with the second focus of support being for the adopters. Adoption support is envisaged as a negotiated activity between the wider environment of mainstream and other services, and the adoptive family, the one shaping the other in various ways (Lowe et al, 1999). The following section draws on literature describing the present environment created for adoption support through the legislation, policy and practice.

2.5.1 The legal framework of support in arranging adoptions

The legal requirements for an adoption service to provide support for the child, adopters and certain others, including birth relatives, are detailed

within the ACA 2002.¹⁰ Two sets of regulations¹¹ provide the parameters of the provisions for support when arranging new adoptions and for after the adoption order.

The arrangements guiding new adoptions can be found in the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (AAR), which are largely similar for England and Wales. During the process of arranging an adoption, the requirement for support is expected to be considered proactively at specified points, such as at the stages of planning for the adoption decision, matching and at the placement; these are described as 'proactive' duties of support (Bingley Miller and Bentovim, 2007:13). The adoption panel is also expected to review the support needs when considering the matching proposal through the Adoption Placement Report (AAR 32). A Placement Plan, which is described in the Welsh regulations as a 'new concept', is drawn up when the match between the child and the prospective adopters is agreed, setting out the details for the introductions and the transition of the placement (AAR, (Wales) 2005:100; Schedule 6 Regulation 36 (2)). Bingley Miller and Bentovim (2007) note:

After the adoption order is made, the adoption support component of the Placement Plan continues in its own right as an Adoption Support Plan under the Adoption Support Service Regulations 2005 (regulation 16¹²) (Bingley Miller and Bentovim, 2007:19).

The Welsh regulations and guidance refer briefly to the Adoption Support Plan and the arrangements for support services are expected to be included in the Adoption Placement Report (AAR 32). The suggestion that the Placement Plan continues as an Adoption Support Plan following the adoption order seems unclear within the Welsh regulations. The assessment for support, during the adoption arrangements and beyond the order, is based on the Assessment Framework (DOH, 2000b), although there is separate guidance for England and Wales (DCSF, 2008; WAG, 2006). Luckock and Hart (2005) criticise the guidance as 'tame', with the arrangements for the adoption placement being presented as if the adopters were carers, who are given 'advice and information and sent off to, or put in direct contact with, appropriate agencies' (Luckock and Hart, 2005:132). The main preoccupations, throughout the arrangements for

¹⁰ Adoption and Children Act 2002 section 3 (2) and (3).

¹¹ Adoption Agency (Wales) Regulations, 2005 and Adoption Support Services (Wales) Regulations, 2005.

¹² This is Regulation 10 in the Adoption Support Services (L.A.) (Wales) Regulations, 2005.

adoption, in the Adoption Agency regulations and guidance are on the decision events, the finding of a family (link), the matching and the placement. Support, whilst frequently mentioned, is not specifically integrated into the new adoption, thus appearing to be peripheral. Ensuring that support is meaningful in adoption requires more than raising the profile and giving it a name (Sturgess and Selwyn, 2007).

2.5.2 The policy and practice of support within the adoption system

The government in Wales commissioned a review of the existing support provision prior to the launch of the National Adoption Service (NAS) in November 2014. This study involved an on-line survey and follow-up telephone interviews with the 10 local authority adoption services, the 3 regional collaborations and 5 voluntary adoption agencies. The aim was to ‘map the current structure and provision of adoption support throughout Wales’ as well as explore views about support in the new NAS framework. The opinions of 91 adopters (147 children), some of whom were pre-adoption order stage and some of whom were at the post-adoption order stage, were sought to ‘explore their current experiences regarding the availability and effectiveness of the adoption support service and ... how their needs could be most appropriately met’ (Ottaway et al, 2014:6). The findings from the study provide an overview of the existing network of support provision, which is noted as being variable across Wales, in terms of:

- the ways in which assessments for support are requested and responded to; adoption is seen as the ‘poor relation’ where resource priorities are safeguarding
- difficulty in achieving co-ordinated multi-agency responses to needs
- delays in responses
- limited reviews of Adoption Support Plans or contact arrangements
- inadequate systems for data collection
- most frequently adoptive families requested counselling, therapeutic parenting and family intervention; more support for letter box contact, in school and support groups

The findings also note that there were both positive and cautious expectations for adoption support provision across Wales from the new NAS framework. Ottaway et al’s recommendations include multi-agency structural reform for

adoption support arrangements and the enhancement of the skills and knowledge for all staff involved in adoption-related support across all agencies. Their research provides a valuable contribution to understanding some of the issues requiring reform but has little focus upon the systems for introducing support for new adoptions (Ottaway et al, 2014).

Thomas (2013), in her overview of the Adoption Research Initiative programme, notes that ring-fenced funding did secure improvements for support, although she noted that it was not possible to comment on the relevance, quality, value or continuation of these supports. However, she considered that ‘significant progress has been made towards the development of an adoption system that is suited to the needs of looked after children’, although there is little detail relating to how introducing support into new adoptions could be strengthened (Thomas, 2013:88).

More critically, a focus upon increasing adoptions is suggested by Kirton (2013) as representing a ‘determined attempt to weaken the links between maltreated children and their birth families’ (2013:98). His perspective is linked to the limited services for all family support, which are seen to have been steadily undermined. Present social work practice is characterised as being dominated by management, and consisting more of information gathering and form filling rather than relational activities (Rogowski, 2010). The tension between the prevention and protection policies, noted at the beginning of this chapter, can be seen to persist (Lewis, 2004).

2.6 Concluding summary

The literature review paints a picture in which support for adoption is recognised as necessary but is found to be complex to deliver. Quinton and Selwyn (2006) highlight the difficulties in establishing a relationship between positive adoptive outcomes and support. Two concluding themes emerge from this chapter, which are seen as inter-related, and were selected as a relevant backdrop for this thesis. The first relates to the intentions of the English and Welsh governments to reform the arrangements for adoption, so that where possible more children may be adopted from local authority care. Luckock (2008) argues that adoption involves matching very vulnerable children with approved and competent adopters, who are seen as successful in terms of their

social and economic status. He suggests that the tensions surrounding support for adoptions today can be located in the expectations underpinning the concept of adoption. Adoption is seen as a form of family, based on the biological model of family, albeit with the legal entitlements of parental responsibility conferred through the adoption order. However, the adoptive relationship is also expected to provide the healing and reparative parenting required to help overcome the child's early adverse experiences (Luckock and Hart, 2005).

A policy of more adoptions for vulnerable children in the context of the present economic constraints on public services raises the second theme that adoption support is competing for scarce family support resources. The challenges of support for adoption agencies, practitioners and the adoptive family perhaps revolves around the limitations of what is known: how individual children cope in their new family, how to interpret the child's presenting behaviour or which parenting approaches can sensitively respond to the child's particular needs (Woolgar, 2013). The recent study that focused on adoption support in Wales highlighted that 'many adopters are managing a range of complex needs on a daily basis' (Ottaway et al, 2014:11). The survey of adopters from the Adoption UK study found that many adopters did not understand the importance or relevance of support until further into their adoption journey (Pennington, 2012: 15).

This thesis explores how some of these larger issues impact upon the ways in which the Adoption Support Plan functions during the arrangements for new adoptions. The next chapter outlines how this study was undertaken.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to set out the research framework for this qualitative study. The research endeavour is described as that of ‘seeking knowledge for a purpose’ (D’Cruz and Jones, 2004:5) and research in social work has ‘ethical and political dimensions’ (2004:31) that influence all aspects of the research process and those involved. Having established that there seemed to be little previous research regarding the ways in which support is introduced to new adoptions, the study assumed that the Adoption Support Plan (ASP) could be seen as a significant artefact in this context. The aim of the research was to investigate this phenomenon further as a contribution to bridging this perceived gap in the literature.

The purpose was thus to explore the ways in which the Adoption Support Plan (ASP) document was used to introduce support during the arrangements for the adoption. During the process of developing the ideas for this study, the following questions guided the research process:

- What is the structure and design of the Adoption Support Plan document?
- Does the ASP structure influence the text?
- What themes emerge from the content of the ASP documents?
- How was the ASP document created within the processes of the adoption?
- What space and function did the Adoption Support Plan occupy within the arrangements for adoption?
- What links were there between the Adoption Support Plan and the notion of support in adoption from the perspectives of adopters and professionals [the users of the ASP]?

The initial section of this chapter sets the context of the study, as ‘the practice of social research does not exist in a bubble’ (Bryman, 2008:4). Providing an explicit account of the research process also enables the reader to evaluate the reliability of the chosen research process in order to replicate a

similar study (Silverman, 2005). In the second section, the different theoretical positions underpinning the research strategy of this project are explained. The chapter then goes on to describe the methods employed for data gathering, the ethical issues inherent in the study, and the significance of assuming a reflexive mind set throughout all stages of the process. The analysis section details the steps undertaken to make sense of the data, forming the basis for the following three findings chapters. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the research process.

The research design is seen as coming into being, so to speak, through the interactions of the ways in which the researcher makes sense of their philosophical perspectives, theoretical ideas and values (Miller and Dingwall, 1997). Furthermore, the methods chosen to undertake the research are also seen as being influenced by the researcher's epistemological and ontological viewpoints (Crotty, 1998). Thus, explaining and accounting are regarded as a means of achieving some credibility in the social research process (Bryman, 2008).

3.2 Clarifying the research design

Social work research is seen as including a broad range of methods, which are neither 'pure nor applied', but seek to contribute to practice and theoretical perspectives; it tends to be characterised by 'concerns of inclusion, justice and change' (Shaw, in Becker et al, 2012:17). This study may also be seen as being motivated by some of these concerns. The interest in pursuing this research emerged from two directions. The first factor influencing this choice of research topic came from my indirect experiences of the ASP. I worked in a voluntary adoption support organisation in Wales at the time of the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. My role within the organisation involved building service contracts with local authority adoption agencies to deliver adoption support services to specific groups of people affected by adoption. Within this context my curiosity grew as to how the Adoption Support Plan document actually worked. The Adoption Support Plan (ASP) was an additional document emerging from the regulations, suggesting, in my mind, that it would identify what support adoptive families required. This document was however never in evidence in any of the requests for

support that we were asked to provide, and neither adopters nor social workers routinely referred to the ASP. On leaving the voluntary adoption support agency I worked in a local authority Children's Services department. This role involved chairing reviews, including reviews of children placed for adoption. In my experience, the ASP was never evident in the reviews, despite my requests to see the ASP. I was unable to explain the reasons why the ASP document appeared so peripheral or indeed absent. Thus exploring how the ASP was used within the arrangements for the adoption formed one of the motivations for this research.

Secondly, I was interested in exploring my experiences of some of the tensions involved in doing social work business through either a managerial or partnership ethos. To my mind the Adoption Support Plan encapsulated this dilemma of control versus collaboration. In social work there are many documents that are used to 'speak' for others, as well as to provide evidence of and to account for worker activity (Pithouse, 1998:156). Thus the ways in which the agency of the ASP determines the social work practice of adoption support, as well as representing the 'reality' of the support, shaped the questions of this research. First though, the terrain of the theoretical aspects of the research process needs to be explicated regarding this study. Some of the challenges in clarifying my own positioning lay within the complex array of the various paradigms, which use different terminologies to describe contested theoretical concepts and the historic influences upon contemporary research practice (Blaikie, 2007). D'Cruz and Jones (2004) argue that selecting one's theoretical positioning in the research process must also include opportunism and knowledge of the political possibilities and constraints; that is, the context within which the research is taking place.

3.2.1 Theoretical ontological and epistemological relationships

The choice of theory is seen as a guide to the range of assumptions that underpin aspects of research (Bryman, 2008). The theoretical relationships within the research process are regarded by Blaikie (2007) as giving 'the logics available for generating new knowledge'; they are seen as inter-related and focus upon five key concepts of the research process:

- 'The research problem to be investigated;

- The research questions to be answered;
- The research strategies used to answer these questions;
- The postures adopted by the researcher to the researched; and
- The research paradigm containing the assumptions about reality and how it can be studied' (2007:5).

Thus, the literature review relating to a research problem, in this case that of adoption support, provides an overview of some of the 'existing' theoretical ideas that guide the formulation of the research questions for the current study (Becker et al, 2012:94). Theories are also evident in terms of the research topic, such as within the professional practices of social work, where different theoretical positions can suggest different explanations of the same events (Taylor and White, 2000), for example, in this study, exploring how support in adoption should be conceptualised in practice. Setting out the choices and theoretical assumptions with regard to one's research also increases the transparency of the research activities, allowing the reader to assess the validity and reliability of the research process (Denscombe, 2002). Additionally, clarifying theoretical assumptions acknowledges the ways in which some of the taken-for-granted ideas have influenced the researcher's assumptions and understandings (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004).

The initial baseline theoretical positions are to do with the researcher's beliefs concerning the nature of being (ontology) and the theoretical ways in which we come to know 'what we know' (epistemology) (Crotty, 1998:8). The two main ontological perspectives concern whether truth, and thus reality, exist independently of human thinking, or whether reality is constructed and is a consequence of our perceptions and the meanings attributed to events, relationships and interactions (Bryman, 2008). The terminology describing these two positions varies. Blaikie (2007) suggests that these positions are 'reduced to mutually exclusive categories: *'idealist* and *realist*' (2007:13), with the *idealist* theory assuming that the external world is linked to what we think. Bryman (2008) uses the terms 'constructionism', linked to Blaikie's *'idealist*' position and 'objectivism', linked to the *'realist*' position (2008:19). The objectivist or naturalist perspective has a long history of influence in science. In this form of science the research undertook neutral observation, gave descriptions, and undertook empirical testing; these strategies led to explanations of generalised truths. However, for constructivists, 'patterns of

interestare a product of our own making' (Moses and Knutsen, 2007:10). Taylor and White (2000) use the terms 'realist' and relativist', where the 'realist' position is that of the objectivist and knowledge is regarded as objective and accepted at face value (2000:22). Irrespective of the terminology, ontological positions are philosophically and practically significant in social science and in social work (Latis et al, 2007).

My own ontological position perhaps corresponds to the ideas of constructionism, which 'asserts that social phenomenon and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors' (Bryman, 2008:19) and to those of 'idealists', defined as:

Whatever is regarded as being real is real only because we think it is real.....Reality is what human beings make or construct; it is the activities of creative subjects that constitute the world of objects (Blaikie, 2007:16).

The important issue here is that this ontological positioning contends that there is more to our beliefs regarding the nature of the world than what exists and what we can observe or see; sense making has a history, and is constructed within a context and at a particular point in time for particular purposes (Berger and Luckman, 1971). The positioning of the constructionist approach can be seen as unsettling to those who prefer realities of certainty or absolutes or see particular viewpoints as unproblematic (Taylor and White, 2000). The history of constructionism has enabled all sorts of new understandings such as critical thinking that shows how some dominant ideas have come to define normative reality (Crotty, 1998). However, constructionist concepts require caution as complacency related to the notion of 'looping effects' can affect the subjective ways in which we think about and understand what is studied and experienced (Hacking, 1999:34).

Turning to the epistemological considerations of my study perhaps paves a way through some of these more abstract ideas. Constructionism is not straight forward, as Hacking (1999) notes; one needs to establish what is being constructed - an object, an idea, the matrix within which the object or idea exist and to what purpose the constructionist is 'committed' (1999:19). Thus in this study I have used the object of the ASP as representing the idea of support within the arrangements of a new adoption, which in turn was seen to be situated within legal, organisational and practice contexts. The wider notion of how adoption operates today (i.e. older children from public care who have

experienced early adverse experiences) forms part of the significant culture within which other ideas, such as parenthood, family practices and support reside. Research of the social world from the constructionist perspective embraces the logic of interpretivism, facilitating an 'understanding', as opposed to an 'explanation' as put forward by positivists in the tradition of the natural sciences (Bryman, 2008:15). My epistemological preference for this study was that of interpretivism. This facilitated gaining and producing insights into the ways in which the document represented and others viewed support, whilst accepting and acknowledging that, as a researcher, I was also engaged in interpreting the interpretation of the other (Bryman, 2008) and restricted by being a part of the social work world that I was studying (Crotty, 1998).

Linked to interpretivism is the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism, which argues that the interactions between individuals and their environment are constantly being interpreted and it is this interchange that is regarded as the focus for the researcher (Bryman, 2008). Crotty (1998) suggests that the ways in which the constructionist researcher reasons are essentially subjective, involving a relationship between the researcher and the object of study. He sees reasoning as involving making sense of the data, having an awareness of the impact of the nature of the embedded meanings as well as exploring the 'significant symbols' of cultural history (1998:86). He further suggests that interpretive reasoning may also be developed through the interplay between the ways in which language is used and understood - 'the way things are, shapes the way we perceive things, and this gets expressed in the way we speak', or conversely taking a 'linguistic turn, the way we speak, is considered to shape what things we see and how we see them' (1998:88). The interpretation of the data in this study emerged through a 'process of induction [which] involves drawing generalizable inferences' out of the research data (Bryman, 2008:11). The inductive stages emerged from the interpretations of the ASP document structure and content, and from the descriptions gathered from the interviews, in which 'patterns, consistencies and meanings' were sought (Gray, 2009:15). The inductive process of the analysis gave some structure to the critical 'understanding' and 'deeper meaning' in the 'original accounts' of the data, in order to create the 'texture[d]' findings of the study (Willig, 2014:137).

3.3 Using the documentary analysis approach

My initial intention for this research was to use the ASP as a case study (Yin, 2009), which was probably influenced by my social work thinking, rather than a research minded approach. In social work institutions, professional involvement with children is organised and administered through 'cases' and case files. Thus initially I viewed the ASP as being part of the child's 'case'. I came to see that the ASP could be seen as a discrete document, something separate from the child's file. Treating the ASP as a textual document, rather than part of the child's case file, suddenly became startlingly obvious. I chose to employ a documentary analysis approach (Prior, 2003) as a means of exploring the ASP, enabling the enquiry to be broadened into areas such as 'language, representation and social organisation' (Silverman, 2011:4). The theoretical positions of constructionism and interpretivism, discussed above, are, in my view, compatible with a documentary analysis approach and for providing a structure for grappling with the intricacies embedded within the research question.

Prior (2004) suggests that the processes of documentary analysis are comparable to archaeology; the structures and content can be scrutinised to make visible the ways in which the document operates. Written documents in social work are generally constructed from the conversations and stories provided by families to professionals as well as from the verbal and written reports exchanged between professionals. Although text and talk are important in the world of social care, much of this type of work is 'invisible' to others (Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988:183).

Prior (2004) also suggests that it is not necessary to 'interrogate the authors' of the document to gain an appreciation of the 'ways in which knowledge is represented' (2004:331). Thus the ASP itself became the 'field' for the research. The practitioners involved in creating the ASP described a picture of the context and their 'rules' for production (2004:331). The final stage of the documentary analysis procedure investigated the ways in which the ASP was interpreted by those using and receiving it, and this stage involved an Adoption Panel chair and some adopters.

3.4 Accessing ‘the field’

The term ‘accessing the field’ is borrowed from ethnographic literature (Delamont, 2004). In keeping with other research projects, this study also required careful consideration with regard to how the field was to be approached and how the data were to be gathered. Here I describe the aspects involved such as the practical matters of seeking and obtaining permission to undertake the research, as well as the more complex areas of pursuing sensitive introductions and the need to build trusting relationships (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). Exploring the themes relating to access is closely associated with ethical issues but the ethical issues are considered separately as a reflection of their importance in this project.

Approaching individuals and organisations with whom I had had a previous working relationship seemed an obvious starting point for negotiating access, but not one guaranteed to succeed. This stage proved to be difficult and time consuming.

3.4.1 Negotiating the access

At the beginning of the study I believed that I would be able to conduct the research in a few social services organisations across the south and west of Wales. My hope was that in this way I might be able to link the practitioners, adopters and ASP documents together according to the earlier ideas of the case study approach. It soon became clear that gaining access to the field, (however this field would become defined), was going to be difficult. Whilst I understood that my request probably seemed unimportant and possibly an unwelcome added burden to busy senior managers in the local authority Children’s Services, I was surprised at how difficult it was to realise; I needed to be persistent to achieve any progress.

Initially I had spoken to and e-mailed several ‘decision makers’ and followed this communication up with a letter (Appendix A). When there was no response, following a period of time, I telephoned to clarify whether the letters had been received; this prompt resulted in the offer of a meeting to discuss my request further. When arranging a meeting date proved difficult due to several rearrangements, I started to consider alternative avenues to access the ASP documents. I approached other adoption agencies directly, as

they function separately from other children's social work services in the local authority due to legislation for adoption work. From my previous work experience, I knew that the area of responsibility for adoption support provision was contentious in that the adoption agency believed that the children's team should respond to such requests and the children's teams considered the matter to be the domain of the adoption service. However, I was also aware that the ASP document in which I was interested in was part of the arrangements for adoption and thus would fall predominantly within the responsibility of the adoption agency.

I had several discussions with two managers from one agency. Whilst they said that they were keen to participate in this research, their legal service advised against allowing me direct access to individual ASP documents. The legal concerns centred on Data Protection issues such as the complexities of gaining permissions in the sensitive context of adoption. The agency's concerns related to the work and time that would be involved in removing identifying data from the ASP documents, which, they felt, it was not feasible for them to undertake. An additional concern for the agency related to the non-identification of the organisation in the presentation of the written report. These tensions added, I believed, to the problems of gaining access to the field. Smith (2001) suggests that 'organisational gatekeepers tend to deny or delay researchers' for a range of reasons (2001:226). This attempt at access to the field took seven months, from the sending of the initial letter to achieving an interview with a practitioner, nine hours of travel and meeting time, and over two hundred miles of travel. I took heart from Rossman and Rallis (1998), who note that 'negotiating entry is a process; it seldom happens quickly and smoothly' (1998:101).

At this point my access strategy became more diversified. I reasoned that increasing the sources for access to the field was essential if the research was to succeed. I made numerous telephone calls to various managers in local authority services and voluntary adoption organisations to seek their agreement for participation. Frequently I was asked to telephone again as further consideration was required. I systematically followed up these calls and access became 'an on-going process rather than a one off event' (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994:171). In late 2012 and early 2013, several expressions of interest to participate in my study emerged from the extensive

range of contacts I had made. I was fortunate to be offered a number of interviews with practitioners from different agencies. I was also offered an opportunity to meet with a group of Adoption Support Services Advisers which was co-ordinated through a voluntary agency. I received agreement from an adoption service manager for access to a number of ASP documents. Finally, I also received an invitation from a voluntary organisation to attend an adopters' meeting to explore their interest in being involved in the research. The decision to approach different organisations and particular individuals directly, rather than senior managers, thus widened my access strategy, and may have contributed to the gradual increase of those willing to participate. It is possible that a combination of my persistent telephone calls and the presence of existing communication channels between adoption practitioners also facilitated the increased access. At this stage the field became defined by those willing to participate. Thus my efforts eventually bore fruit and my determination rewarded. The anonymised details of the participants and the ASP documents may be found in the Schedule of the data in Appendix E.

3.4.2 Building the relationships within the field

Having considered some of the factors important in negotiating access, it is equally crucial to consider the components of building the research relationship. These relationships are both 'professional and personal' (Coffey, 1999:39). The researcher, it is suggested, needs to 'earn' the trust of the participants and establish a level of intimacy to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, experiences, feelings, opinions and so forth (Morse, 1994:27).

There is considerable personal work and effort involved in developing the research relationship (Coffey, 1999). I wanted to strike a balance between my appreciation of their time and involvement and the possibility that their involvement in this study may be of some interest and benefit to them. To develop this reciprocity I sought to promote the potential value of the research and convey trust and respect through the interview discussion. Where I have drawn on previous networks, I hoped that I would be able to minimise any potential or perceived exploitation in this manner.

In summary, access, to me, seemed both a mundane topic and a significant part of the research method, as without successful access there would be no research project. Carefully considering the presence of and problems for the

researcher enhances awareness in the research relationship, thus facilitating the data gathering process (Coffey, 1999), and is closely linked with ethical issues, which is the focus of the next section.

3.4.3 Ethical concerns

An ethical position with regard to research, it is suggested, needs to consider three areas: the purpose and outcomes of the research, the rights of the research participants, and the values and ways in which the research is conducted (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Others suggest that the ethical position is not just established at the beginning of the research, when, for example, the university grants 'ethical approval' for a particular study (Appendix G), but is a continuous 'moral responsibility' permeating all aspects of the research project (Ryen, 2011:421). The application process for ethical approval for this study from the university was valuable because it forced me to think ahead and pin down certain practicalities. The ethical themes present within the social work and academic establishments provided the early framework. Initially there were the practical matters that needed to be put in place, such as the design of an information leaflet (Appendix B) and a consent form (Appendix C) for the participants, as well as ensuring the safe storage of personal details. However, thinking through how these practical aspects of assurance would follow through into the later stages of the research practice required more attention.

In the process of negotiating access to undertake this research (as described above) I was conscious that my ethical responsibilities were stretched when, in the desire to be given permission, I was providing generalised confidentiality assurances, without carefully considering the implications for the later stages of the research, such as ensuring anonymity in the written report of the findings. The offer of access to a number of ASP documents prompted such gratitude in me that I leapt over the 'layers of consent' issues with very little consideration (Ryen, 2011:419). I reasoned that personal documents are made available to others, for example inspectors, and that I was in some senses perhaps no different. Indeed, like others, I was asked to sign a form as an undertaking of confidentiality. I did however consider the difficult issues of ownership of the document and thus where the authority to give consent actually lay, as well as the issue of whether any harm would ensue in using

these ASPs for the research. I took the view that these ethical dilemmas should be acknowledged and accommodated in the light of the interests of the potential wider benefits of the research and those committed to the focus of the study.

To ensure that all of the participants were aware of the purpose of the research and my personal details, I e-mailed the Information Leaflet and Consent Form to each person, as well as taking a hard copy with me to the interview. I also provided a brief verbal summary of the research as I wondered whether anyone had actually read the leaflet. I also took a copy of the Consent Form and requested that this was signed. I requested permission to record the interview and at the beginning of each interview I tested and played back a small recording of our introductory exchange. These steps were intended to give the participant time to consider their understanding and develop the ability to give meaningful consent to participate (Gray, 2009).

Deception in research may take many forms, for example, the ethical management of 'casual' conversations outside of the 'structured' interview. Furthermore, participants may be uncertain regarding what information to reveal and how, in terms of their actions and attitudes. In my role as the researcher, I could potentially seek to over-reassure regarding confidentiality in order to gain private insights. Integrity and trust can be compromised where there were competing ethical concerns, presenting dilemmas of 'prioritising levels of privacy' and competing interests (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994:57). Each interview and each ASP document presented an occasion for ethical conduct, as did the analysis of the collective data shaped from the individual contributors. Ryen (2011) suggests that in qualitative research the 'meaning making process of the knowledge production' can present ethical issues beyond the consent form, which, she suggests, acts as a 'symbol of goodness' (2011:428). All happenings in the field were potentially relevant and I therefore maintained a fieldwork diary (Atkinson et al, 2001). Although the diary was not part of the formal data gathering, it has undoubtedly influenced the writing of the thesis.

3.4.4 Validity and credibility

The research methods literature relating to the quality of the research process tends to focus more on measures of reliability, generalisability and replication,

terminology associated with quantitative research and positivist notions. However, for qualitative research, terminology such as ‘trustworthiness’ (a term introduced by Guba and Lincoln, 1994 in Bryman, 2008:377) as well as ‘plausibility’ and ‘relevance’ can be used (Bryman, 2008:34). Throughout this study the ASP remained the focus, giving the research process a stable foundation. The written account of the research process and the findings can be seen as an account that offers further ways of ‘knowing’ together with some degree of transparency and visibility of the activities involved in undertaking the study (Richardson, 2000:923).

The main challenge to the validity of this study was seen to be my bias, as a researcher and a social worker, in conducting the semi-structured interviews. Further concerns related to whether the interviewees might tailor their responses according to my reactions, whether verbal or non-verbal (Bryman, 2008). I decided to use the adoption arrangements as the structure for the interview schedule, thus aiming to ensure that the participants were asked mainly about their practice and the experiences involved in undertaking their activities. This approach was intended to minimise bias in the responses to the questions (Taylor and White, 2000). My approach in each interview was to openly explain my lack of knowledge and experience in adoption and underscore the exploratory nature of the research (Crotty, 1998).

Seeking data from three perspectives was a further step taken in aiming for plausibility (Bryman, 2008). Bryman (2008) suggests that this process, which may be referred to as ‘cross-checking’, is an adaptation of the idea of triangulation, a terminology used by positivists (2008:379). The sources of data from the recorded and transcribed interviews from the practitioners who produced and used the ASP, the data from the adoptive parents recently involved in the adoption process, and the data from the ASP document itself constituted some form of cross-checking throughout the analysis, adding, it is suggested, value and credibility to the findings. A further challenge to the quality of the study was the validity of the interpretation of the data and the various viewpoints. The steps taken to minimise my bias and misinterpretation included undertaking careful transcription, detailed immersion in all sources of the data through the grounded and iterative process of analysis, and the writing of many drafts for the findings chapters (Silverman, 2005). However, it is important to acknowledge that my interpretation will be affected by my

known and unknown assumptions and biases. I have sought to acknowledge some of these matters in the sections below.

3.5 Data gathering methods

Gathering the data for this study was based upon the actual ASP documents and their contents together with descriptions from social workers, other practitioners and recipients of the ASP, detailing what they did when constructing or using the ASP. The activities of social workers tend to be made visible through their descriptions (talking) of their practice and their recordings (writing), such as when undertaking assessments and interventions (Hall et al, 1997). The sample for gathering the data thus became contingent on who was willing to be interviewed and the offer of access to a number of the Plans (Gaskell, 2000).

An overview of the data on which the study is based is shown in Table 2 below. The twelve ASP documents were the foundation for exploring the ways in which support was introduced into the arrangements for new adoptions. The interviews with adopters and professionals provided perspectives from those involved in producing and using the ASP together with wider contextual data.

DOCUMENTS		Adoption Support Plans	total 12
Children		Male 7	Female 5
Placing Authorities (PA)		11	same PA in Wales
		1	different PA in Wales
Receiving Authorities (RA)		4	to different RA in England
		4	to different RA in Wales
		4	to same RA in Wales
Adopters		3	Single (2 Female)
		9	Couples (Heterosexual)
INTERVIEWS		Adopter couples	total 3
Children 3	Aged 2.5 years; 2.7 years and 8 years		
Pre- order	1		

Post-order	2		
INTERVIEWS		Professionals	total 23
Male	3		
Female	20		
Qualified/Experience		Average 13.6 years	(16 months - 34 years)
Adoption Agency social workers		10	
Adoption Agency managers/ASSA		5	
Consortium manager		1	
Senior practitioner/ASSA		1	
Panel chair		1	
Children social workers		4	
Children's social workers manager		1	

Table 2 Overview of study data sources

The complete data schedule is included in Appendix E, with the following sections focusing on the data gathering methods involved.

3.5.1 Using the Adoption Support Plan document

Two ways in which documents may be used as sources of data are suggested by Prior (2011); the first draws upon the structure and its content and the second gathers data from the ways in which the document is used and how it functions (2011:95). Permission to view ten ASP documents was given by one adoption agency. I was provided with a room of my own, in the office building, where I spent two days tape recording the content of the ASPs, and making careful notes of the document layout. I was also given several blank ASP templates from other agencies, which had insignificant variations, although in one agency I was told that they were in the process of redesigning their ASP template. I transcribed these recordings onto an Excel spread sheet. In this way I became very familiar with the ASP structure and content, building a sense of the relationship between the structure and the narrative within each of the sections; an ASP template is available in Appendix F. Later I was provided with a further two ASP documents from individual adopters and the data from those documents was added to the spread sheet.

Documents within their contexts can create a social reality in their own right (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011). The ways in which the data from the ASP documents makes known its purposes throughout the adoption system are explored in the analysis section below and discussed further in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3.5.2 Interviewing participants

Interviewing is described by Burgess (1984) as a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1984:102 in Mason, 2002) which confers on those who provide the information the status of ‘data sources’ (Mason, 2002:225). Drawing upon a qualitative ethnographic style of interviewing that gathers the data based upon ‘*learning from people*’ (Spradley, 1979:3), I wanted to explore with the participants how the ASP document was constructed and used. I was keen to understand, from the practitioners involved in creating the ASP, the cultural context within which the ASP was produced. From those receiving and perhaps using the ASP, I wanted to investigate the ways in which the ASP was comprehended and the ways in which its implications were interpreted (Miller and Glassner, 2011).

In addition to the individual interviews, I was also offered an opportunity to join an Adoption Support Services Advisers (ASSA) meeting. These meetings are quarterly events convened by an umbrella adoption charity for the all Wales ASSA group. Through the umbrella organisation, the ASSA group members were provided with information about my research in order to obtain their agreement to be part of this study. This was a type of focus group, which gave the participants the opportunity to consider their responses and hear the contributions of their colleagues (Postmus, 2013). The discussion in the focus group sought to explore the role of the ASSA within the ASP production and their perspectives regarding support in adoption, without necessarily seeking a consensus (Wilkinson, 2011).

Any form of interviewing is affected by various factors including the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee and/or potential misunderstandings or non-understandings, both in relation to what is asked and the responses offered (Bryman, 2001). With an awareness of the sort of individual interview atmosphere I wished to promote, and the challenges

inherent within the relationship, I prepared my communication strategies with these issues in mind. Each interview followed a pattern of introductions, briefly revisiting the purpose of the research and ascertaining willingness to participate. The interviewee was shown the interview schedule (Appendix D) as I felt that there was much to be gained by being open and transparent in order to promote trust and responsiveness. I attempted to be relaxed and informal to put the interviewee at ease (Fielding and Thomas, 2008) and build a rapport. During the interview my aim was to show curiosity and empathy to encourage the interviewee to respond to the open-ended nature of the exploratory questions in a detailed way, describing their involvement in producing or receiving the ASP. This semi-structured style of interview was intended to provide a flexible and sensitive approach to the 'discovery' of how the construction of the ASP occurred (Fielding and Thomas, 2008:247). Whilst seeking to foster a friendly and conversational approach in the interviews (Spradley, 1979), I also sought to engage in what Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe as an:

... intense listening, a respect for and curiosity about what people say and a systematic effort to really hear and understand what people tell you (Rubin and Rubin, 1995:17).

The interview guide provided a framework for exploring the interviewee's actual experiences and actions, commencing with the 'specifics' in terms of the ASP, and then navigating to the more 'general' area of their opinions regarding the ASP and support in adoption in general (Mason, 2002:228). Where I needed to ask for clarification to aid my understanding and minimise making assumptions, 'probing' techniques were used, such as an enquiring look or an invitation to expand on their meaning (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). I hoped their involvement in the interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to 'step back from their ordinary routines and reflect upon their' different actions in this context (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002:210).

Following each interview, I undertook a brief self-evaluation by writing up reflection notes regarding how I thought I had managed the pace, style and timing of the questions, the manner of the communication such as listening, interruptions, silences, indirect responses and so forth, and a short commentary relating to my reactions to the interviewees' opinions and perspectives (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

Both individual and focus group types of interviews can be problematic, in that the data rely on the accuracy of the interviewee's response. It is of course possible that some details are overlooked or left out, or that practice or experiences are so embedded that they are taken for granted. The interviewee may be uncertain and for whatever reason not share their uncertainty or just ignore it or, in some way, distort the information (Gaskell, 2000:44). The biases that I brought to the interview, such as social and/or professional baggage, were also limitations inherent in gathering the data (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

3.6 Analysis

The nature of this research was exploratory and its purpose was to highlight the ways in which support was introduced into new adoptions through the Adoption Support Plan (ASP) document. Whilst not intending to re-rehearse the research approach, reinforcing the aim of the study gives the framework for the reasoning and processes of analysis. In this section I describe the approaches I took to engage with the data. The starting point for 'doing the analysis' (Miles and Huberman, 1994:3) involved getting to know the data and setting out how I sought to develop a 'qualitative analytic attitude' (Rapley, 2011:274).

3.6.1 Building familiarity with the data

Familiarity with the data grew over time through a process of 'close reading' (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996:290) and transcribing the interview and ASP document recordings. Some transcriptions of the interview recordings were done for me, to save time but others I transcribed myself, to save money. I also transcribed my recordings of each of the ASP documents onto an Excel spreadsheet, giving me an in-depth opportunity to learn about the ASP structure and content. Reading the transcriptions and listening to the recordings, in combination, increased my familiarity with the intimate detail of each interview forming the basis for this part of the coding process (Prior, 2011:95; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

I drew on the ASP document structure itself for exploring the ways in which the 'rules' of the document structure governed its use (Prior, 2004:377). My

approach to the coding was experimental and initially I created numerous tables for exploring the ways in which the interaction between the ASP structure and the textual content represented support. These tables served as a vehicle for identifying words and phrases from the ASP text within each of the domains in the documents which gave me a way of managing and handling my data for the next step of gathering selected themes from the highlighted text in the tables (Spradley, 1979). I also used tables to compare differences and similarities between ASP text for groups of older and younger children. The findings from this stage of the analysis are discussed in Chapter 4, the first of the empirical findings chapters.

From the interview data transcriptions and recordings I sketched out a chronology of the ASP's life cycle for 'displaying' the process of the ASP production (Miles and Huberman, 1994:11) during the arrangements for adoption; this is set out in Chapter 5, the second empirical chapter. The coding of the data from the interview transcripts also allowed for the development of the categories and themes for the ways in which practitioners described and accounted for their activities in producing the ASP (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The purpose of this stage of the analysis was to develop practitioners' conceptual perspectives of support from their practice and within the context of the ASP's production process (Miller and Glassner, 2011). I found that by drawing on the terminology used in the interviews and the ASP document data, the evident 'preoccupations' between the relationship of support and the ASP production process became clearer (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:42). These findings are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Seeking to make sense of the data from the adopters' interviews, the third component of data material, I used a similar coding process consisting of careful reading and highlighting key phrases. The intention of these interviews had been to explore adopters' perspectives as recipients of the ASP document. The interviews focused on the adopters' experiences of the arrangements of their adoption as they had limited familiarity with the ASP document itself. The themes gathered from the coding segments from these interviews are discussed in Chapter 6, the final empirical chapter.

3.6.2 Seeking an ‘indifference’ to the analysis

Atkinson and Coffey (2011) suggest that it is unhelpful to approach the analysis of documents ‘from an initially critical or evaluative stance’, suggesting that an ‘interpretative standpoint’ is more conducive (2011:81). I found that my early approach to the analysis process was through a critical lens and I noticed that I was initially tending to form surface opinions regarding the coding activity (White, 2001).

White (2001) suggests that beyond a ‘normative judgement’ style of analysis, one can look at the data through an ‘indifference’ lens, a term she borrows from Garfinkel and Sacks (1970), for exploring the data and identifying actions and descriptions that illustrate practices that have become ‘taken-for-granted’ (2001:110). In this phase of the coding and trying to ‘think with the data’ (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:191), I was trying to make sense of how the ASP was to be viewed within the ‘social reality’ of the adoption process (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011:80). Here I tried to step back from the detail and volume of data material. I wanted to disentangle the interrelationships between the three sources of data and the different contexts: social work practice, adoption agency policy, and the system for arranging adoptions. I kept returning to the data to reconsider my interpretations. The combination of stepping back from the data and using an interpretive lens allowed me to see the data within its cultural context, namely that of the social workers in the Children’s Services teams and the Adoption Agency, as well as within the legislative setting of the formal procedural boundaries and the adopters’ perspectives (Eberle and Maeder, 2011). This complex context and the interactions between the ASP’s structural ‘rules’ and its content highlighted that whilst the ASP was titled and described as being about support for new adoptions, the analysis was illustrating that in practice the ASP was being used for a different purpose, that of matching.

3.6.3 The ‘voice’ of the data

The approach to the analysis felt more structured as the study developed. Through the drafts of the early chapters of the empirical findings I battled to discover, and subsequently represent, what the data could be saying about the introduction of support through the ASP document. The activity of writing became an integral part of the ‘dynamic, creative process’ of the analysis

(Richardson, 2004:474). The writing, although maintaining confidentiality, has drawn upon the 'voices' from the sources of data. Representing the analysis in the following chapters aimed to bring the ASP document out from its 'taken-for-granted position' and spotlight how this exploratory study has positioned the ASP in the adoptive arrangement system (Denzin, 2014). I recognise that the selection of 'voice' in the writing is a further part of the analysis influenced by my biases. In the next section the focus is on how I sought to integrate reflexivity throughout the research process.

3.7 Reflexivity in the research

Schon (1983) suggests that the activity of reflection is stimulated when activities take place that surprise or are unexpected, thus leading to an interactive form of reflective thinking that includes 'the outcome of the action, the action itself' and what is learnt from the reflection (1983:56). The idea of reflexivity is seen as fostering an awareness of the potential power of the research and researched relationship as well as the ways in which my own views may impact on my attitudes, prejudices and pre-conceived notions in the research activities (Haney, 2002). There is a balance to be struck between describing the ways in which the self can intrude, obstruct and bias the findings, and not tipping the research focus excessively on to the self (Alexander, 2008).

In the context of this research there was a continual thread of reflexivity throughout all stages of the study. Given that my work background is social work, I needed to hone a critical, self-awareness towards social work practice, systems and recording (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). My practice disposition perhaps became one of compliance, which meant that examining processes that are implicit or taken for granted required serious reflective effort to make myself question the familiar and develop a stance of 'defamiliarisation' (White, 2001:107). Coffey (1999) cautions against an oversimplification of concepts such as 'strangeness' and 'familiarity' in undertaking research, in that the researcher's 'self is the outcome of complex negotiations' (1999:36).

The interviews with the practitioners and adopters felt like familiar territory to me and I needed to consciously adopt an open, curious mind, for I did not know what was hidden or unknown. Whilst I believed that a questioning approach to

the interviews could encourage the social workers to dig deep into their practice knowledge and skills, I was aware that for some there was a sense of resistance and incomprehension with regard to why filling in a form required such in-depth questioning (Gobo, 2011). I also found that I was concerned that the act of asking some of the questions regarding the adoption process to some of the interviewees suggested that I was criticising social work practice, and their wish to not be critical deflected their thinking and responses (Buscatto, 2011). In some of the interviews this resistance and reluctance contributed to feelings of 'role tensions', which I sought to manage, but not resolve, as this was not the aim of the research (Wellin and Fine, 2001:328).

A position of privilege can influence all aspects of the research process (Beverley, 2000). I was aware that I could be seen as being privileged precisely because I came with the label of 'researcher', or with personal attributes, such as my education, gender or my shared background with some of the research participants. Thus, for example, as a social worker, having experience of various job roles, I could pose a threat in the research context. Such shared positions use similarities and familiarity rather than distance and difference to shed light on the problem of familiarity (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2003). Finally, as mentioned earlier, in writing the research findings, I wanted to be reflexive, careful and cautious to guard against any 'privileged position' mindset that may unconsciously minimise the 'voice' of the researched (Coffey, 1999:143).

As noted above, I had previously worked in various roles across the area over a period of years and thus I knew some of the interviewees. Given these previous working relationships I sought to be sensitive towards unexpected political or social problems as a consequence of this different role, hoping to 'create a space' where their story about the ASP could be told and heard (Heyl, 2001:377). In all of the interviews my aim was to promote an 'inclusive' co-operative approach towards exploring the processes involved in producing an ASP, and thereby minimise any potential concerns (Cooper, 2008:19). The reflexive approach underpinning the study also recognised the responsibility for some of the limitations within the study, which are considered in this final section.

3.8 Concluding reflections

The constraints of time and personal resources and the challenges of gaining access to the data sources have resulted in many 'voices' being absent from this exploration, especially those of birth relatives, and others involved in the arrangements for an adoption, such as Medical Advisers. The practicalities of undertaking the interviews as they became available limited the possibility of piloting the interview schedules; most of the interviews with the practitioners occurred before the access to the ASP documents and the interviews with the adopters took place at the same time as the period in which I had access to the documents. Following through the ASP production process was not possible and thus significant issues relating to the ASP's value for all stakeholders were not explored. Recognising that the content of the ASP, depending on how it was gathered, may well not be 'firm evidence' of need was acknowledged in the analysis (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011:79). However, beyond these pragmatic reflections, this study has purposefully focused upon the processes involved in the uses and construction of the Adoption Support Plan during the stages of the arrangements for an adoption.

From the theoretical reflections two themes emerged as a background for the following findings chapters. The 'realities' of the ASP emerged through concepts underpinning the use of language; Taylor and White (2000) suggest that positivists tend to use language in a 'descriptive' manner, whereas for interpretivists language is used to describe but also to achieve some purpose, and is thus seen as acting as a 'performative' (2000:26). The findings explore the ways in which the language from the data was used to represent ideas of support for adoptions. The second reflective theme centres on the managerial and partnership forms of social work practice within the context of the ASP. Howe (1994) suggests that the positivist notions of efficiency and effectiveness have attempted to gain a 'common conceptual base', such as evidence-based practice in social work. These ideas have been challenged by the 'post - modern ideas of pluralism where difference and multiplicity are valued leading to practice where understanding is a constructive performance and truths come to be known through collaborative authorship' (1994:525).

Chapter 4 Exploring the Adoption Support Plan structure and content

4.1 Introduction

In this first analysis chapter, the emphasis is on the findings from the principle subject of the study, the Adoption Support Plan (ASP) document itself. The chapter begins by locating the ASP in the context of the adoption system. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the ASP structure and the design foundations (ASP template, Appendix F). The second section presents the anonymised background circumstances of the ASP sample, summarised in Table 3, to explore the ways in which support was constructed through the content of the ASPs. The analysis investigates how the support was conceptualised through the interaction between the ASP structure and content. Consideration is also given to any emerging differences in the form of support for older and younger groups of children in the ASP sample; see Table 4 below.

4.2 Locating the Adoption Support Plan in the adoption system

The Adoption and Children Act, 2002 (ACA, 2002) is at present the main adoption legislation in England and Wales, guiding the requirement for a local authority to provide an adoption service that includes an adoption support service (ACA, 2002:s3). The arrangements for an adoption are set out in the detailed regulations imposed upon adoption agencies, which Masson describes as ‘excessive’ (Masson, 2010:82). There are two sets of regulations governing the circumstances of support in adoption. The arrangements for the adoption are shaped by the Adoption Agency regulations (AA regulations, 2005), which frequently refer to support, but only briefly touch upon the notion of a Plan:

Where the adoption agency is considering placing a child for adoption with a particular prospective adopter (in this regulation referred to as “the proposed placement”) the agency must ... [ascertain] the child’s assessed needs for adoption support services and the adoption support plan (Adoption Agency (Wales) 2005, regulation 32.1 c (ii)).

The Adoption Support Services (Local Authority) (Wales) regulations (ASS regulations, 2005) address the steps that the local authority is required to take to both introduce support into the arrangements for an adoption, as well as to respond to requests for support following the adoption order. The ASS regulations detail the procedures for undertaking the assessment for support

(regulation 8), producing the notification of the assessment (regulation 9), and producing the Plan (regulation 10). The guidance accompanying the ASS regulations identifies ‘a plan [that] should be set out in a way that everyone affected can understand’. These regulations state that the structure of a Plan should set out the objectives of key services, timescales for achieving the Plan and who is responsible for co-ordinating the document (ASS Regulations and Guidance, 2006:18).

In addition to the ASP document, the AA regulations and the agency procedures require many other documents in order to make the arrangements for an adoption. The range of documents referred to in this study is listed in Figure 1 below.

	Core Assessments for child protection conferences, court reports and Care Plan - these documents produce the background material for the construction of the CARA
	Referral to the Adoption service - this details the Looked After Child Review decision that adoption should be the plan for permanency for the child
CARA ¹³	Child's Assessment Report for Adoption - this is a lengthy document detailing the child's history and needs, which is drawn from the assessment and court documents noted above
	Medical Report in respect of the child - this document is constructed by a medical practitioner and draws upon the medical notes of the child
	Foster carer's form describing the child's behaviour during the time in their care
PAR*	Prospective Adopter's Report - this is a lengthy document that provides the assessment information regarding the adopters' suitability
	Matching Meeting Minutes - these can be incorporated into the ASP or they can be a separate document attached to the ASP
APR*	Adoption Placement Report - this provides similar details to the ASP but is constructed at the time of the placement
	Placement Plan - this document details the specific arrangements for the introduction of the adopters and the child with times for the adopters and the child to spend time together to prepare for the child to move from their foster home to the adopters' home
	Suitability Report for court - this report draws on information from the above documents and is submitted to the court following the adopters application for an adoption order

Figure 1 Suite of documents involved in arrangements for adoption

¹³ The starred documents are templates produced by BAAF when the Adoption and Children Act 2002 was implemented in Wales in 2005. BAAF produced the initial templates, which some agencies have subsequently adapted.

The Adoption Support Plan is thus only one document in a suite of documents, leading to the suggestion in this analysis that this affects the ASP's individuality and visibility throughout the adoption arrangements.

4.3 The design and structure of the Adoption Support Plan

Here the ASP document design and structure are explored and made visible, in preparation for the subsequent analysis of the ways in which the support becomes constructed from the text in the ASP (Prior, 2003). Initially the 'foundational' parts of the ASP structure will be detailed to explore the layout of the ASP sections; an illustration of the complete ASP template is available in Appendix F.

The 'front page' of the ASP sets out the identifying details of the child and the adopters, such as their names, dates of birth and so forth. At the bottom of this page there is a section for the name and office address of the 'Individual Worker Responsible for Co-ordination and Monitoring the Delivery of the Services in the Plan (Link Worker)' (Appendix F).

Following the 'front page', the ASP has three principle sections, which will be explored in turn. The first section concerns the child's Support Plan and it contains columns, which create the organisational structure of this part. The headings of these columns (see Figure 2 below) include terms such as Needs, Services and Outcomes. Arguably these terms provide a device for creating clarity, efficiency and accountability (Stevens, 1999; Joyce, 1999). The notion of services achieving their intended outcomes is based on there being a relationship between the identified needs, services and outcomes (DOH, 1998a). Adoption services, like other public services, are required to be accountable, efficient and effective (DOH, 2000a).

Child's identified developmental <u>needs</u> , strengths, difficulties	<u>Services</u> to be provided	Person/agency responsible	Frequency, duration and starting date	Planned <u>outcomes</u> and plans for reviews

Figure 2 Columns providing an organisational structure for parts of the ASP

The layout of the child's section (see Figure 3 below) is influenced by the principle of promoting the welfare of a child, as embodied in the Children Act,

1989, as well as the wider concept of promoting a child's well-being through the seven dimensions of Health, Education, Emotional and Behavioural Development, Identity, Family and Social Relationships, Social Presentation and Self-care Skills.

Health (including any special needs which a disabled child may have)
Education
Emotional and Behavioural Development
Identity including ethnicity, culture and religion
Social presentation including physical description, personality and interests
Self- care skills
Family background and social relationships, including attachments
Wishes and feelings of child
Preparation work completed (life journey work)
Wishes and feelings of birth family members
Support for Birth Relatives
Contact
Support arrangements in relation to contact for child and adopters

Figure 3 Domains for support for the child - first section of the ASP

Ensuring improved outcomes for children, it was argued, would be achieved through using these domains and systematically structuring the relationships of assessed needs and specified services; progress would be monitored through the reviewing of the planned outcomes (Parker et al, 1991). Others were critical of this approach, suggesting the domains and dimensions standardise concepts of parenting and child development in social work practice (Knight and Cavenney, 1998). This systematisation for the gathering of information has become a common format for many of the documents used in child care practice, including assessments, which incorporate the dimensions of child, parent and environment, as illustrated in the Assessment Framework diagram (see Figure 3a below) (DOH, 2000b; Bailey et al, 2002).

The additional dimensions in this section of the ASP, such as *Wishes and Feelings*, *Preparation Work* and *Contact*¹⁴ are specified within the Adoption Agency regulations (regulation 13 and 14). The document design here also incorporates expectations regarding support for the child's birth relatives (ACA, 2002, section 3(1) (a)).

The ASP design, in the child's section, and in the following section relating to the adopters, can thus be seen to have been influenced by these two sources, the 'Looked After Children' materials and the 'Assessment Framework'.

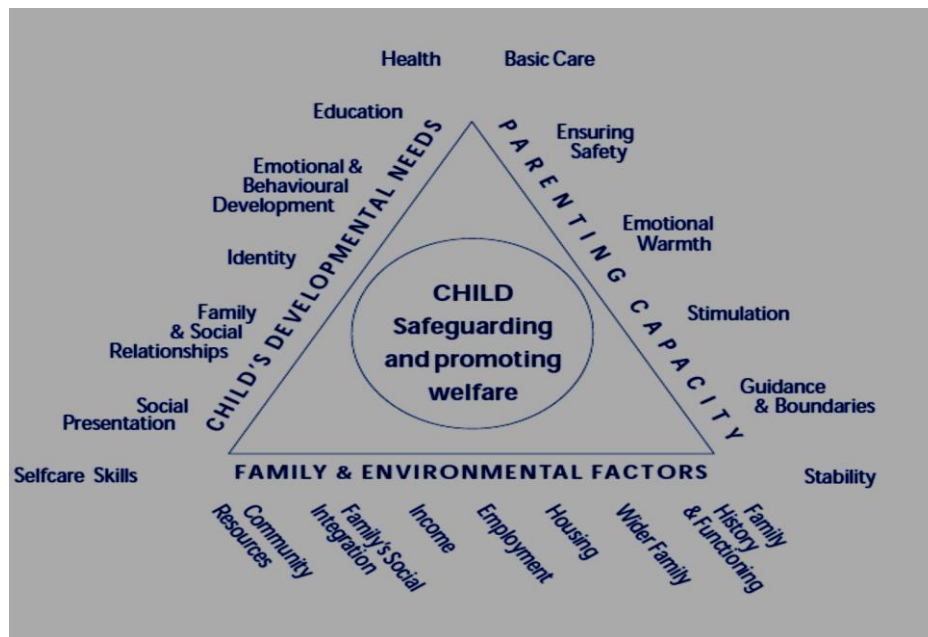


Figure 3a Assessment Framework (DOH, 2000b:17)

The second section (see Figure 4 below) of the ASP document focuses upon the activities involved in finding an adoptive family and the adopters' information. In this section the details of the family finding activity are described, followed by the details of the identified 'linked family', the selected prospective adopters. The summary information regarding the 'linked family' is drawn from the Prospective Adopters' Report (PAR). The PAR is used for the assessment of the adopters and is the document that is presented to the adoption panel for their recommendation of approval.¹⁵ Some of the domains in this section are also drawn from the Assessment Framework, for example 'Parenting Capacity'

¹⁴ Contact refers to some form of continuing exchange with the child's birth relatives, either face-to-face or through letters, cards or photos.

¹⁵ Approval of adopters describes a legal function of the Adoption panel, which recommends their 'suitability to adopt' (AAR, 2005: 27).

and ‘Family and Environment Factors’ (see figure 3a above). This section is not organised into columns for Needs, Services and Outcomes, as described in Figure 2 above. The linked family section concludes with a box identified as Matching Considerations. The significance of this aspect of the ASP’s design is discussed later.

Family Finding Work Completed (date and summary)	
Matched/Linked Family - Families being considered	
Approval details Health and age Employment and income Identity including ethnicity, culture and religion Social presentation including personality and interests and physical description Family composition Family history and Functioning Support networks and community links Parenting capacity including child care experience Preparation and training What contact able to consider Financial considerations	
Matching considerations	
Recommendation <i>Are these adopters able to meet the identified long-term needs of this child? Yes/No</i> <i>Should this match be presented to panel Yes/No</i>	

Figure 4 Information relating to the potential match - second section of the ASP

The third section of the ASP (see Figure 5 below) relates to support provision drawn from the legislation; columns are also used to organise the information in this section (see Figure 2 above). The ACA, 2002 defines adoption support services as ‘*counselling, advice and information and any other services prescribed by the regulations*’ (Section 2 (6)). The provision of support from the adoption services falls under Section 3, which also identifies ‘*counselling, advice and information*’. The ‘*prescribed*’ services are found in Regulation 3 of

the Adoption Support Services Regulations, 2005, where some of these are for the adoptive family (financial support, therapeutic support, provision to maintain the adoptive relationship such as training, respite care, assistance if there is risk of disruption or disruption occurs, and for a disruption review meeting); other '*prescribed*' services include provision for both adopters and the birth relatives (services to discuss adoption, assistance for contact).

Financial Support (considering criteria as laid down in regulations)				
Support needs of child and adopters	Services to be provided	Person/Agency Responsible	Frequency, duration and starting date	Planned outcome and plans for review
(e.g. to get to contact sessions, to fund therapy sessions etc.)	(these could include: -A single lump sum -A series of lump sums -A regular on-going payment -Home adaptations etc.) (financial assessment completed)			
Adoptive Family				
Basic Support Services			Provided by	
(available to all members of the adoptive family)			Own agency	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Point of contact available long term for advice and information and onward referral as necessary- Group meetings with other adopters- Regular workshops/training- Opportunity to keep in touch through a newsletter or regular social event				
Adopters feedback				

Figure 5 '*Prescribed*' and Basic support requirements - third section of the ASP

The ASP document includes 'Services' of support in several of its sections; for example the '*assistance for contact*' for the birth relatives, the adopters and the child is incorporated into the child's section (Figure 3 above). The Financial support for the adoptive placement and selected provision for maintaining the adoptive placement are within this third section of the ASP document (Figure 5 above). However, '*prescribed*' services relating to

‘disruption’ support and *‘therapeutic’* support were not included within these ASP documents.

In most of the ASP documents in the sample used for this study, there is space before the signature page for the adopters to contribute their written views. The Adoption Agency regulations and guidance ‘invite’ the adopters to send in writing, within 10 working days, their observations of the assessment for the adoption support services, the proposals for contact, the adoption support plan and the agency’s report for the Matching panel (AAR, 2005; reg. 32 and Guidance, 2006: 90).

Throughout the AA regulations reference is made to the requirement for support to be considered and included for the child, the birth relatives and the adopters. The design of the ASP document can perhaps be viewed as a vehicle for structuring the requirements from the regulations into the three separate sections, as identified in Figures 3, 4 and 5, with the organisation of the information into columns introducing the notion of accountability within the ASP structure. Although the ASP document format draws upon the content of information from other documents, such as the CARA¹⁶ and the PAR¹⁷, it can be seen to be distinct in its focus upon selected support matters, such as support for the birth relatives, the Financial Support and the ‘Basic’ support for the adopters and the child. The structure of the ASP prioritises the child and the adopters, providing sections that bridge the child’s circumstances, the adopter’s details, the family finding activity, and the matching considerations, with the Financial and ‘Basic’ support for the adoptive family. The birth relatives’ details are, it is suggested, out of place in a document that focuses predominantly upon the child’s and the adopters’ details for the adoption arrangements. However, the document structure and focus is perhaps unsurprising given the wide range of functions suggested in the document’s title.

¹⁶ CARA – Child Assessment Report for Adoption – Reg. 17; structure specified in Schedule 1 of the AAR, 2005.

¹⁷ PAR – Prospective Adopters’ Report, information detailed in Schedule 4, Adoption Agency (Wales) Regulations, 2005.

4.3.1 The Adoption Support Plan document title

Most of the documents in the sample were titled '*Adoption Support Plan including Matching¹⁸ Report for Panel*' (Appendix F). The documents also had a sub-heading of '*Proposed Adoption Support Plan*', which, it is suggested, introduces uncertainty into the document's status and purpose. The term '*proposed*' may suggest that the document is in its early stages, waiting to be finalised at some future point. Alternatively '*proposed*' may reflect terminology from the Adoption Agency regulations, where the ASP is linked to the '*proposed placement*' with the term '*proposed*' implying that the support Plan is provisional and awaiting ratification through the stages of its journey for the arrangements of the adoption (discussed in chapter 5). The term '*proposed*' may also be seen as an indication that the ASP document is intended to address '*proposed*' support that may be required at some point in the future. The term '*proposed*' adds an element of uncertainty to the document's status.

The title of the ASP document thus explicitly connects the two functions emerging from the ASP's design, namely that of an intended plan for support for the adoption and the preparation of a report for the Matching panel. The next section, which focuses upon the text within the ASP sample, explores the ways in which the relationship between these two functions is evident within the content.

4.4 Background circumstances of the sample of Adoption Support Plans

Table 3, below, provides an anonymised overview of the sample of ASP documents, including a brief summary of the children's early background experiences. Ten of the documents were made available through one adoption agency with the final two Plans being provided by adopters themselves. One document was completed in 2006 and the other eleven Plans were completed in 2012.

At the time when the Plans were completed, the ages of the children ranged from 11months to 5 years and 2 months. Five Plans relate to girls and seven to

¹⁸ Matching describes the activities involved when considering the 'fit' between the child and the linked adopters

boys. The majority of the adopters in the Plans were heterosexual couples [9]; one was a single male adopter and two were single female adopters. All of the documents were completed by social workers from the Children's Services (the local authority) and from the adoption agency.

Plan + Date	Children			Placing authority	Adopters	Receiving authority
	Name	Age	Gender		Names	
1 2012	Edward	4 y 6 m	m	A (Wales)	Sarah	B (England)
Looked after since 2 due to neglect and birth mother unable to cope with his special needs; three siblings adopted and two in foster care. Birth mother wanted Edward to remain cared for by his foster carer.						
2 2012	Betty	2 y 10 m	f	A (Wales)	Tim and Belinda	C (Wales)
Assessments of birth mother not positive during care proceedings; concerns that birth mother unable to meet Betty's basic needs; Betty exposed to adult arguments. Birth mother asked foster carers to adopt Betty.						
3 2012	Primrose	2 y 3 m	f	A (Wales)	Keith and Sabina	D (England)
4 2012	Milo	5 y 2 m	m	A (Wales)	Henry and Pippa	E (Wales)
Concerns about chronic neglect and poor attachments with birth parents led to Primrose and Milo [and two other siblings] being placed for adoption. Three older siblings not adopted. Birth parents did not agree to plan for adoption.						
5 2012	Basil	3 y 9 m	m	A (Wales)	James	F (England)
Birth mother had substance misuse problems although she cared for Basil for two years. His maternal grandmother also cared for him but was unable to cope. Basil then returned to his mother's care for a short while but this broke down and he then became looked after. His sister is also being adopted and contact is to be reviewed.						
6 2012	Alan	5 y	m	A (Wales)	Jemima	A (Wales)
Whilst living he was with his birth mother [had substance misuse difficulties and chaotic lifestyle] there were concerns for Alan's care. When his birth parents were together there were arguments. Alan was cared for for a while by great grandparents but this was unsustainable when mother admitted to hospital. Alan placed with foster carers when he was two. Birth mother not supporting plan for adoption.						
7 2012	Thomas	1 y 9 m	m	A (Wales)	Patrick and Janice	G (England)
Thomas placed with foster carers from birth. Birth parents opposed local authority concerns and plan for adoption. Initial developmental delay reduced in foster care although emerging concerns regarding Thomas's communication capacity are to be assessed. Adoptive placement proposed with Patrick and Janice together with his two sisters						

Plan + Date	Children			Placing authority	Adopters names	Receiving authority
	Name	Age	Gender			
8 2012	Petula	2 y 9 m	f	A (Wales)	Lyndon and Vera	A (Wales)
Early experiences of emotional deprivation and negative assessments of birth mother. Adopters knew Petula and her birth mother. Birth mother neither opposing nor agreeing to plan for adoption.						
9 2012	Alex	1 y 6 m	f	A (Wales)	Bob and Rachel	H (Wales)
Alex was placed with foster carers due to historical concerns regarding birth mother's capacity to protect her children. Alex's birth mother has significant learning difficulties. Concerns that birth father is unable to prioritise Alex's needs. Alex is being placed with Bob and Rachel who have already adopted Alex's sister. Birth parents contested plan for adoption.						
10 2012	Peter	1 y 3 m	m	A (Wales)	Martin and Susan	A (Wales)
Peter placed with foster carers following birth; no reasons for concerns recorded. Initial developmental delay although he is now making progress. Birth parents did not agree to plan for adoption. Peter has a half sibling.						
11 2006	Caroline	11 m	f	I (Wales)	Hugh and Janet	A (Wales)
Plan completed in 2006 - document layout different to others in sample; no information regarding concerns; no identified needs for support. Caroline placed with her half -sister. Birth parents caring for one child.						
12 2012	Harvey	1 y 9 m	m	A (Wales)	Luke and Jade	J (Wales)
Harvey's name was on the child protection register from birth due to a history of concerns relating to the neglect of his siblings. Lived with his birth mother for his first few months but when she went to prison he lived with his grandparents. On her release she lived with Harvey at her parents' house. Harvey sustained an injury as a result of neglect. He was admitted to hospital for a short period and then placed with foster carers. Birth family did not want Harvey adopted.						

Table 3 Overview of the sample of Adoption Support Plan documents [Personal details anonymised]

Here it can be seen that for some children, the ASP is required to straddle different geographical locations as a consequence of the significant functions in respect of the placing authority,¹⁹ the approving authority,²⁰ and where the adopters live (the receiving authority). For three of the children these

¹⁹ The placing authority is responsible for the child and is the lead for the ASP construction

²⁰ The approving authority has assessed and decided that the applicant is suitable to adopt; they can be a local authority adoption agency or a voluntary adoption agency

functions were located in the same geographical area allowing the ASP to be created within familiar surroundings and organisational relationships.

For eleven of the ASP documents the placing authority was the same, although they were involved with eight different local authority areas whose function is that of 'receiving' the child. The number of different receiving authorities implies that the placing authority will need to negotiate support across a greater distance as well as within unfamiliar and unconstructed relationships and resources.

The analysis now turns to exploring the content of the ASP document, as summarised in the above overview, Table 3.

4.5 The shaping of support from the document's content

Each ASP document contains a significant volume of text, requiring a way of making sense of the data so that the themes hidden in the dense, complex content can be highlighted (Jupp, 1996). The analysis of the text was done in two ways in order to manage the data. The first approach used the text within the organisational columns within the ASP, those of Needs, Services and Outcomes, (Figure 2), to highlight themes relating to how support was identified. The second tactic explored the content according to the ages of the children in the ASP. Older children with early abusive experiences and possibly longer periods of being 'looked after', face particular challenges in adjusting to adoption (Rushton, 2003; Rosnati, 2005). Developing a pathway through the document's content in this way, it was hoped would clarify the profile of support within the ASP.

The length of time that children wait for permanent homes is also identified in the literature as significant in terms of their future security and emotional well-being. Research studies have shown that older children who have waited longer for a settled home experience more difficulties in terms of managing their behaviour, their ability to form trusting relationships, as well as coping with transitions, such as school (Parker, 1999; Selwyn et al, 2006; Rushton, 2003; Selwyn et al, 2014). Table 4, below, groups the children's ages at the time the document was completed and the period of time that the children waited to be matched with their adoptive parent(s). The younger children (involving five ASP documents) spent a shorter time waiting for their adoptive families, whilst the older group (involving three ASP documents) waited for a

longer period of time before an adoptive family was identified. Dates were missing from three of the documents, and one document format was incomplete and this information was absent.

Ages at time of completing the ASP		Length of time waiting for adoptive family	
Youngest	Oldest	Shortest	Longest
Peter 1y 3m	Primrose 3y 3m	Petula 2m	Milo 10m
Alex 1y 6m	Milo 5y 2m	Thomas 5m	Primrose 12m
Thomas 1y 9m	Alan 5y 2m	Peter 5m	Alan 1y 10m
Harvey 1y 9m		Alex 6m	
Petula 2y 9m		Harvey 7m	

Table 4 Grouping the ASP documents for analysis of the content

The children's early history is presented in the 'pen picture' in Table 3 (above). The summary is drawn from the content in the '*Family Background and Social Relationships, including Attachments*' domain, Needs column (see Figure 3, page 63). Two children of the children were placed with foster carers from birth. Nine of the children were described as having been exposed to a range of experiences whilst in the care of their birth families, such as arguments between adults, their birth parent's chaotic lifestyles, instability, neglect and emotional deprivation. There was no background information for one of the children. The decision that adoption was 'in the child's best interest' was made through the court. Table 4 also draws from the content of the 'front' page of the ASP documents. It shows that Petula waited the shortest time, as her adopters came forward because they knew her. The information that Primrose and Milo are birth siblings, although they were placed with different adopters, emerges later in the ASP content as does the detail that Alex was placed with her birth sister. Alan, one of the older children, waited the longest period, almost two years, for his placement with his adoptive family.

4.5.1 Exploring the way Needs are identified

The Needs column of the first section of the ASP document focuses upon the child (Figure 3) but although the document structure follows the child Assessment Framework domains, the social worker is not required to engage

within the expected process of an assessment, engaging directly with the birth family, the child or the adopters (Holland, 2011). The social worker is faced with the task of constructing this content from various other sources. The intertextuality²¹ of the ASP document is constructed from a range of sources, brought together by the choices made by the author (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Materials are selected by the social workers for the purposes of the ASP document, forming the representation of the Need for support in the arrangements for the adoption.

In Milo's Plan, for example, the social worker that authored the document has drawn on the foster carer's observations of improvements in Milo's interaction, as part of her description of Milo's Emotional and Behavioural Development (EBD) Needs:

Foster carers feel he has made huge improvements in his relationship with them over the last few months and has started seeking and giving physical affection (from Emotional and Behavioural Development Needs in Milo's Plan).

The inclusion of this particular bit of text, it is suggested, serves to demonstrate the progress that Milo has made, with the author implying that Milo's EBD Needs are related to him needing continued nurturing to develop his emotional literacy of reciprocity in relationships (Golding, 2008).

In Petula's Plan, the text makes significant use of reports from other sources to describe her Health Needs:

Immunisations are up to date. There were concerns regarding her overall developments with historical assessments by physiotherapy, speech and language, educational psychology and audiology. She was discharged from all services [date] and there are no evident concerns now (from Health Needs in Petula's Plan).

Here the author has selected these sources perhaps to add weight to the comment '*no evident concerns now*', implying that Petula has no Health Needs at this time that require support. Whatever the basis for the earlier concerns, the text suggests that these have now been eliminated, and additionally, as her '*immunisations are up to date*', there is now, the text also suggests, an absence of Health Needs. However the author is silent with regard to Petula's current or potential future Health Needs.

²¹ Intertextuality is described by Prior (2003) as 'a 'gadget' invented by ...Julia Kristeva (1980) ... referring in part to the notion that the meaning of a single text is always bound up in its relations with others [texts] that are contemporary to it... texts are never singular or unique ...' (Prior, 2003:124).

In addition to the shaping of the content through other sources, the text within the ASP document is influenced by the way in which the social worker uses their theoretical or formal knowledge and ‘process’ or practice knowledge, which are both, it is argued, consciously and unconsciously embedded in social work practice (Trevithick, 2008; Sheppard and Ryan, 2003:158). Taylor (2004) highlights that influences from developmental psychology have subliminally permeated social care practice language following demands for social workers to use more research and evidenced-based approaches; she cautions against a form of social work practice where the knowledge base is implicit and uncritical. She considers that this leads to a standard ‘taken for granted’ approach to assessment and interventions (Taylor, 2004: 228; Parton and O’Byrne, 2000). In a similar vein, Sheppard and Ryan (2003) refer to how social workers use their formal and process knowledge as ‘rules’ for guiding their practice (2003:160).

In Harvey’s Plan, the text draws upon the developmental information from routine health screening schedules and the psychological theories underpinning the stages of a child’s development (*developmental milestones*), which guide the author’s assessment of his ‘normal’ development; the text is presented here as the social worker’s knowledge and as ‘statements of fact’ (Taylor, 2004:231). This is illustrated in the following extract:

Up to date with immunisations and developmental checks; reported to be meeting developmental milestones and is making good progress; hearing seems to be normal; sustained significant ...[injury] and receives treatment through the hospital ... unit; is prescribed cream which needs applying twice daily; health to be continually monitored (from Health Needs in Harvey’s Plan).

Harvey’s Health Needs are thus represented mainly as descriptions of his present health. A summary of his physical health is provided together with some specific information regarding an injury requiring continued treatment; there is however no reflection upon any future potential Health Needs.

The word ‘attachment’ is peppered throughout the ASP text, implying that the concept of attachment is commonly understood in social care, and perhaps suggesting an assumed audience who share this knowledge and understanding of attachment theory and the implications of its significance. The general use of the word ‘attachment’ carries with it, so to speak, complex ideas about the development and capacity of forming human relationships, over time, drawn from attachment theory (Golding, 2008). How attachment issues are

understood within the new child-adopter relationship involves reflexive recognition of the internal working models of both child and adult and their emotional climate (Holland, 2011). The text in Alex's Plan illustrates the ways in which the author relies upon embedded theories and 'rules', conveying assumptions that the reader will understand the author's intentions. In Alex's Plan, her EBD Needs are described as:

Alex is a sociable young girl who is always full of smiles. She will need an appropriate unification plan in place to allow her to transfer her attachments from the foster carer to her adoptive carers. She does not display any difficult behaviours at present other than within the normal expectation of an 18 month old girl. She will need to know about her situation and why she was adopted. She will need to have a life story book completed (from the Emotional and Behavioural Development Needs in Alex's Plan).

Here Alex's Needs within the EBD domain are wide ranging and are identified as:

- *Need an appropriate unification plan for transfer of her attachments from the foster carers to her adoptive carers*
- *Need to know about her situation and why she was adopted*
- *Need to have a life story book completed*

The background narrative in this domain describes her as a '*sociable young girl who is always full of smiles... who does not display any difficult behaviours at present other than within the normal expectation of an 18 month old girl*'.

Several strands of embedded theory and practice knowledge are seen as evident in this text. Firstly, the link between the presence of a positive attachment between the foster carers and the child are given as an indication of Alex's capacity to transfer these attachments to her adoptive family. This notion is also reflected in several other plans. Secondly, the statements, '*does not display any difficult behaviours*' and '*normal expectations*' are examples of the text reflecting embedded 'rules', acting as a link to the suggestion that the transition, [and by implication that the future adoptive relationship] should be problem free. The transition for the actual move from foster care into Alex's adoptive home is of course important, but the text suggests a preoccupation with Alex's present and past relationships, indicating little consideration from the author regarding potential future support. Thirdly, the word '*quickly*' reveals limited reflective practice for creating the space for the

nurturing of the new relations between the child and her adopters. The focus of Alex settling '*quickly*' appears again in Alex's Plan in the Outcome column:

Able to quickly establish relationships and move from foster care to her adoptive placement without too much disruption to her emotional well-being; Alex has an understanding of what is right and wrong and a good understanding of her routines which will allow her to settle quickly; Alex has a good understanding of her life story (from EBD Outcomes in Alex's Plan).

The text here suggests a fourth strand, that Alex's transition will be achieved '*without too much disruption*', with the focus of the Outcomes text implying the author's expectations of the adopters. The implicit expectation here lies within the parent-child relationship, where the suggestion of a behavioural style of parenting to provide continued routines and boundaries will facilitate Alex's '*settling quickly*', '*without too much disruption*' rather than any discussion with the adopters about their style of relationship building and parenting or, indeed, if they require any support (Woodhead, 1999). The fifth strand, the belief that '*an appropriate plan*' will facilitate the successful transition for Alex, is carried through into the text on the Services in Alex's Plan:

the ... social workers, foster carers and adoptive carers will need to devise a plan that will allow Alex to form a relationship with her adoptive carers without unsettling her; this plan will need to meet her current needs and allow her to transfer her secure attachment from her foster carers to her adoptive carers; she will need consistent boundaries and routines in place; social worker will need to complete a life story book for Alex prior to the adoption order being granted (from EBD Services in Alex's Plan).

The assumption evident here indicates that the act of creating a plan in social work practice serves as a Service; in Alex's Plan, '*to devise a plan*' is described as a Service for facilitating the transition (Taylor and White, 2006:939).

4.5.2 Exploring how Services are conceptualised

Williams (2003) suggests that the notion of 'service' within the social care context has associations with interventions following assessments, as well as with the provision of specific resources intended to meet particular needs. The Services content in the ASP document, it is argued, is an important part of how the support provision is represented in the adoption arrangements.

4.5.2. i Basic tasks represented as Services

For Health, in both groups of children, the predominant Service identified is that of registration with a general practitioner, dentist and optician. This is illustrated first through the text in Thomas's Plan, from the younger group, and secondly through the text in Alan's Plan, from the older group:

To be registered with local G.P., dentist and optician. Access to routine health care as and when the need arises; if required will need to attend additional appointments to address current worrying behaviours now displayed (from Health Services in Thomas's Plan).

Attend all relevant medical and dental appointments. To be registered with local G.P., dentist and optician. To be monitored through adoption review process until order granted (from Health Services in Alan's Plan).

In other documents from the sample, the text describes Services as '*attendance at relevant appointments, access to routine health care, additional care as and when the need arises*'.

The same basic level of Service formulation is also evident in the text for Education Services, which states that, although not yet of (statutory) school age, the younger children attend at a toddler group or playgroup. For the older group the text describes as a Service, '*school to be identified*'. For Milo, who was just over 5 years old when the ASP was completed, the description of Services for his educational needs appears meaningless, as illustrated in the extract below:

Local primary school. No special provision is currently anticipated. Anticipated that [placing authority] educational psychologist will liaise with the new school identified for him (from Education Services in Milo's Plan).

The description of '*anticipated liaison*' between schools as a Service is opaque, with no identification of who would trigger or initiate this liaison. A stand-alone phrase, '*local primary school*' suggests that the Services text perhaps means something for the author(s) but this is not clear for the reader. However, in examining the relationship between this Service and Milo's Educational Needs, the context of the limited text in the Services column becomes clearer:

Careful [school] transition planning and that Milo may benefit from a key person in class to help with security/attachment (from Education Needs in Milo's Plan).

In this context, this Service seems to be inexplicit and rather weakly defined. Ensuring that Services are clearly formulated so that the adopter is able to justify the need and access the service is crucial, especially in the context of education, where obtaining support in school can be a particular challenge (Cooper and Johnson, 2007).

For the younger group, the Service text suggests obvious and basic activities for the adopters, such as in Peter and Harvey's Plans, where there is the suggestion of their enrolment in school when they are old enough:

... it is envisioned that Peter will progress to mainstream/junior school when he is of the appropriate age to do so (from Education Services in Peter's Plan).

Harvey needs to be enrolled at the local education provision which he will begin to attend after his third birthday (from Education Service in Harvey's Plan).

'Enrolment', like 'referral' and 'registration', are examples of where a task is represented as a Service, showing, perhaps, that the text 'acts through distance', noting an action expected from the adopters, rather than the provision of a Service (Prior, 2011:104).

The level of the Services reflects the actions or tasks associated with 'looked after' children's changes of placements. The mundane nature of the Services could be seen to represent actions required following the transition to the adoptive placement. The arrangements for the adoption placement could be viewed as requiring activities parallel to those for Looked After Children (LAC), with the adoption placement involving a shift of parental responsibility as identified within the Adoption Placement Report (APR)²². This suggests that the ASP document is functioning as a schedule for clarifying the tasks that the adopters need to undertake, as identified by the author in Peter's and Harvey's Plans above. Thus, an initial finding is that Services are conceived as mundane tasks, representing a continuation of the social worker's LAC responsibilities, through specifying the tasks that the adopters are required to undertake.

4.5.2. ii Adopters represented as Services

The second finding sees the adopters represented as a Service in both the younger and older groups of children, as well as being responsible for securing

²² APR -Adoption Placement Report, Reg. 32; structure specified in Schedule 5 of the AAR, 2005.

the Services as noted above. Some of the domains note that more than one person or agency is Responsible, with the adopters being identified as being Responsible on 78 occasions within a total of 186 ‘types’ of Services. Children’s social workers and adoption agency social workers are identified on 85 occasions, mainly with reference to their organisation. As in Primrose’s Plan, both the adopters and the agency are frequently identified together:

Adopters will need to continue to promote Primrose’s emotional and behavioural development with advice and support from [the placing authority] (from EBD Responsible Person/Agency in Primrose’s Plan).

Other Responsible individuals and agencies noted in the text are foster carers, various roles from health and education organisations, the birth parents and an IRO²³. Across the documents in the sample 28 ‘none’ Responsible entries and 35 entries of no Services were noted. The profile of the role of adopters within the ASP is raised when the Services and Responsibility content columns are linked together, and the adopter is identified as both the Service and the Responsible person for the Services, as illustrated in Alan’s Plan:

... to be provided with a warm, loving, nurturing home environment, where he can be supported to develop his attachment relationships; to be provided with continuity of clear and consistent boundaries, guidance and routines (from EBD Services in Alan’s Plan).

The second finding is that adopters are placed at the forefront of providing the Service and making them Responsible for accessing the Services. The inference here is that the purpose of this text is to confirm the suitability of the match, as opposed to considering potential future support matters within the adoptive relationship.

4.5.2. iii Contingent representation of Services

The third finding is that Services are conceptualised in contingent ways as being beyond the responsibility of the local authority or the adoption agency. The notion of ‘*no Services*’ or ‘*no specialist Services at this time*’ or the limited nature of the specific Services seem to overlook the entitlement to support or any envisioning of the future possibilities of support. Beyond the ASP document content lie contested ideas regarding the place of support in adoption (Coleman, 2003). The text within the Services columns seems to

²³ IRO – Independent Reviewing Officer.

mirror the ambiguity of support in policy and practice, as illustrated in Primrose's Plan:

No services needed at present. Prior to the making of the order and three years post adoption order the need for services would be via [placing authority] adoption team and the Adoption Support Services Adviser [name]. After this three years the ASSA in area where the child is living will take responsibility. Anticipated that the child care social worker and adoption social worker will offer advice on promoting attachments; Foster carers will pass on information on how they managed Primrose's temper tantrums (from Emotional and Behavioural Development Services in Primrose's Plan).

The suggestion '*no services needed at present*', seems curious given the following Service of the '*offer of advice on promoting attachments*' and that the '*foster carers will pass on information on how they managed Primrose's temper tantrums*'. The author may view '*advice*' and '*information*' as not being a service, instead perhaps placing their confidence in the adopters to access any services through available mainstream provision. This suggests the idea that here adoption equates with being like any other family, able to choose and use 'ordinary', 'normal' mainstream services (Luckock and Hart, 2005).

Specifying the '*three years post adoption order*' time period refers to the regulatory parameters of responsibility between the placing and receiving authorities (ASS Regulations, 2005). The three-year period of responsibility for support following an adoption denotes the author marking a significant boundary, perhaps for the protection of their resources, setting a different context for the phrase '*no services needed at present*'. Of note is that the text in Alan's and Primrose's Plans makes no mention of how the adoptive family should, if they wish, access services beyond the three-year period.

In Alex's Plan, the text illustrates assumptions underpinning the author's approach to the adopters' capability to access services in the community:

... adopters can request information from Alex's health visitor regarding available groups; adopters are school teachers; their local knowledge will assist them in identifying a school for Alex; adopters will need to inform the school so that the school can monitor Alex [this links to birth parent's learning disability] (from Education Services in Alex's Plan).

Requesting information about toddler groups and the basis for the adopters' local knowledge seems to be more a reflection of the author's presupposed ideas about the adopters' professional and social capital as '*school teachers*'.

Here the adopters' status as teachers, rather than as adopters, places them in the frame for accessing mainstream Services to facilitate Alex's learning, with the implication that as adopters, they will require or need no support. This also suggests ambivalence towards the expectations of the role of support within the new adoption.

There is limited evidence of specific Services in any of the ASP documents, although tentative specific aspects emerge in three of the Plans, linked with particular Needs. Harvey was required to attend a hospital out-patient clinic regarding an injury, and Thomas required further assessment regarding his neurological development. Although the Needs identified are specific, the text describing '*attendance for appointments*' make the adopters responsible for accessing this specific service from the health authority.

Milo's Plan, however, identifies the continuation of the Service of a therapist to support his communication development. This is an illustration of a specific defined Service:

... therapist has met with Milo's foster carers and is prepared to meet with proposed adopters, which is felt to be important. A report of this work has been requested by the social worker. It is anticipated that this can be shared with the adopters (from EBD Service in Milo's Plan).

The notion of this as a specific Service is rather tempered by the tentative use of words such as '*is prepared to*' and '*it is anticipated that this can be shared*', suggesting a conditional note to the therapist as a specific Service.

The contingent nature of these themes, namely the tentative tone for a specific Service, the adopters' professional and personal knowledge and the expectations that adopters will access mainstream health services to secure continued health Needs for the child suggest underlying threads of ambivalence with regard to what the support is intended to achieve within the adoptive relationship, thereby losing opportunities for the normalising of support in new adoptions (Lowe, 1999).

The text within the Financial Support section has a different tone to the other sections, perhaps as a consequence of the regulations prescribing the parameters (ASS, 2005, reg.11 and 12). The focus of this text is upon the adopters' needs and relates mainly to costs incurred by the adopters during the introduction to their child. The narrative ignores the column structure,

locating the details of financial support in random columns, as illustrated in Primrose's Plan:

Reimbursement of mileage during introductions. Cost of hotel during introduction to be paid by [placing authority] adoption team. Adopters to apply for control of child trust fund once the adoption order is granted. No other financial need identified at this time. [Placing authority] does not pay the fee for the adoption order (from Financial Support Needs in Primrose's Plan).

The phraseology has a factual, business like tone, making clear what will and will not be included in terms of financial support, which is located in the Needs column.

In Thomas's Plan it becomes apparent in the text in the *Matching considerations* section that his adoption placement is to be with his two sisters; the Needs column states that the adoptive mother is giving up work '*to parent the children*'. In the Services column, the narrative forms a list:

Adoption allowance; settling in grant; mileage throughout introductions; accommodation in Wales; court application; domestic assistance; 2 sessions with the psychological service... (From Financial Support Services in Thomas's Plan).

This list of 'Services' serves to bring together the placing authority, the receiving authority and the adopters as contributors to these Services, which becomes explicit in the text in the Frequency column:

Mileage to be granted throughout introductions; accommodation in Wales during introductions; domestic assistance for up to 4 hours a week for three months; if required [placing authority] will fund 2 sessions with [receiving authority's] psychological service; adoption allowance will be granted for each child for 5 years - this will be reviewed annually (From Financial Support Frequency in Thomas's Plan).

The text specifies the limits of the placing authority's financial support by quantifying the amount and length of domestic and psychological help. However, the use of the phrase '*if required*' could be seen to introduce some ambiguity into the value of the text, as there is no clarification regarding how this will be ascertained (Cooren, 2004). The column identifying Responsibility notes that the children's social worker is the lead for these Services, and again specifies the limits of the placing authority's financial support:

[Placing authority] social worker; Adopters responsible for funding the court application (From Financial Support Responsibility in Thomas's Plan)

The explicit and detailed nature of the Financial Support Services in Thomas's Plan suggests that this section of the ASP may have been constructed during the period leading to Thomas's placement with his sisters or perhaps following

his placement. Of note is that this text does, significantly, indicate the involvement of the adopters and others in the negotiations for support.

4.5.2. iv Future considerations of Services

Consideration of future elements of support may be seen through the structure of the Contact sections, the domain of Life story work and the Basic Support Services for the adoptive family. Contact is a significant concept in adoption, being associated with ways in which the birth family connections are accommodated into the adoptive relationships (Neil, 2012). The attitudes and confidence of the adopters in negotiating their feelings about their child's birth history will influence the emotional atmosphere within which their child's sense of self is developed (Kirk, 1981; Brodzinsky et al, 1993; Jones and Hackett, 2011).

The *Support for Contact* section in the ASP document specifically notes that its purpose is to provide support to the adopters and the child. Support for birth relatives, although a part of the ASP document structure and content, appears marginal to the general purpose and function of the document. The ACA, 2002 requires that proactive consideration be given to contact for a child with their birth relatives on an individual basis (Thomas, 2013: Neil et al, 2013). Within the domain of *Contact* the ASP document sets out a matrix of the persons for whom the '*contact type*' is prescribed and the frequency that is specified for birth parents, siblings, grandparents and foster carers (Appendix F). Direct contact, which involves seeing each other, is identified mainly for siblings who are also adopted. The text notes that in some Plans the arrangements are not yet finalised, as they require further clarification, presumably with the adopters of the siblings.

Across the two age groups, the '*contact type*' for birth parents, older siblings and grandparents is identified as '*indirect*', which involves an exchange of correspondence through the adoption agency office. Indirect contact may also be referred to as 'letter box' contact (Selwyn et al, 2006). The exchanges include birthday and Christmas cards for the child from the birth relative and a report from the adopters to convey aspects of the child's life or progress to the birth relative.

Arrangements for continued Contact between the child, adopters and the child's foster carers ranges from '*indirect*', '*informal, in neutral area twice a year*', '*wait till settled*' to '*blank*' in seven of the Plans. The text here conveys little awareness of the loss the child may experience or the support the adopters' may need to assist the child in this transition (Boswell and Cudmore, 2014).

The *Support Arrangements for Contact* section offers Services ranging from practical help with writing reports, as in Alan's Plan, to minimal support responses, as illustrated in Peter's and Harvey's Plans:

Advice to be given as requested (from Support Arrangements in Relation to Contact Services in Peter's Plan).

Routine support offered via home visit or telephone (from Support Arrangements in Relation to Contact Services in Harvey's Plan).

Here the minimal Service of support links with the two younger children, whereas a more proactive proposal of support is associated with Alan, an older child.

Alan's Plan describes the support Services of *advice and support* as a distinct Service, together with the drawing up of documentation for a '*contract*' to be developed at some unspecified time:

Advice and support in sending items for letter box contact. Advice and support in preparing annual reports. Contract of letter box contact to be drawn up (from Support Arrangements in Relation to Contact Services in Alan's Plan).

The notion of further documentation as a Service, can be seen again here in the form of a contract, illustrating how documents equate with the provision of a Service (Taylor and White, 2006). In some Plans the text for Contact is '*blank*' or '*not known*'. The absence of text perhaps acts as a means of distancing the author or organisation from their responsibility for the provision of support (Cooren, 2004). The formulaic nature of the text for support for Contact creates the impression of the authors' compliance with expected procedures, rather than shaping the support to the individual circumstances.

The narrative within the ASP for the *Support Arrangements for Contact* indicates no acknowledgement that adopters need to work out how to integrate the contact into their day-to-day family life (Jones and Hackett, 2012:287). Furthermore, there is no mention in the text that arrangements for

contact present opportunities for adopters to promote knowledge of, and information about, adoption, to their child, over time (Neil, 2009). The final concern is that there is no recognition of support for how both the adoptive and birth family relationships may become redefined over time. This is a complex process within the adoptive relationship, and can perhaps threaten the child's sense of belonging or the adopters' confidence as parents (Jones and Hackett, 2012; Brodzinsky, 2005; Neil, 2009).

Life story work and life story books had been used to a large extent by the authors of the ASPs in the domain of *Identity including Ethnicity, Culture, Religion* [IECR] and in the section entitled *Preparation Work Completed (Life Journey Work)*. The 'life story' is described in the text in a range of terms, such as *life story book, memory book, life journey work, Later Life letter*²⁴, *treasure box and photos*. In all of the ASP documents, irrespective of the age of the child, the *Preparation Work* section refers to the production of a life story book, suggesting that the interpretation of *Preparation Work* is determined by the ASP document format, which includes *life journey work* in brackets following the heading *Preparation Work* (Figure 3, page 63). The intention of the 'life story' work or book is that it is a resource for the adopters and child for the future, to talk about adoption (Ryan and Walker, 1993). Combining life story with preparation, presumably for the adoptive placement, suggests confusion regarding the purpose and function of the life story work or book and the preparation work, both of which entail important aspects for possible support (Cook-Cottone and Beck, 2007; Shotton, 2010).

Alan's Plan is unusual in that his social worker has identified that the Service of producing a life story book should include Alan's involvement, in the domain of *Identity including Ethnicity, Culture, Religion* [IECR]:

Life journey work to be undertaken with Alan; life story book to be prepared; memory book to be provided; to be given reassurance and encouragement from his adoptive family in developing his sense of identity (from IECR Services in Alan's Plan).

It is expected that the memory book will be prepared by the foster carer to reflect the memories of the child's time with them. The Services narrative,

²⁴ The Later Life letter is a legal requirement detailing the reasons for the child's adoption in the form of a letter from the social worker to the child, for them when they are older. It is given to adopters to keep for their child.

whilst noting the attributes expected from the adopters in terms of promoting Alan's '*sense of identity*', provides no indication of how support, if needed, could be accessed. However, the text in the Preparation Work Outcomes in Alan's Plan suggests that the preparation for his adoptive placement will become subsumed into the wider intentions of the production of his life story book:

Alan to have an understanding of the reasons [for] his adoption and to make sense of his early life experiences (from Preparation Work Outcomes in Alan's Plan).

Envisioning links between life story activities and developing aspects of Contact could promote a proactive bridge between building memories and stories of adoptive life, identity and retaining birth family connections, all of which are important tasks for securing attachment and belonging in the adoptive relationships (Neil, 2009; Jones and Hackett, 2011). The ways in which children and young people make sense of their history and identity evolve as they become older (Neil, 2012; Neil et al, 2013). The importance of adopters and young people managing the ways in which these dual connections (Brodzinsky, 2005) impact upon the adoptive relationships are important aspects for immediate and longer term support, for both younger and older children (Habermas and Bluck, 2000; Biehal et al. 2010).

The section relating to *Basic Support* appears at the end of the ASP document. This content, as described above, is presented as a 'set menu' reflecting terminology from the Adoption Support Services Regulations (ASS, 2005). This provision is arranged in a similar style, but with some variation in the frequency of the service availability, such as monthly or quarterly. This is not surprising as eleven of the ASPs in the sample came from the same placing authority, but it is significant in illustrating the formulaic styles of the ASP construction. The *Basic Support* Services section offers the option of self-selection for socialising and to keep in touch with other adoptive families. Opportunities for young adopted children to keep in touch are available through monthly toddler group meetings; older adopted children have opportunities to keep in touch through an annual or six monthly event. Training is less consistently available across the Plans. Where the adopters came from a different local authority or agency to the placing authority, *Basic Support* is presented from both agencies. In two of the documents, a specific name appears in the text with the other documents being marked with 'yes',

the agency name, or *a tick*, indicating the availability of the provision. Participating in *Basic Support* Services will require further information about the times and locations to be made available, suggesting that the inclusion of the *Basic Support* section in the ASP has little relevance for future support.

4.5.3 Exploring the place of Outcomes and Reviews

Outcomes have become commonplace in social care plans as a means of seeking to improve the impact of services (Rushton and Dance, 2002). Outcomes are seen to be difficult to formulate, particularly when there is uncertainty about what is expected to be achieved (Parker et al, 1991). The ASP column structure combines '*Planned Outcomes and Plans for Reviews*' (see Figure 2), although some of the text only relates to Reviews, as illustrated below:

Regularly monitored by adopters and during statutory visits and reviewed at adoption reviews; monitored post adoption by adopters (from Education Outcomes in Primrose's Plan).

To be regularly monitored by adopters, during statutory visits and reviewed at adoption reviews; to be monitored post adoption by adopters (from EBD Outcomes in Thomas's Plan).

Regularly monitored by adopters and during statutory visits and reviewed at adoption reviews; to be monitored post adoption by adopters (from Social Presentation etc. Outcomes in Milo's Plan).

The notion that adopters will 'monitor' is unlikely, as is the proposed 'monitoring' following the adoption order. This form of words is also repeated within the domains of *Wishes and Feelings* and *Preparation Work*, suggesting a lack of attention from the authors. The idea of adopters continuing to monitor the *Wishes and Feelings* or the *Preparation Work* beyond the adoption order seems illogical and irrelevant. The term monitoring is unusual in family life, and the continual use of the term 'monitoring' further points to a formulaic approach being taken to the text in the Outcomes column.

As in the Services text, the Outcome and Review text suggests that the adopters are responsible for the Outcomes, as illustrated in Milo's Plan. Milo's health development is presented positively, identifying areas of delay that are noted as being of no continued concern given the progress he has made with his speech. The nocturnal enuresis is explained as 'occasional' and linked to his

emotions, rather than there being a medical diagnosis; thus the Health Outcomes are presented as:

Milo is registered with the local G.P. and dentist and has access to routine health care which will enable any arising health needs to be met quickly and effectively; Milo's health care needs will be regularly monitored by adopters and during statutory visits and reviewed at adoption reviews (from Health Outcomes in Milo's Plan).

The text locates the adopters as being responsible for Milo's continuing health progress. Whilst this is appropriate at one level, in the context of the ASP there is no mention of advice or information should Milo require additional support for his speech or for the periodic enuresis. The register of the text, such as the use of the term monitoring, suggests that the text has been written in a tone familiar to and for professionals (Coffey, 2014). Here too, the purpose of the text may be seen to be for the matching event, with the function of the text being to clarify the expectations of the adopters' future accountabilities, rather than consideration of future support for Milo or the adopters. Furthermore, the text suggests that the author's focus is upon the Outcomes of the adoption placement, and the adoption itself, rather than any Outcomes of support. The text in the Outcomes column, in these documents and across both groups of children, suggests that the arrangements for the adoption are seen as being synonymous with support. This finding suggests that the activities undertaken to achieve the adoption, are of themselves interpreted as a form of support by the authors. Finally, the column within the design of the ASP for identifying Outcomes seems inappropriate, given that most of the Services relate to the expectations of the adopters.

4.5.4 Linking in the details of the *matching considerations*

Exploring the *matching considerations* section completes the analysis of the ASP. As noted above, the ASP design places the *matching considerations* section after the adopters' details, which are summarised from their assessment report²⁵ (see Figure 4). For eleven of the ASP documents in this sample, the *matching considerations* emerge from the adopters' details and the child's information²⁶. The matching themes may be grouped into the following areas, which are compatible with the findings from other studies (Dance et al, 2008):

²⁵ Prospective Adopter's Report is the title of the adopter's report.

²⁶ One of the ASPs in the sample, from a different period and placing authority, was incomplete.

- Adopters' motivation,
- factors contributing to their suitability,
- existence of their support networks,
- their views regarding contact
- financial information (included for a few)

The content of the *matching considerations* records the ways in which the prospective adopters' parenting capacities and vulnerabilities are identified in terms of meeting the particular child's needs. There are no formatted headings in this part of the ASP, and the text is mainly structured according to the adopters' *strengths* and *vulnerabilities* in relation to their perceived suitability for the linked child. An illustration is provided from Alan's Plan:

Routine is important to Alan which Jemima accepts and she will continue the established routine.
 Alan needs patience and can want to talk about past events - it is unclear how he will settle in placement - Jemima accepts that things may take time and is willing to go at Alan's pace.
 Jemima has friends who adopted.
 Alan needs nurturing and space and Jemima is able to respond to this.
 There will be male role models through Jemima's family.
 Jemima has experience of providing care for a friend's child.
 (From Matching Considerations in Alan's Plan).

Thus, here, Jemima is seen to be suitable due to her acceptance of Alan's requirements, coupled with her willingness to respond to Alan's pace of doing things and his need for routine. A significant prerequisite for the match is the adopters' experience and ability to provide parenting (Quinton, 2012). Jemima's parenting capacity is evidenced in the text by the inclusion of the information that she '*has experience of providing care for a friend's child*', as well as her acceptance and willingness to respond to the manner in which Alan is expected to cope with the transition. The extract also notes that Jemima has supportive networks through her family. Unusually, in this extract, there is no mention of the adopter's attitude in relation to contact.

The bulk of the text in the '*Matching considerations*' section is concerned with '*strengths*', factors that display the positive *considerations* underpinning the match. The predominant criterion emerging from the text relates to the adopters' suitability, which is expressed as their stated willingness to accept the uncertainty within the child's birth history information. Limited specific '*vulnerabilities*' have been identified in this sample of ASPs, with most

'vulnerabilities' being expressed within the body of the *'matching considerations'*. An illustration of this can be seen in the above quote: Jemima's capacities to accept Alan's needs and behaviours can be both *'strengths'* if she can cope and *'vulnerabilities'* if she is unable to cope.

Crucial here are the implications of support for the future; the adopters' willingness to accept uncertainties now, could, in the future, develop into challenges for which support may be required (Selwyn et al, 2014).

4.6 Concluding summary

Setting out the design and structure of the ASP not only highlights that the document is intended to fulfil the new legal requirements for support, but also that it reflects the child care policy and practice expectations at that time. The ASP is structured into three sections. The first section prioritises the child's details and support for contact (Figure 3); the second section focuses upon the family finding activities and the details of the prospective adopters (Figure 4); and the third section addresses the new aspects of Financial Support and 'Basic' Support (Figure 5). Threaded through the first and last sections of the ASP document structure are the 'organisational columns' for accountability (Figure 2). The design underpinning this format for the purposes of support was possibly determined to fit with the organisational norm (Bell, 1998) where the existence of a form represented a reality, in this case, support for the new adoption. However, the ways in which the realities of the documents are interpreted can vary (White, 1998). The ASP design includes space for birth relative support, which, it is suggested, is inappropriate, given that the main intention of the ASP is as reflected in the ambivalent title of the document.

The analysis of the content from the sample of ASPs indicates that the text was drawn from various sources, with the material selected by the ASPs' authors throughout the period in which the arrangements were being made for the adoption. Six themes may be summarised as emerging from this part of the analysis. Firstly, the child's Needs are presented as a summary of information, chosen from a range of sources, reflecting the past and present circumstances rather than consideration of possible future needs. Secondly, the text relating to Services links more to expectations from the adopters; it identifies tasks

that the adoptive parents are expected to undertake and indeed, in some ASPs, the adopters are conceptualised as the Service.

Allied to this is the third theme, that Services appear contingent upon the present time, for example 'no services at present', the professional and personal status of the adopters and the tentative tone of some Services, for example 'if required'. The expectation that adopters will access mainstream services where specific Needs have been identified could become problematic when those Needs become re-defined. Here, the text in the Services section of the ASPs is seen to mirror the policy ambivalences inherent in the intentions underpinning support for adoption (Luckock and Hart, 2005). Fourthly, the topics of Life Story, Contact, Financial Support and 'Basic' Support suggest longer-term issues, but consideration of future support requirements is not generally evident within the text. The tenor of the text in these areas is formulaic, suggesting that the text has been 'cut and paste' and is non-individual.

The final themes highlight the language used within the Outcomes and Reviews columns, suggesting that the text is tailored towards the *matching considerations* and the placement rather than towards considerations of or for support. The willingness of adopters to accept uncertainty within their child's birth history is regarded as a strength of their suitability for the match, although the ASP text does not reflect support for areas of potential vulnerability or how such support, if required, could be accessed (Kaniuk, 2010).

Whilst most children do well in their adoptive families, some do experience difficulties, highlighting the importance of flagging up pathways for future support (Howe, 1992; Selwyn et al, 2014). In Chapter 5, the analysis turns to focusing upon the ASP's journey through the arrangements for adoption, by exploring the views of professionals who are involved in different ways in the production of the ASP.

Chapter 5 The Adoption Support Plan's 'journey' and operational 'space'

5.1 Introduction

There are two principal intentions in this second empirical chapter. The first is to critically examine the processes involved in the construction of the Adoption Support Plan [ASP] and explore how the ASP functions as the adoption is arranged; here the metaphor of a journey is employed as a means of tracing the ASP through the stages of the adoption system. Following the ASP in this way is intended to highlight what the ASP 'does' in terms of introducing support for a new adoption (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011). The second aim of this chapter is to set out and explore the organisational space within which the ASP is able to operate, explicating the ASP's ability to function as a Plan for support in a new adoption.

In this section of the chapter the findings draw on the data gathered through the interviews with practitioners; the details of the interview sample are available in the Schedule of Data in Appendix E. The initial focus is on the influences on the ASP of the two sets of regulations, the Adoption Agency regulations (AAR, 2005) and the Adoption Support Services regulations (ASSR, 2005). The chapter then explores the ASP's operational space in the pre-placement and post-placement stages of the adoption arrangements. The concluding section of this chapter summarises the implications of these findings in relation to the ASP's position within the adoption arrangements.

5.2 The Adoption Support Plan's journey through the adoption arrangements

The ASP will only come into being following various assessments, planning meetings and court proceedings. Where the local authority Children's Services consider that the child is unable to live safely with their birth family, care plans are formulated in order to secure the child's long term stability and security. These care plans are frequently negotiated in court as usually the birth parents do not willingly agree to the local authority actions or for their child to be adopted. These procedures are prescribed by legislation and

regulations, principally through the Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Masson 2010).

The stages of the ASP's 'journey', developed from the research participants' contributions and from the details in the regulations (AAR, 2005), are illustrated in Figure 6 below. The intention is to pin down the main stages of the construction of the ASP document as it travels through the arrangements for an adoption, as the ASP is not always visible during the process. The end of the ASP's construction was described as being '*when the order for the adoption is granted*'.

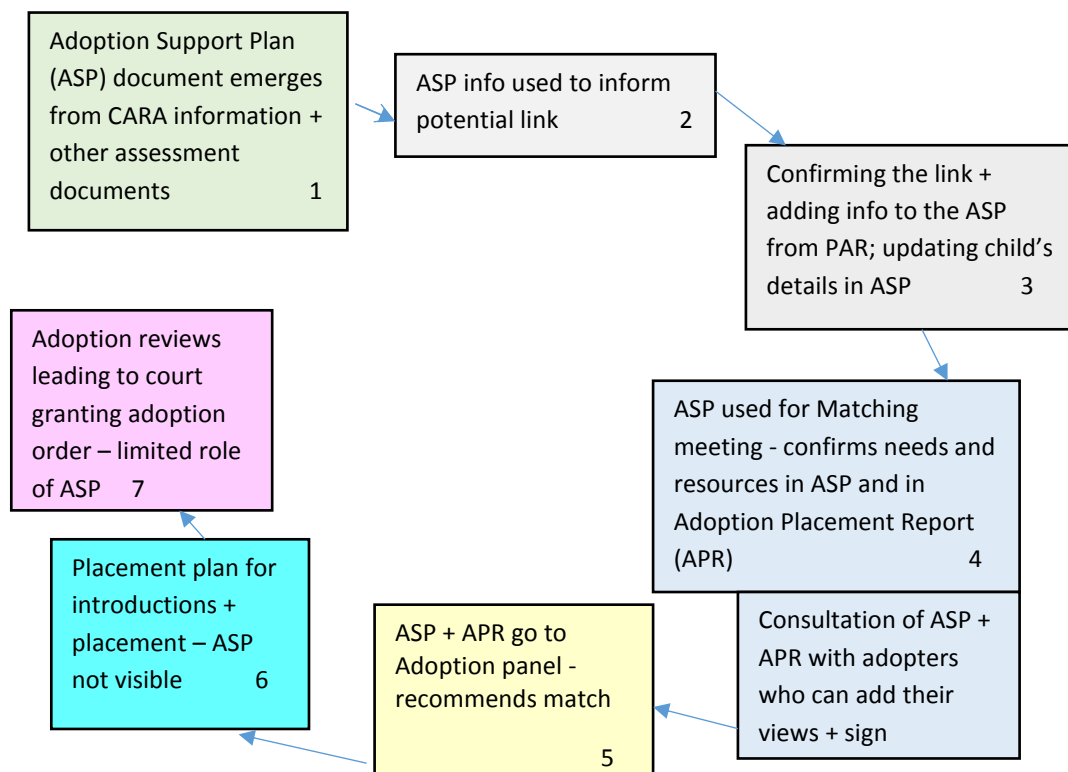


Figure 6 The key stages of the Adoption Support Plan's 'journey'

Stage 1 The emergence of the ASP document

The decision to go ahead with adoption signals a sequence of legally prescribed administrative and practice based steps, guiding the ASP on its 'journey' through the arrangements for the adoption. Whether adoption should be the permanent care plan for the child is decided at the child's LAC²⁷ review and the child's social worker is then required to make a referral to the adoption

²⁷ 'Looked After' Child is a term used in the Children Act 1989. It replaces 'boarded out' and 'being in care'.

agency; the agency provides the necessary documentation. Rose, a children's social worker, described these initial steps:

.... when you first make a phone call to the adoption team or send an email to say I am considering this child's care plan to be twin tracking and that includes adoption and that has been agreed at the second LAC review in terms of permanency. The adoption team send you out a pack and contained within the pack is the CARA²⁸, the referral to the consortium and the support needs of the child and the birth family (Rose, children's social worker).

The children's social worker has already been involved with the child and their birth family; Rose described the task of assessment as being continuous throughout the permanency process:

... it is a dynamic assessment it is not static, it will have carried on from the very beginning of when you began working with that family ... But along the way and at that point in time when you are gathering information you are looking at a plan of permanency for this child, a big part of that assessment is identifying needs not just now when this child is 2 or when this child is 3 but when the child is 4, 5, and 6. So what you are trying to do is look into the future in order to predict, ok this is going to be the most suitable plan of permanency which is going to meet this child's needs in the safest way but.... in order for that plan... to be successful, that child is going to have some needs [for support] (Rose, children's social worker).

An important theme raised here relates to the dynamic dimension of the social work task, namely that whilst the assessment is in the present, consideration is required for the child's future in identifying the arrangements most likely to achieve the permanency outcomes. The task of completing the documents rests with the children's social worker, and these are then presented to the Adoption Agency Decision Maker who makes the decision as to whether this child 'should be placed'²⁹ for adoption:

... alongside the CARA you would be doing any support needs for the child [which] are part of the assessment of the CARA but within the organisation where I work they [the support needs] are a very separate document which clearly identifies the child's need and any support that is required from the local authority to meet the need... at that point (Rose, children's social worker).

In general the children's social worker is required to complete the initial part of the ASP, although for some this can be a collaborative task that is undertaken with the adoption social worker. In one authority, where many

²⁸ Child Assessment Report for Adoption [in Wales] and the Child Adoption Assessment Report [in England].

²⁹ This is sometimes referred to as the 'ought to be placed' or 'should be placed' decision, replacing the 'best interest' decision; the terminology is taken from the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Adoption Agency Regulations, 2005. Before September 2012 this decision was a recommendation from the Adoption Panel to the Agency Decision Maker; now the Panel is no longer involved in this stage of the process.

social workers had left, Naomi, an adoption social worker, described why she completed the initial part of the ASP using her knowledge of other siblings already adopted:

... although increasingly we [*adoption social worker*] are starting to do it because social workers wouldn't get it done in time for Panel if we didn't get involved in doing that; Yes but as it happens she is the third sibling to be placed for adoption and so I just adapted it really because she is a straight forward child....And I think to be honest a lot of particularly newer social workers and social workers who are very pushed for time do tend to cut and paste things..... and I know from my years of working with social workers that there are some who are very good and.... if somebody says to me how do I fill this in then I would say have a look at one that so and so did because that was very good and people do copy and paste things if it is straight forward. I mean if there is particular needs, specific to that child, then you would [not] do that but... (Naomi, adoption worker; italics added).

A different emphasis was given by Bill, a children's social worker, who viewed the child's needs as essentially remaining the same at the beginning and end of the arrangements for the adoption. Bill viewed the early content entered into the ASP as being drawn from the CARA. These needs, he believed would remain constant, with further details being completed later in the ASP's journey. Bill described the construction as being one of adding layers of content to the document:

... but really what you do, you know the child's needs are always going to be the same from the CARA or its always going to be the same child, it's always going to have, you know, the same identified characteristics, or supportive needs, so those stay, those can be added before-hand... it's sort of like a working document really you add on the layers (Bill, children's social worker).

Thus Rose described the needs of the child as dynamic and always changing whereas Bill saw the child's needs as having a more stable element. These different perspectives are significant, illustrating differences in what the ASP document should be reflecting. Rose focused on the child's changing and continuous development, which for her provides the basis of the text that should form the early content of the ASP. Bill focused more upon the latter stages of the arrangements, suggesting that the child's early needs are identified elsewhere, as in the CARA, and that the ASP content should be added to later in the journey. Additionally, from the suggestion made by Naomi, there is an indication that the early stages of completing the ASP document can be '*straightforward*', perhaps accounting for why some social workers resort to '*cutting and pasting*' the early content from details contained in other documents.

During this early stage of the ASP's construction, in parallel with entering the child's details into the ASP, an adoption social worker, known in some agencies as an 'independent birth parent counsellor', provides information, counselling and support to the child's birth parents and relatives regarding the plan for adoption. This can be a challenging aspect of the support provision, especially if the parents are opposing the court applications:

... we have a duty to ensure that we've prepared birth parents, we've provided the information and we've offered counselling sessions to them right in the middle of the court proceedings when they're fighting for their child and at that point they are not going to engage with us, they're not going to engage with the [independent] social worker because they are still in the process of fighting for their child... (Sandra, Adoption manager/ASSA).

As described in Chapter 4, the ASP structure contains a distinct section relating to the birth relatives' *wishes and feelings* and needs for support during the arrangements for their child's adoption. In some adoption agencies, the support needs of the birth relatives are managed separately from the main body of the ASP:

.... we have got a separate plan, it is a detachable part of the adoption support plan ... and so that part of the birth parent's support plan is in the adoption support plan bit, but it is a detachable section so that it can be easily separated out (Deborah, Adoption manager/ASSA).

The notion that there is a '*detachable part of the ASP*' introduces an element of uncertainty to the early construction of the ASP.

Thus, in this first stage contradictory perspectives emerge regarding the coherence of the ASP's beginnings. Deborah suggested that the ASP contains a '*detachable part*', casting doubt on what constitutes the identity of the ASP document. Differing perspectives were presented regarding the early construction of the ASP; Rose viewed this stage as representing a continuous assessment of the child's needs for support and Bill and Naomi presented the ASP's early construction as more formulaic, where content is drawn from other documents and perhaps '*cut and pasted*' into the ASP.

Stage 2 Family finding - searching for a 'link'

The various documents, including the ASP, then move to the adoption agency where the search for an adoptive family is undertaken. The content of the ASP, together with the CARA and any other relevant documents, is used by the

adoption social workers to find suitable adoptive parents; this process is referred to as 'identifying a link':

... we [adoption service] start thinking about the support needs when you actually start looking at the link, you are immediately thinking this is the child's needs, these are the adopter's abilities so what is the deficit, what is the gap. So you then start thinking about could this adopter be suitable, you know the actual support plan is the end product, I think, well for us anyway... (Esther, Adoption manager/ASSA).

Esther also considered that the ASP document should be produced towards the end of the journey of the adoption arrangements. Leaving this aspect aside for the moment, the second stage involves using the child's needs, which have been identified in both the ASP and the CARA. The adoption social worker, who is nominated as the family finder, seeks possible 'links' for the child, as Bill, the children's social worker, described:

.... and they [adoption social worker] make things called links which are people who on paper should match the child's needs and they come to us [children's social worker] then and they say look we've got a family you know yeah we've got... broad information about some people who have been linked to the child going for adoption, would you like to pursue them? And then we get to see the broad information about the adopters and we believe it might be worth pursuing... Erm it's a decision that's made by yourself ... but its good practice to have a discussion with your team manager [who] is quite good, she... just usually wants to hear your reasons why you think it's a good match... (Bill, child's social worker).

Finding a suitable 'link' can be a long process that takes a considerable length of time and involves searching at different levels and in different locations. Initially an 'in-house' search is undertaken, within the child's own local authority area, by the adoption agency, to ascertain if there is a suitable adopter and whether it is safe for the child to be placed in their 'home' area. Where no 'in-house' prospective adopter is available, the search may involve several stages: a referral to a consortium of adoption agencies, and/or the National Adoption Register,³⁰ in tandem with the development of a profile of the child to be placed in one of the family-finding publications, such as Be My Parent³¹ or, if necessary, to send to other adoption agencies, or for use in conjunction with any other innovative media. To assess the suitability of the potential 'links', judgements are made regarding the suitability of the selected adopters for the child by the child's social worker. Information for this stage is

³⁰ UK national data base operated by BAAF.

³¹ Published by BAAF.

drawn from a range of documents including the prospective adopter's report (PAR) and the child's documents including the ASP (Dance et al, 2008).

Stage 3 Negotiating the match

This stage of the process is profoundly complex and dynamic (Cousins, 2003; Quinton, 2012). The participants in this study described a process in which at first written information is exchanged. The children's social worker receives the 'link' adopter's assessment report, the PAR, which contains information relating to the adopters' circumstances, together with a list detailing the characteristics of a child they feel they can accept:

Part and parcel of the prospective adopters' report is that they [*adopters*] have got to do the horrible tick list of all the background factors they are willing to consider. So it is already sort of an idea of their capacity... when they are approved as adopters (Irene, adoption worker).

The 'link' adopters receive the child's non-identifying information, from the CARA and the ASP. Through this '*broad paper information*' exchange, the 'link' moves on to being a potential 'match' and a visit may be made by the children's social worker to meet the adopters. This initial visit provides the opportunity to share further general information and for the children's social worker to 'put a face' to the adopters described in the PAR. At this stage the prospective adopters do not see a picture of the child. The visit affords the opportunity for each individual to formulate an opinion regarding the suitability of this 'link', namely the children's social worker, the adopters and the adopters' social worker. Further visits may be arranged to discuss the child's circumstances in more detail. Sandra emphasised the importance of providing information about the child to the adopters from a range of sources:

Yes but for us it's about ensuring that the adopters have got all of the information and not just from us [the agency] but from different perspectives and so they're satisfied that they've got all of the information and they've met, you know, everybody who is involved in this child's life [and] are given this information rather than it [only] coming from us (Sandra, Adoption manager/ASSA).

Ensuring that prospective adopters have adequate information is important at this stage of the adoption arrangements. The research literature shows that where arrangements for adoption break down, at any stage of the process, one of the themes is that the adopters feel that they have been given insufficient information regarding the child and their circumstances (Randall, 2013). Ensuring that the child's information is made available to the adopters is a

significant aspect throughout the process of adoption. The intricate, detailed elements involved in the continued construction of the ASP document once a match emerges were described by Matty, an adoption social worker:

It is about making it [ASP] more appropriate; when we get together, we refine it when we have found a match and so we refine it in relation to matching with the adopters.... [this means] you... look at them [the child and the adopters] holistically - it is not just about the child and what they are going to require, it is also what the family is capable of offering and the support... that they might additionally need ... children change weekly, monthly... especially the younger ages and so I want to relook at it [ASP]... because of those changes, the new assessments that are in place, the new behaviour skills that this child is now demonstrating, coupled with the foster carers approach, my insight on the child, the social workers'... understanding and observations of the child. But also alongside the adopters form, PAR and meeting the adopters and what their needs and potential capabilities are in relation to that child as well (Matty, adoption worker; italics added).

Matty emphasised the dynamic aspect of constructing the ASP, echoing the observations that Rose made earlier, through giving attention to the past, present and the future to '*make the ASP more appropriate*'. Matty saw the content of the ASP as being '*refined*' as the match develops, which contrasts with Esther's view that the ASP is constructed as the '*end product*', when the match is decided upon. This introduces contradictions in terms of the ASP's longevity. Matty implied that the activity of '*refining*' the ASP content, by including the child's and the adopters' needs for support, enables the ASP to function beyond the arrangements for the adoption. Esther's perspective, in contrast, links the end point of the ASP to the matching event.

When everyone is positive regarding the possible match, a summary of information from the adopters' PAR is entered into the ASP document by the adoption social worker and arrangements are made to hold the matching meeting.

Stage 4 The matching meeting

The focus of the matching meeting is upon ensuring that the strengths or 'capacities' of the adopters are able to respond to the needs of the child (Quinton, 2012: 97). This meeting does not include the adopters. It is chaired by a senior practitioner or adoption service manager, and attended by the relevant social workers and the manager of the children's social worker. The focus of the meeting is to explore the 'fit' of the proposed match through the use of the ASP document, as Becky, an adoption senior practitioner described:

... in this authority we use the Adoption Support Plan to look at the child's needs and to look at how the prospective adopters meets those needs and then what additional needs the adopters have. So at that meeting we are looking at it as an agency and prior to that the prospective adopters have seen the anonymised version of the child's information and support plan.... So that is the way we look at it, it helps us with our matching.

.... so in the Support Plans what are the health needs of the child? So quite typically it will be the child's birth mother took a lot of drugs in pregnancy and what are the implications for the child now and more long term. Quite often it would be that the child is healthy now although they showed signs of withdrawal, in the future there may be a developmental uncertainty or behavioural difficulties or concentration problems and these may be as a result of the drugs taken at pregnancy. So we look at then how the adopters may feel about that, what is their response to that, do they think that they can manage that... well they have an opportunity to discuss this with our medical Adviser and that would probably be the next step. So... we... take all of the children's needs step by step and how the adopters might be able to meet them and that is how it is set out and how we use [the ASP] to start with... so as an agency we have decided that this is a good match, the adopters details are put into the second section of [the ASP]... what their specific matching criteria are and if there is any known needs [for support] then that is the opportunity to put [it] in writing and to discuss it with the adopters as to how we as an authority might be helping them or supporting the child... if it's erm an issue over contact how often it is going to be, it is recorded there and discussed with the adopters... (Becky, senior adoption practitioner).

Becky described in some detail the steps her agency follows to secure the best match between the child's needs and the adopters' 'capacities' and feelings. The ASP is described here as having the role of a 'matching tool'. In this authority and agency the reasons for supporting this match are added into the ASP document, although in other agencies the minutes from the matching meeting are attached as a separate document to the ASP. Practice appears to vary slightly regarding the handling of the matching process, as illustrated by both Deborah and Mary below:

... it is always that challenge between keeping that matching meeting brief enough, in depth enough to capture all the needs but brief enough for a quick turnaround then to get the report written and then to Panel... (Deborah, Adoption manager/ASSA).

... so at the very bottom of our matching meeting minutes it has got like 17 areas we look at [for] matching, and there is a section that I have added to mine and I think that other people have as well which is unmet need in placement. And the unmet need goes into the bottom bit for the adopters, child and placement, environment or whatever and then that is pulled into your support plan (Mary, Adoption manager/ASSA).

A further document, the Adoption Placement Report [APR], is completed at this stage and is presented together with the ASP document to the Panel. The regulations³² require a written report to be provided to the Adoption Panel for

³² Regulation 32 from the Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005

the scrutiny of the arrangements for the proposed match. Whilst the APR and the ASP share a similar format, the ASP starts its journey at the beginning of the adoption arrangements and the APR makes its first appearance at the matching stage, as the placement details begin to come to the fore:

... but what I would say is that all authorities should be completing the APR... you can't go to Panel without the APR, without the signatures of the adopters on the ASP, you know as well as on the APR; erm what we do separately, as well, to ensure the match is right, we won't let it go to Panel until the adopters have met with the medical Adviser and the medical Adviser has provided the adopters with a written report on the child's health needs... (Sandra, Adoption manager/ASSA).

The ASP grows from the material used in other documents as well as from the recording of the matching meeting. Esther described how this 'intertextuality' is part of the construction of the ASP, using materials from other documents constructed for other purposes (Atkinson and Coffey, 1996:120). Esther described their approach to constructing the ASP document:

I, we don't regurgitate what is in the PAR and CARA like we used to do, we now put the analysis of the placements and the unmet needs... in our matching documents, so we are saying you know that the adopters are this particular age, have got these particular skills and qualities and the child is this particular age and needs these and this is the gap. So that then naturally starts populating our Support Plan. No [we don't get many unmet needs] because we wouldn't use that link. We kind of try to match as best we can so that actually we end up with very little in the way of a kind of assessed support need to our placements and we very rarely have an unmet need. The worst unmet need we have had is speech therapy, we know that where the child is going there aren't the services and then we have to... wait on a waiting list (Esther, Adoption manager/ASSA).

She described that the ideal match, from her perspective, has a minimum of unmet needs. From Esther's description, the ASP is perhaps more of a list of ways in which the adopters will respond to the child's needs, giving a different perspective to her earlier reference to the ASP as being the '*end product*' of the match; the ASP seems to be seen by both Esther and Becky, as a document for recommending the match. This is an important finding that suggests how the ASP itself and the concept of support in adoption are perceived. Esther suggested that the presence of minimum support needs in the ASP document is a sign of a good match and a successful matching process where the adopters' capacities are judged to meet the child's needs.

Quinton (2012) offers a different view of matching and support:

support is *essential* to the process of matching, if by "matching" we mean the process through which adoptive parents *come to meet* the needs of adopted children (Quinton, 2012:100 (*italics in original*)).

The idea that the match is the beginning of the adoption process, as Quinton proposes, and thus essentially requires support, is overshadowed in this study by the matching activity being described as an end in itself, where we '*try and get the best match we can*'. Here, it is suggested that there is a difference of emphasis; one focus is upon the relational aspects of the matching process moving into the placement stage, and the other emphasis is upon the matching activity, the correctness of the 'fit' at that moment in time.

In the short timeframe available before the 'match' is presented to Panel, the adopters are presented with the APR and the ASP. This is known as the consultation stage.³³ The adopters are expected to add to the APR, their reasons for providing a home for this child, their views on the parental responsibility³⁴ arrangements, the adequacy of the information received, the arrangements for contact and the agency's proposed Adoption Support Plan, and then sign the two documents. In principle, this consultation process offers the opportunity for the adopters to scrutinise the child's information and the content of the ASP; this is explored further in chapter 6.

Stage 5 Adoption Panel - recommending the match

The arrangements for the constitution and functioning of the Adoption Panel are prescribed through the adoption agency regulations. The Panel's functions are to approve prospective adopters and scrutinise the agency matching recommendations and the arrangements for support; in this way the Panel is involved in the ASP process. Esther, an adoption manager/ASSA, reflected on the vast array of documentation that the Panel receives, adding to the finding that the ASP document is just one of a suite of documents:

For us the pack that goes to Panel has the adopters' PAR, the child's CARA and then the matching pack [which]... contains a welfare checklist, for... the Panel to comment on... the APR which the adopters have contributed to and signed... the minutes of the matching meeting and the Support plans... (Esther, Adoption manager/ASSA).

The adopters are invited to attend part of the Panel meeting. Jonah, a Panel chair, described how he seeks to ensure that the adopters have considered the

³³ Regulation 32 and Schedule 5, AAR (2005).

³⁴ The adoptive placement contains some shared parental responsibility between the local authority and the adopters for the child which are specified in the APR.

array of information they have received, including the ASP. He considered this to be an important function of the Panel:

... the first thing I ask them is do you feel you have all the information that you need on this child? Have you looked at all this material, are you aware of this and the other in the child's background? Have you spoken to the Medical Adviser, have they gone through all of this material? And invariably yes they have you know or they say that they have but you can't sort of take away the thought that they are so caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment, of the adoption that almost at that point you know, I don't know if this is quite fair, but you know there is almost a tendency to say yes [to] everything [and it] will be all right... and I think that it is very much for the Panel to sort of explore the could be scenarios with them... there is always that tension I think between rerunning an assessment in a Panel and not, and I think you have to draw a balance and say well look they have been through all of this before, this is a stressful experience that they are having now but for the Panel I think, for me, I feel that I need to be reassured that they know everything. That they are not going to come back and say that you didn't tell us that that was there and it was available. There are some things that you can't know, you know, but the things that you do know, they should know everything (Jonah, Panel chair).

Jonah highlighted that the Panel's task is that of seeking to ensure that the adopters are aware of the information regarding the child's history and balancing this with their evident enthusiasm to move ahead with the placement.

In some areas the arrangements for support to birth relatives, formulated in the early stages, are still part of the ASP document at this stage. When the Panel considers the match, all of the sections of the ASP and ARP are considered as part of the Panel's deliberations, including the support provision and the contact proposals. Jonah described the support provision for birth relatives as generally being unclear in the ASP document, although the Panel is required to comment on contact proposals:

... very rarely have I seen clear sort of plans for support to be offered [to birth relatives] and generally the reason is [that] the support has been offered but not accepted. And that is part of the dynamic of children being removed from parents and the parents sort of object, you know objecting to the process... Contact is always considered but direct contact is not the norm... yes, I mean, the Panel should make a recommendation around contact (Jonah, Panel chair).

The notion that '*direct contact is not the norm*' perhaps suggests that the individual ASP documents do not routinely reflect the individual interests of the child regarding Contact proposals (Neil, et al, 2013). Following the Panel's considerations of the match, the support arrangements and the proposals for contact a recommendation is made, which is then approved (or not) by the Agency Decision Maker. Should the match be approved, the next stage involves planning for the transition to the adoptive placement. The ASP falls into the

background as arrangements for introductions between the child and the prospective adopters take centre stage.

Stage 6 Placement arrangements

This stage draws upon the information from the ASP and other documents to formulate a schedule, the Placement Plan,³⁵ which provides the framework for the introductions between the adopters and the child. Sam, an adoption social worker, explained how they are involved in facilitating this introductory planning meeting and formulating the timetable for the introductions of the child to their adoptive parents:

There may be a child appreciation day in respect of the child which the adopters are invited to attend and once that has taken place then we go into the introduction planning meeting. And it is at that meeting we have the Adoption Placement Plan which we as adoption officers will pull together taking on all the information from all the other documents (Sam, adoption worker)

The reality of the adopters meeting the child and others involved in the child's life, leads to the ASP falling into the background, as the emotional dynamics of the meeting and developing a 'parent-child' relationship come to the fore. Bill, a children's social worker, described the introduction process:

... so part of the introduction process is that the adopters come at night time, [and in the] morning, so they are there for the bed routine, they're there for the bathing and stuff like that... very hands on. So the foster carer goes in the back ground trying not to intervene too much really allowing the adopters... it's very difficult, from my experience of two adoptions so far, and speaking to other social workers. The introduction process is the most draining on the adopters... what tends to happen is introductions go for a week and then a few weeks, and then things are progressing and the child usually goes towards the end of the introduction process... [and] spends more and more time at the adopters home and then when that's it and the adopters have the child.... you know, in their own care, they crash a bit... yeah well I suppose basically it's physically and mentally... its draining really (Bill, children's social worker).

Although somewhat dormant, the ASP remains in its construction phase as the child and adopters settle into their life together. The final stage of the ASP's 'journey' involves the Reviews and the application for the adoption order.

³⁵ Regulation 36, AAR, 2005.

Stage 7 Adoption Reviews leading to application for the adoption order

An adoption Review³⁶ takes place within twenty-eight days, following the child moving to their adoptive home [the placement] and thereafter at prescribed intervals. The regulations require the Review to consider particular aspects including the:

... existing arrangements for adoption support services and whether they should continue or a re-assessment of need for those services is required (AAR Guidance, 2006:104).

Practice varies regarding the revisiting the ASP document at the Review, which is considered further in Chapter 6. If the adoption agency, the children's services, the adopters and the IRO³⁷ feel that the child is progressing positively within the placement, the adopters are encouraged to apply to the court for an adoption order. A Suitability Report is prepared for the court by the child's social worker and the adopter's social worker. This report brings together all of the information for the judge regarding the child, their background, the adopters' circumstances and the support arrangements. In due course, a date is given by the court for the hearing and, assuming that all is well, the adoption order is granted. At this stage the 'journey' of the construction of the ASP ends. The placing authority, however, remains responsible for responding to any support matters for a period of three years following the granting of the adoption order.

Describing the final stages of the ASP's 'journey' in this factual manner hides the huge personal adjustments from the child, the adopters and the foster carers, as Irene, an adoption social worker observed:

I was looking at the support plan for that child [from]... the local authority, and... so those things had been identified and it was recognised that it probably was going to be hard for him but I mean the reality for him was that he was going back and forth for a period of introductions he would get back to [the] foster carer and say, 'I still do love you'. You know and it [is] what you expect children to cope with; it is enormous really (Irene, adoption worker).

The protracted construction of the ASP throughout this 'journey' illustrates that the ASP has limited significance to the arrangements for the adoption (Kaniuk, 2010). Although the Adoption Agency regulations refer frequently to the need to consider support, the ASP is only specifically linked into the

³⁶ Regulation 37 AA (Wales) Regulations 2005

³⁷ IRO – Independent Reviewing Officer who chairs adoption Review.

arrangements in two places. The first is in the matching process (stage 4) and the second is through the linking of the ASP with the APR for the Panel's considerations (stage 5). This finding is developed further in the following section through exploring the ways in which the practitioners described the operational space available for the ASP within the adoption arrangements.

5.3 The operational context of the Adoption Support Plan

Ottaway et al's (2014) recent report focuses on the provision and experiences of adoption support services in Wales. Relevant to this study is the fact that, Ottaway et al's report briefly comments upon the phase before the adoption order:

All agencies highlighted that following a child's placement with their adoptive family, support continues to be available through the adoption agency and the child's social worker until the adoption order is granted. The adoption support provided was reported to be responsive to need, and designed to ensure as smooth a transition as possible for the child and their adoptive family until the adoption order is granted (Ottaway et al, 2014:35).

There is no specific reference to the ASP, although there is the suggestion that support is available. This support is described as being '*responsive to need*' and '*designed to ensure as smooth a transition as possible*' up to the granting of the adoption order. The absence of any specific reference to the ASP is significant in the context of this study, possibly implying that the ASP is not seen as an important document during this period; support for the adoption, it seems, is not linked here to the construction of the ASP. This leads the way to exploring how the practitioners in this study described the space within which the ASP operates. Here the analysis aims to disentangle the impact of the operational systems upon the functioning of the ASP document, during the adoption arrangements (Dawson, 1996; Mullins, 2005; Senior and Loades, 2008:278).

5.3.1 Interface between the Regulations³⁸

The interface between the two sets of regulations in respect of support was touched upon in Chapter 4. Adoptions involve both detailed legal procedures and social work practices to ensure that the child's best interests are served and that they move safely and securely into their adoptive home (Adoption and

³⁸ Adoption Agency Regulations and Adoption Support Services Regulations (Wales) 2005.

Children Act, 2002:1). The intention that support may assist both in the pre-order arrangements as well as beyond the adoption order was introduced in the ACA, 2002 through *the maintenance of an adoption support service* for those affected by adoption, which is part of the adoption service (Section 3, ACA, 2002); also included is the provision of *prescribed* support services to be triggered following the eligibility of need through an assessment (Section 4, ACA, 2002). Entitlement to support in adoption seems to straddle these two sets of regulations, although in practice the identity of the ASP, the focus of this study, and access to support seems to be separated by the adoption order.

The operationalising of the explicit entitlement to support in adoption has mainly been added into the Agency functions. The eight authorities participating in this study had different organisational structures through which they responded to support requirements. Some adoption social workers held both responsibilities (Agency and support³⁹) and in other organisations the roles were carried out by different people. The intermingling of these functions also existed in frontline management roles where the combined roles of Adoption Agency manager and Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA)⁴⁰ were vested in one person. However, in one area, three local authorities were operating as one adoption agency, with one manager for the adoption service, and a senior practitioner fulfilling the ASSA role, overseeing the adoption support staff and the support service.

The ASP developed during the arrangements for an adoption is located within the Adoption Agency regulations (AAR, 2005) and is the focus of this study. The second and potential subsequent ASPs fall into the period beyond the adoption order, requiring an assessment of need, notification and consultation procedures, including the possible drafting of an ASP document, which rests within the Adoption Support Services Regulations (ASSR, 2005). The legitimacy and relevance of the ASP constructed during the pre-order phase becomes less clear post-order. The value of a coherent and effective ASP pre-order is potentially sharpened, should the adoptive family require support after the order and the need was not established pre-order or the post-order pathway

³⁹ The tasks of the Agency role relate to the arrangements for the adoption; the task of support has been added following the ACA, 2002.

⁴⁰ An Adoption Support Services Adviser (ASSA) is required by Regulation 6 in the Adoption Support Services Regulations, 2005.

for access to support is unclear (NAW, 2012; Selwyn et al, 2014). Exploring the issues within the operational space of this boundary is the emphasis of the next section.

The first illustration of the complexities existing within the adoption service, relating to the legitimacy and location of support in adoption, can be seen in the extract from an interview with a group of ASSAs (see Schedule of Data, Appendix E). The discussion centred on the issue of the ASP's status within the arrangements for an adoption, and the provision of support. The exchange conveys ambivalent attitudes towards the ASP's position within the 'space' of the adoption arrangements:

- Solomon: ... we have a duty to assess but I am always unclear about what [our] duty is or the responsibility is to deliver on what we have assessed
- Esther: You don't have to deliver
- Solomon: Well that is why I am questioning whether it [ASP] is legally binding or not, I feel that you are professionally obliged to supply those services but it stops short of being...
- Deborah: If you have got a signed up Plan then that would be legally binding I guess, wouldn't it?
- Esther: If you have assessed the need and you have put it into a Plan... the Plan is your intention to provide...
- Solomon: Well we are saying that some of them do [go to court] and some don't
- Doreen: I mean it is awful in that we are sat around here and we don't even know if it [ASP] is legally binding or not
- Deborah: It is an agreement I suppose isn't it....
- Doreen: Well I suppose adopters have accepted a placement on the basis on what is in there, they are given the support plan and they accept the placement....
- Esther: I think that it is a protected function for adopters
- Mary: It is also a protective function for the agency as well... But does it... Yes and as things you know develop later on. You have acted in good faith at that time, this is the information that was available, isn't it ... But then turn it on its head, the support... also identified say indirect letterbox contact; how many times have we had adopters a year or two years down the line.... who have then said I am not doing it anymore. We say well you actually signed up to it in the Plan but what else can we do if the birth parents are complaining.... yes but it is the same really, we can't use that support plan as a mechanism to enforce it can we, we can only advise the birth parents to take that route...
- Esther: We can't enforce it, you can only help the birth parents; but you can be asked by a solicitor what was the agreement at the time
- Doreen: The thing is... It is not legally binding
- Deborah: It is an agreement though isn't it... the contact agreement, we say, that ours [the contact agreement] is not a legally binding document ...
- Solomon: I am not sure if the actual purpose [of the ASP] is a mixed picture, I think that it's the sort of detail of the legal status of this and all the rest of it and the actual delivery is the problem isn't it. Do you

think that is fair, that is what I thought, the actual purpose is clear I think, isn't it?

Esther: I think that your description of the purpose is pretty [in line] with what the regs say, kind of a framework to articulate the support needs...

Solomon: to identify structure and...

Esther: I think that is quite good.

The discussion focused on the legal and operational boundaries, rather than choosing to explore ways to clarify and resolve barriers to support. In a context of scarce resources, boundaries tend to come to the fore, rather than exploring ways to resolve the tensions (Luckock and Hart, 2005). Professionals operating within bureaucracies can both face and pose challenges when mediating or acting as gatekeepers, in this case for adoption support provisions, across different types of boundaries (Morgan, 1997).

The second topic relates to the idea that behind the ASP document sits the operational notion of a 'case'. A 'case' represents the file containing information and documents relating to the activities involved in arrangements for an adoption. Two types of 'cases' were described as impacting upon the 'space' of the ASP:

The ones [children] that we are placing, the support plan kind of ends at the time of the adoption [order], if there is an on-going need then that stays open with us [adoption team] as an adoption support case, and that support plan is reviewed annually (Esther, Adoption manager/ASSA).

It is slightly different to what we do ... we review the Adoption Support Plan at the time the adoption order is granted and it is either signed off and closed.... the majority I would close... and then if they come back again in the future it is a brand new one [case]. Or if there is on-going needs then it will transfer over to an adoption support case, [and] be a new referral [to the adoption support team] (Deborah, Adoption manager/ASSA).

The distinction between an adoption case and an adoption support case suggests that the ASP is structurally inhibited from continuously operating as a focus of support, from the arrangements for the adoption to beyond the granting of the adoption order. The process of constructing the ASP document seems to transform adoption support into something 'other', and out of the ordinary (the ordinary being no support), splintering off the 'space' within which the ASP operates (Ottaway et al, 2014). This is reinforced through the processes of managing the work-flow by the 'open and closed' case procedures (Morgan, 1997). In the unusual event that support provision has been

identified in the ASP, the adoption case and the ASP move beyond the adoption order and have a new status, becoming an adoption support case. Deborah explained the case management process in her agency:

... examples are far and few between but... where... there is some sort of therapeutic or direct work intervention that even though the adoption order has been made... is still required.... we will, just to help keep track of where our systems is... we can still close [the adoption file] but we would open [a] new referrals [for] adoption support. So that Plan probably still stays the same and comes across with them [the case] but it will then be reviewed and monitored and held by adoption support team. And then there are the usual reviews and re-assessments as and when they are needed (Deborah, Adoption manager/ASSA).

The arrangements that Deborah described are different to the way in which requests for support are responded to in Solomon's organisation:

.... but I suppose for cold cases, as we call them, where the adoption order has been granted and then the family comes back, that assessment of Adoption Support needs would go through our front door, intake and assessment, and there are all sorts of problems with that really (Solomon, Adoption manager/ASSA).

Thus the notion of 'cases' serves to strengthen the undermining of the ASP's capacity as a continuous source of support to the child, the adopters or the birth relatives, throughout the arrangements for the adoption and beyond.

The third theme relates to the insistence by Adoption managers that the children's social worker is responsible for completing the ASP, as Sandra, an adoption manager and ASSA observed:

.... and now quite often in practice what happens is the social worker, that is the child's social worker, in liaison with our adoption social workers will work together to put that [about the adopters and reasons for the match] information into the ASP and quite often we [the adoption team] will take responsibility for doing that part of it; **but what I don't want to move away from is that the responsibility for that ASP remains the responsibility of the child's social worker...** (Sandra, Adoption Manager/ ASSA, highlight added).

On reflection, there are several possible reasons for why this division of roles is significant: Sandra may be protecting her adoption staff from additional work; she may be complying with procedures and the regulation guidance; or she may be concerned about accountability in the event of demands for support that had not been anticipated during the arrangements. Whatever Sandra's reasons, the effects of insisting that the children's social worker is responsible for the construction of the ASP perhaps serves to maintain a schism in the positioning of support in adoption, between the safeguarding and 'looked after' responsibilities and the normalisation of life-long support within adoption.

Furthermore, among the participants, the adoption social workers were critical of the children's social workers' lack of expertise regarding the complexities of adoption, as Sam, an adoption social worker, indicated

So [children] social workers will make use of those other outside report writers but it is still perhaps not looking at the child within the adoptive placement and what the adopters might need to think about 3 years, 5 years, 10 years down the line (Sam, adoption worker).

Adoption knowledge and expertise is mainly located within the adoption service (Ottaway et al, 2014). The potential for the ASP to effectively function in its operational 'space' is thus further compromised by the insistence upon retaining barriers rather than exploiting opportunities for promoting the status of the ASP and the potential value of support.

5.3.2 Issues emerging pre-placement influencing the ASP's 'space'

The initial construction of the ASP is part of the pre-placement stage, which includes a range of social work activities that are concerned with making preparations before the child is placed with the adopters. The children's social worker has the responsibility for visiting the child in their foster home, providing information to the birth relatives and preparing to complete the life-story book. They may be involved in the court proceedings, together with undertaking assessments and contact between the child and their birth family. The child's social worker is also required to complete the documents used as a basis for formalising the decision for the adoption. During the pre-placement stage, the ASP content, together with other documents, is used for the search for an adoptive family, a task undertaken by the adoption social worker. The pre-placement period can be viewed as a waiting time where perhaps defining support for the anticipated adoption is characterised as less of an operational priority. Esther highlighted that this pre-placement period can involve an extended part of the child's life:

I think that depends on... if you have got a 6 month old child... [at the] should be placed [decision stage], you are not going to necessarily have the same support needs at matching. You might have that child waiting 18 months to 2 years [for a] ... placement and so you can't do all that preparatory work, you have to do your adoption support direct work in kind of 3 stages, kind of the routes and origins from here and now is done with the child with their child care social worker because that is the core business of the safeguarding social worker [child's social worker]. The move on work would go into matching for us [the adoption team]... So like you I wouldn't call that direct work but [I] didn't think of it as adoption support... (Esther, Adoption manager/ASSA).

Esther seemed to be expressing distinctions regarding adoption support in terms of the stages in the process and also the roles of the social workers. She acknowledged that the child's support needs would change during this period (this contrasts with Bill's views earlier); she also expressed uncertainty as to what constitutes adoption support during the pre-placement stage. Revisiting this point, she emphasised that she did not view the work undertaken to prepare the child for moving into their adoptive home, which she described as 'move on work', as adoption support work:

We do very targeted... targeted pre move work and a child is not allowed to move because the Panel need to see the work, the preparation work that has gone on with that child and that [work] is submitted to Panel at match. So Panel need to know that the child is ready and so we are doing that, but I don't think of that as adoption support (Esther, Adoption manager/ASSA).

Thus, here, *preparation work* is not viewed as support for the adoption. This again illustrates the evident separations that dog the definition of adoption support, and by association the purpose of the ASP. Esther illustrated that she did not link support with the social work activities involved in securing the adoption. Esther's observations are all the more perplexing, given that within the ASP document structure, discussed in Chapter 4, the section *Preparation Work* is specifically regarded as part of the arrangements for introducing support for the adoption. Solomon also described 'move on work' as direct work that he regarded as the responsibility of the children's social worker:

That is sort of direct work though isn't it... [it's only] a question about whether you call it adoption support work or direct work isn't it and therefore it is the social workers responsibility to do that.... (Solomon, Adoption manager/ASSA).

Solomon seemed to be implying that the organisational divisions between the child and the adoption social workers should determine the definition of adoption support practice and, perhaps by implication, the development of the ASP.

Mary viewed the ASP as involving several plans such as a 'should be placed plan' and a 'matching support plan', implying the idea of plans within plans:

... we actually do a 'should be placed' support plan and that type of stuff would come into that and not into the 'matching' support plan that we are discussing today (Mary, Adoption manager/ASSA).

Mary's perspective, that the ASP is made up of a range of different plans that are involved during the different stages of the adoption journey, deepens the

confusion as to how the notion of the ASP should be understood, adding a further challenge for the ASP in establishing its visibility and contribution to the arrangements.

5.3.3 Issues emerging post-placement influencing the ASP's 'space'

Following the placement of a child with their adopters, the profile of the ASP becomes less visible. Shula proposed the idea that the placement is the beginning of the adoptive family's journey, where support should be available as a continuous thread, *dipping in and out* of the adoptive family's lives:

Yes... I say to all my adopters when they have a child placed, you know as soon as it starts it will be a journey... obviously for me the support ends when they go for their adoption order but it shouldn't really we should be there, we should be dipping in and out of people's lives throughout really because you know their [child's] brain starts shifting again and they are starting to ask questions around their identity (Shula, adoption social worker).

Shula envisioned a fluid form of adoption support. Although she did not refer directly to the ASP, she acknowledged that at present the adoption order defines the end point of her involvement.

In contrast Esther's interpretation of the ASP seems to raise a fundamental question relating to the purpose of the ASP during the adoption arrangements:

....we wouldn't support the order being raised if there was still unmet needs (Esther, Adoption manager/ ASSA).

There are several troubling implications in associating an absence of needs in the ASP with the agency's support for the application of the adoption order. At one level, Esther was directly referring to her perception of the adoption agency's role in matching; a lack of *unmet needs* can, in this context, be equated with a good match and the agency's agreement for the adopters to apply for the order. This suggests a formulaic approach to the process of matching, which is the gateway for the child and adopters coming together. The reasons for considering the match as suitable rely on information (the child's and the adopters') from the past and the present. Esther's perspective suggests a static notion of child development and the notion of becoming a parent; the adopters are either able or not able, rather than being facilitated to become able. Quinton (2012) suggests that support can be viewed as a means by which the '*adoptive parents come to meet the needs of adopted children*' (2012:100). The suggestion that the adoption agency would withhold

their endorsement of the adopters' application for the order if there were *unmet needs* raises the issue of the use of power within the operational space of the ASP. Provision of support in adoption is complex, balancing the success of adoption with the recognition that at certain times different levels of support may be required (van Ijzendoorn and Juffer, 2006; Selwyn et al, 2006, 2014). There are many reasons, beyond the matching event, for ensuring that support is made explicit post-placement, during the phase of 'settling into adoptive family life' (Selwyn et al, 2014:135; Jones and Hackett, 2011).

The ASP is afforded the opportunity of visibility in the post-placement stage through adoption Reviews, which are required by the AA regulations and are chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). In principle, the Review discussion would enable the ASP content to include the adoptive family's views, to consider future transitions and 'normalise' support for the adoption. The AAR guidance suggests that the Review, amongst other matters, should consider:

The existing arrangements for the provision of adoption support services and whether they should continue or a re-assessment of need for those services is required (AAR Guidance (Wales), 2006:104).

However, in this study, the presence of the ASP in this operational space was not assured. Solomon's acknowledged oversight suggests an undervaluing of the ASP's contribution to the process:

I don't think that we are very good at reviewing Adoption Support Plans, we might review them internally but we don't actually review them almost sitting down with the adoptive family, I think that tends to slide off the agenda if I am honest (Solomon, Adoption manager/ASSA).

Sandra accepted that she was unaware and uncertain as to whether the ASP was used in their Review meetings:

... you know once the child is finally placed with the adopters... it [ASP] should be reviewed in the adoption Review, which is to review the ASP... it should happen, I can't say whether it does or not...I'm not a 100% sure... because again you know... I expect it does. I'm not particularly party to those, maybe interesting to ask some IROs in terms of how they review adoption placements, whether they are actively reading the ASP and reviewing [it] but... out of those adoption Reviews the Support Plan should be updated if it's felt it needed to be updated. Erm that [is]... the main purpose for me... of those... Reviews (Sandra, Adoption Manager/ASSA).

The significance of Reviews in terms of exploring the ASP's value for the adoption placement was not able to be developed in this study, and should be

an area for future research. From a practitioner's perspective, Shula highlighted missed opportunities in using the ASP when difficulties emerged post-placement. She explained that despite her efforts to provide an IRO with a copy of the ASP, the document was not used during the Review discussion:

I think yeah, I think it [ASP] has a role... but I feel that we don't use them enough... I mean no IRO, that I have worked with, would use it, as they Review the adoption placement, you know we will... try and flag it up and then erm I have emailed it on to an IRO in the hope that they would bring it along with them when I feel that there are issues [that]... need to be addressed [at the Review]... but then you are doing it wondering you know will anybody look at it in the future just because with the Adoption Support Plan that I did for a sibling group that were placed out of Wales even where that has become an issue erm and senior managers have been involved and having to travel and deal with the [receiving] local authority. Whether erm they have used the Adoption Support Plan at all... have they looked at it because the arguments that they have been having with the adopters, you just think well if you look at the Adoption Support Plan it would be addressed there... Oh things... the adopters are saying that they weren't made aware of how serious erm these children's issues might be in the future and it quite clearly was addressed within the Adoption Support Plan (Shula, adoption worker).

Shula raised crucial points regarding the use of the ASP during the post-placement stage. She questioned whether the ASP was used or read by anyone in the placing agency or the receiving local authority. In her example, however, it seems clear that the adopters and the receiving authority had read the ASP as their concerns related to the perceived lack of information regarding the seriousness of the *children's issues*. The availability of information in adoption is an important theme, which was touched on by Jonah, a Panel chair, earlier. Shula suggested that she has limited power in her role, as well as highlighting some of the complexities underpinning information sharing. The ASP has, it is suggested, a critical role, post-placement, for developing the possibilities of support; the implications of the child's history for the adopters will change following the reality of the placement of their child (NAW, 2012; Selwyn et al, 2014: 132).

5.4 Concluding Summary

The ASP's 'journey' through the arrangements for an adoption spans a long period of time, butting up against many other documents, people and key decisions, before the adoptive placement occurs. Maintaining a focus upon support pre-placement presents difficulties, as this is a 'waiting' period for the child and the focus on the ASP is overtaken by the matching process. Following

the placement, the ASP could be expected to be more visible, for example in Review meetings, although this was found not to be the case in this study.

The analysis found that various operational barriers affected the ASP's 'space' throughout the arrangements for an adoption. The first finding centres on the use of language and the ways in which support in adoption is constructed. Two examples highlight this issue; (a) the contested legitimacy of the ASP for adoption support; and (b) where direct work or preparation for the child's move (*move on work*) are not seen as constituting adoption support practice. The second finding relates to the organisational practice of case management creating a distinction between the 'adoption work' and the 'adoption support work'; invariably '*closing the case*' following the adoption order terminated the role of this specific ASP. The third finding emerges through defensive practices surrounding responsibilities for the construction of the ASP (Ottaway et al, 2014). Here the power of language was seen to permeate into definitions of, and responsibilities for, adoption support.

The absence of engagement with adopters regarding the negotiation of any support matters is considered in the next chapter, which also explores wider attitudes underpinning the place of the ASP in adoption arrangements.

Chapter 6 Adoption support within and beyond the Adoption Support Plan

6.1 Introduction

This final empirical chapter seeks to conclude the analysis through considering two related aspects, adopters' and professionals' perspectives of the Adoption Support Plan (ASP) specifically, and their wider attitudes towards the idea of support in adoption. The first section sets out the views of adopters in terms of their experiences of the ASP and of the support they may have received through the arrangements for the adoption of their child. The previous two chapters have highlighted that adopters are not included in the construction of the ASP and thus it is significant to discover how adopters come to know and understand that support exists (should it be required), or indeed the possible value of an ASP document. The significance of support for the adoptions of children from local authority care was highlighted in the literature review, although the ubiquitous aspects of support can obscure the processes of identifying and formalising the provision of individual support (Burns, 2013; O'Neill, 2003).

The second section draws further on the practitioners' perspectives regarding their views on the relevance of the ASP for new adoptions as well as exploring wider attitudes regarding the position of support in adoption. Through exploring the adopters and practitioners' perspectives the chapter also explores some overarching themes such as the position of information, communication and uncertainty within the ASP production process and the adoption system. The final section of the chapter considers the issue of support for contact and some of the more recent risks posed by the use of the Internet and social media.

6.2 Adopters' perspectives on the Adoption Support Plan and support in their adoption

Five adopters agreed to participate in this study and their anonymised details are included in the Schedule of Data in Appendix E. The general challenges of engaging adopters to participate in this study were considered in Chapter 3. The data forming the basis of this analysis was drawn from the adopters'

contributions during the semi-structured interviews. First, a brief introduction to the adopters is provided for the reader.

Jessica and David had adopted Faith just over a year ago. Shaun and Jean were at the point of finding out how to apply for their adoption order whilst Jade and Luke had their adoption order granted a fortnight before the interview took place. They provided a copy of their ASP for the research but, in common with the other adopters, had not been directly involved in the construction of their ASP. There was also limited e-mail communication with an adoptive parent who had adopted a child almost six years ago. She scanned a copy of her ASP for the research and also commented that her ASP did not '*say much*'. It was, however, significant that this adopter was able to locate her ASP, despite the lapse of time.

None of the five adopters had been aware of the ASP as the arrangements for their adoption progressed. Thus the interviews focused upon their wider experiences and feelings about the adoption process and their views regarding support. The themes developed here emerged from their contributions, with support for these adopters operating in many ways.

6.2.1 The invisibility of the Adoption Support Plan document

Knowing when the adopters were first aware of the ASP was difficult to establish as the specific identity of the document did not *feature* for them during the stages of linking, matching, introduction and placement; indeed many things remained *a bit of a blur*. Jade and Luke explained that their document had arrived in the post following Philip's placement with them:

It didn't feature... well the actual document itself didn't feature until... it came a couple of weeks after he'd been placed, in the post (Luke, adoptive parent).

The trouble is that an awful lot of things are a bit of a blur... particularly around the sort of introductions [period] (Jade, adoptive parent).

The other adopters were not able to recall the ASP. Jessica and David believed that they had all the paperwork, but they did not recall this particular document:

Yes, we've got a variety of things... We got all the paperwork from [the placing authority]... and so we've got the contact arrangements, and the support plan here I think, we've got all manner of paperwork... are you talking about the contact one? Is that it... is it what you're talking about? (Jessica and David, adoptive parents).

Jean was surprised that there was an Adoption Support Plan for them as adopters, and wondered whether the document they signed regarding contact at the recent review was the relevant one:

Adoption Support Plan... you mean for us... adopters? We signed a document at the last review meeting.... we agreed to contact... Scott would have letter box contact with his birth family... so we signed a document to say we would do that ... then as far as support... I can't [recall]... (Jean, adoptive parent).

For the adopters that did recognise the ASP, the content of the document was described as being a 'summary' of what had been discussed during the stages of the adoption, but not a document that needed to be 'gone through':

It was discussed... when we were in [the placing authority], when we were with everyone together with the foster carers ...I think. I think it ended up sort of by being something like a summary of everything that had gone on before... I don't remember sitting down and saying right we need to go through this document... it was like everything fed into it... so they then summarised it all in this sort of way... (Jessica and David, adoptive parents).

I would say that a lot of the content of the Plan had been discussed ...it was not that we were looking at this and going I've never seen this before ...but now we've had it all in a single document (Jade, adoptive parent).

Jade described the ASP in terms of its generic structure and purpose rather than in terms of the document being relevant or useful for her:

All I would say is that it summarises, effectively... Philip's position, our position... so this is the situation, this is where support maybe required which could be specific to our case or it could be something which is general, routine every single time, this is what needs to be done and this is who is going to do it effectively and outlines that for you as well... that's how I see it... whether that's right I don't know (Jade, adoptive parent).

For Luke, when he received the document, following Philip's placement, he felt that it added (for him) an insight into the social worker's discernment of them:

You need a lot of support, and I suppose a lot of information, when you are in the early stages, of well the introductions and then the early stages of the placement and I think what it provided for us was... information about Philip and it sounds a bit strange... and information about us... i.e. what they knew about us or what their perception of us was... (Luke, adoptive parent).

The reality that support needs did not appear in the document because the child was too young was accepted by Jade and Luke, as was the notion that the authors of the document judged that at that moment Phillip and his adoptive parents had no needs that required support:

... it does say that explicitly several times, it just says that he's too young... to be applicable... and also he's been with one foster carer for a long time and reached his developmental milestones so.... [he's had stability]... yeah so there weren't really too many issues that I think would necessarily have come up here that would have been a surprise to us or that would have necessarily have needed a statement in here [the ASP] (Jade and Luke, adoptive parents).

However, the medical adviser had flagged up potential concerns regarding future 'unknowns' that may affect Philip's learning capacities in school, and from the birth parent's history it was clear that the adopters were being advised that future learning concerns may occur. Their ASP did not consider such future eventualities or what courses of action could be available if Jade and Luke required support. More significantly, Jade and Luke did not expect such considerations to be included in the document. Factors influencing the shaping of expectations for support in adoption are important and are revisited below.

The ASP document content contains no direct contributions from the child, the adopters or the birth relatives. As noted in the previous chapters, it is a document that is constructed mainly from other documents, although Luke suggested that their involvement had emerged through the information from their PAR⁴¹ document, whilst Jade judged it to be re-constituted content, *a copy and paste job*:

Only to the extent that we were obviously... involved with the visits/discussions with the [adoption agency] social workers in the run up to us being approved and then that material was then used in the various parts of this form (Luke, adoptive parent).

It's a copy and paste job rather than us actually writing it... I think it was the case where if there was anything in it we hadn't agreed with, or we felt we wanted additional input into... there would have been absolutely no problem with us taking that to our social worker, or Philip's social worker or bringing it up at the Review meeting... so I think at that point probably it... was... a working document and if something needs changing we can look at it (Jade, adoptive parent).

The research interview facilitated a debate regarding the content of the ASP, its usefulness and whether amendments could occur. Different impressions were expressed, with Jade viewing the ASP content as 'work in progress' and Luke seeing the document as a fait accompli:

I think... I'm not sure I was clear about that; it sounds like you picked that up and I didn't... the letter says we enclose a copy of the ASP for your retention; it does make it sound a bit like a fait accompli doesn't it? (Luke, adoptive parent).

⁴¹ Prospective Adopter's Report Adoption Agency(Wales) Regulation 32 - BAAF template.

Jade and Luke were reflective regarding the value of the ASP, perhaps more in hindsight and as a consequence of re-visiting their adoption experience during the interview. Jade focused on the emotional demands of the process and saw documents as providing an anchor point:

.... this is true I think of the process as a whole is that you spend quite a lot of time talking to people about various things and quite often you're on a bit of an emotional high... you're trying to take things in and he's [Luke] really good at retaining information and also writing things down, I'm completely useless at both, so having something written down is very useful because you've got it to look back at rather than going, what was I supposed to be doing. So you know, it sounds a really mundane reason... if someone has written that down and put it in front of you it's a useful time to have that, because your head's in a whirl and just because somebody tells you to do it and you nod and you smile, doesn't mean it's actually gone in... which is not news to anybody but being on the, you know, actually on the sort of the receiving end of that, is helpful... (Jade, adoptive parent).

For Luke, the ASP document provided a tangible and concrete sign that the adoption experience was real. He expressed almost naïve observations regarding the content of document, such as *if it's in the report it must be true* together with insightful reflections regarding his own *strange experiences*; the ASP document provided, in part, an anchor point for him too:

I think... maybe this will sound silly I don't know... it felt... having stuff written down sort of validates things... for me at least... the fact that it was all there in the report meant that it must be happening sort of thing and that minimises the feeling of square peg in a round hole or that it was all unreal and it couldn't be possibly be happening.... if it's in the report it must be true sort of thing... so that provided support in that way... I guess it is something to have in your mind when you are going through for the first time some obviously quite strange experiences and there is the Venn diagram of how much of what you are trying to cope with is adoption and how much is what you're trying to cope with is just being chucked into the deep end of being a parent to any toddler... I won't say that it covered all of that but it covered parts of it... (Luke, adoptive parent).

There was a sense during the interviews that the process of exploring their experiences and perceptions of the ASP, which had not featured for them, involved them criticising the ASP or finding wanting the practice of the adoption agency. This was not an impression that the adopters wanted to convey; they felt extremely positive about the workers involved with their adoption. The research discussion took place when some of the adopters were in the process of applying for the adoption order and others had recently had the order granted; for each of these adopters, feelings of gratitude were evident. The reality that the ASP document had not featured significantly for them before was brought sharply to the fore as a consequence of the research interview. This may have contributed to some defensiveness when the

discussion raised questions that the adopters had not previously considered. Although the adopters involved in these interviews were reflective, they were perhaps not, as yet, able to consider the ‘long view’, or be constructively critical. In contrast, in the short electronic communication with the adopter whose Plan was seven years old, they commented succinctly that their document didn’t ‘say much’.

In a process that is populated by documents, the presence of the ASP itself did not function as a supportive mechanism for the adopters in this study, especially given its invisibility in the post-placement arrangements. As Luke noted, whilst the arrival of the ASP in the post did not equate to an absence of support; the support they received and valued was provided through the face-to-face visits and communication exchanges that took place:

... but we were getting quite frequent monitoring⁴² visits both from our adoption agency and Philip’s local authority so as Jade said with one or other of the social workers we would have discussed just about everything that is in the document; what was different [was] it all came in one package (Luke, adoptive parent).

The presence of the ASP document should, it would seem, be distinguished from other forms of support, such as relationships with others and the function of information. The term *monitoring* was discussed in Chapter 4 in terms of the ASP content and the role of adopters; here the term *monitoring* is used to describe the purpose of the social worker’s visits to the adopters.

6.2.2 Information as a source of support

Information is seen to be a complex concept, closely linked to knowledge and data; it is essentially biased (not neutral) and contextual (associated with time and location), requiring understanding (or misunderstanding) from the recipient (Zins, 2007). The agency’s role with regard to the exchange of information within the arrangements for adoption, is to focus upon the child’s welfare, throughout their life; this is to be the ‘paramount consideration for the court and the adoption agency’ (ACA, 2002, section 1(4)). The significance of information in adoption has already been touched on, but here the emphasis is upon exploring some themes emerging from the adopters’ views.

⁴² ‘Monitoring’ is a term used by social workers to describe their legal duty to visit a child in placement.

Jade recalled the useful nature of the information during the early stages when they were thinking about adoption:

... our.... first sort of tentative enquiry and she came out and sat down with us and said ok this is what adoption is now... and actually having that explained to you and having those facts put in place and... effectively what adoption then means... having that information and then having some of that information again but an awful lot more and in an awful lot more detail in that course was very useful... and then again ... you pick up on elements of that again and again so yeah you're right [it]was useful (Jade, adoptive parent).

The preparation course was a further noteworthy information event, which was seen to have supportive value as well as being experienced by the adopters as a means of testing their commitment:

I think the initial preparation that we did, the three day course.... we weren't fully decided when we did that very early on.... so that again that is supportive at a different stage but that kind of thing, that course was really very useful. There is a certain, not mind shift, but you do have your eyes opened and that happens from the word go I think (Jade, adoptive parent).

... and in those three days they bombard you with information and they give you every possibility.... And I think its possibly done so that people who are not a 100% committed, [it] could put you off (Jessica and David, adoptive parents).

During the phases of making the arrangements for adoption, the process of information exchange and sharing may be likened to the idea of carrying out a 'cultural review' (from McCracken (1988), in Holland, 2011:171) within assessments, where the exchanges of information provide the agency and adopters with opportunities to filter and clarify, whilst each makes sense of the complex implications. For the adopters, they are stepping, so to speak, into a new world, that of becoming an adoptive parent. A huge amount of information is exchanged during their assessment for the construction of their PAR. At the stage of linking and matching there is a need for them to explore how the specific information about this child aligns with their hopes regarding adoption:

.... and you can't predict what information it is that you need... I'm sure we were given the right messages. I'm sure [our adoption social worker]... was giving us all the right messages... it's our own... my own nervousness and fear makes it difficult to hear it.... a positive way of saying it [is] you have trepidations, concerns... you have to live it... the experience changes it [the information]... ours has turned out very well so we are very fortunate... (Jean, adoptive parent).

For the social workers, their focus is on processing and reconciling several aspects, such as, can and will this prospective adopter meet this child's needs, or whether this can even be known (Quinton, 2012).

Initial information about the child chosen as the link is at first shared anonymously and verbally from the CARA document, forming the basis for *finding out what else is involved*:

But... when they first gave us information... it's all very anonymous to start with... you get some details... [which]... are read out to you... you don't see anything as such... and then we were given some time to think about it... [David said] she can come tomorrow as far as I'm concerned... no it... just felt right I think... what... they said was just exactly what you wanted to hear... and you know you don't know all the issues then... then when you start asking more questions you find out what else is involved... all the issues involved... and then we go from there... (Jessica and David, adoptive parents).

Whilst sources of information have supportive dimensions, the challenge of imparting and understanding the information was raised by Jean, who recalled the range of emotions she experienced at this stage:

But the fact of the matter is they were so transparent... they probably emphasised the negatives more than what we've seen... meaning I'll say this again, they were so conscious of making this completely transparent for us so we can make a decision; when we saw the file it was really frightening cos you just got this negative information... but then when you meet the little boy you say oh my goodness yes I can see that but no that isn't him... [it]... doesn't match (Jean, adoptive parent).

When the link between a prospective adopter and a specific child is first identified, the initial information sharing focuses on what the child's experiences have been; the adopters describe a picture of the child's personality, which is developed as the information sharing progresses. The distinction here is interesting and insightful. The information provided for the adopters comes from documents presenting the child's history, experiences and events that are known about and written. Recording information in a document suspends it in time, bringing with it a responsibility with regard to the way in which it is shared (knowledge as facts) and how this may be perceived and interpreted by others (knowledge as process) (Holland, 2011; Sheppard et al, 2000).

6.2.3 The supportive function of the foster carers' role and their information

In this study, foster carers were seen as important sources of support in themselves, particularly regarding the information they provided regarding the child. The support role is crucial in terms of the ways in which information is exchanged and in the preparation of the child for the transition to the adoptive placement:

... we had to provide... an introduction visual/audio book.... that was a recommendation... [the foster carer] suggested it... so he had all of this as part of his preparation so he knew we were coming (Jean, adoptive parent).

The adopters all spoke about how important and supportive the foster carers had been. This also included providing the adopters with details of the child and access to their home:

...and I think what helped... in the two or three weeks preceding that, one of things that we had done was that we'd met Philip's foster carer who was lovely... so she told us... a bit more about the kind of little boy he was as opposed to the information that you get prior to that... there's a little bit about who he is, but there's a lot more about what he's experienced, obviously... so you start to have more of a personality... and that helps (Jade, adoptive parent).

We had to meet up... with the foster carers to talk... about her and then we had to go to their house and meet Faith for the first time in their house... it was very awkward because these people are looking after her and we had to have a meal with them you know on that day and it really puts a lot of pressure on.... and... they didn't quite know how to take us do you know, they were protective of Faith, she's been there for almost a year... and they needed to make sure they felt that we were ok.... (David, adoptive parent).

Foster carers were also seen to be instrumental in facilitating the shift of the relationship with the child from themselves to the adoptive parents:

... after lunch we drove to her [foster carer's] house and she opened up the door with Philip under her one arm and said 'its mummy and daddy'... and we went who... oh us... you know it was a real double take (Luke, adoptive parent).

Each of the adopters valued the way in which the foster carer had managed their role. The adopters acknowledged the foster carers' loss, as well as the enormity of the change for their child, and their own feelings in terms of *taking* the child:

I don't know really whether he picked up on the enormity of it all really because we drove off and obviously they had tried their best and done very well in sort of not letting on that it was quite an emotional thing for the foster carers to basically... because he'd been there a long time.... but Philip didn't seem to be that bothered... (Jade, adoptive parent).

... it's quite a hard day that day because you are taking him away... there's an element of that which is you are doing something that is.... but at the same time I guess you've got to... given that you're committed to doing it you've got to try and make a clean break... yeah even though... we took him home, that day was a hard day... the following morning that was a good day for me... he had his first night... the next day that was a good day for me.... (Jade, adoptive parent).

I felt a tremendous amount of guilt... because the carer was very bonded with the little boy... and as professional as they were... this is a loss... this is a loss... she was really good about it but I just wanted the last day to get in and out as quickly as possible - I just felt guilty... and erm they asked us to stay for coffee which we did ... they tell us to do it quickly... so we were there for a few hours before we left...

It's a difficult time for the foster carers, it's difficult on us and on the little boy but it's just the reality of what we're doing (Jean, adoptive parent).

There is provision within the ASP documents to make arrangements for foster carers and children to maintain some contact following the transfer of placement (Lanyado, 2003). The adopters in this study acknowledged that such contact was important for their child. Jean acknowledged the significance of this for Scott, although she did not link this with the ASP document:

We've met with the foster family... and that was discussed about keeping a relationship going... we're fine with that because that's his history... his life story (Jean, adoptive parent).

6.2.4 Information from the Medical Adviser: capturing 'uncertainty'

Medical advisers were seen by the adopters as an important source of information about their child's medical history (Mather, 2003). A meeting with a medical adviser was an opportunity for each adopter to be provided with details regarding their child's pre-natal history, together with discussions regarding the implications of the genetic history and exposure to early adverse environments. Affirming what was not known was perceived as helpful:

... so she [the Medical Adviser] said we're not expecting any problems but what we have to bear in mind is that the parents had both effectively left full time education early... they didn't have any information as to why, but it was just something to keep an eye on because you don't necessarily have the full details of the family history... so it was more keep an eye out [be]cause there are some unknowns rather than we are expecting there to be a problem here... it was a helpful thing to say (Jade and Luke, adoptive parents).

However, unknowns also raised concerns:

We just needed to know and it was sort of quite vague wasn't it and I remember feeling concerned at the time erm and obviously because they didn't decide to go ahead and do the blood tests at the time obviously they didn't feel it was important enough at the time to have to do that... but it's a bit worrying with the medical adviser because there are a lot of unknowns. They... only told us what they had in fact and there's a very big grey area that anything could happen... you should take it on that basis really that anything can happen in the future.... (Jessica and David, adoptive parents).

Whilst there is a lot of information available, it is inevitably limited, as Jessica and David noted:

... I think the most difficult thing is only having a limited amount of information in terms of history... and with [our birth daughter], you know... we've known everything that she's done and what she's capable of and all of that and its quite difficult coming in at 8 years old and having to go from that point (Jessica and David, adoptive parents).

Absorbing information was experienced as challenging for Jean, who did not recall any concerns being raised regarding Scott's future health, although various needs were identified in one of the documents that was made available to Jean:

.... there were some issues... he's seven weeks premature... so he [the Medical Adviser] gave us the medical history from the beginning... all the way through... and he told us everything... I don't think we had anything in writing... it was a lot of information ... it was funny because I would ask a question and he would say... it was his style... he was telling us everything... so if I jumped ahead of his story... he would say... I'll get to that! ... he was very structured... (Jean, adoptive parent).

Gosh... No nothing stuck with me [regarding future concerns] and then that may not be his fault... he may have said something... but I don't remember anything specific ... nothing stuck with me... at that moment in time I was more concerned about what are we getting ourselves into... and the future tends to be more rosier and you think, oh we'll just deal with it... and I can see... now, that's not always the case... (Jean, adoptive parent).

Jean drew attention to some critical points regarding information and support: the volume of information provided, its didactic delivery, and that *nothing stuck with her*. This is relevant for support as Jean's comment that *the future tends to be more rosier, and you think, oh we'll just deal with it*, is a reminder that support for interpreting information can be a significant role of the ASP.

6.2.5 Recognising sources of support outside the ASP document

Some adopters described difficult situations and powerful emotions following the placement of their child, although descriptions of support were not linked with or to the ASP. Support was obtained in diverse ways at different times, through personal resources, through links with other adopters, from the relationship with their social worker, from phone calls with the adopter's extended family as well as from the foster carers.

For Jean, the process could not initially be trusted and having a comparative stranger 'choose' a child for them, she described as frightening. Whilst Jean said that she felt supported by her adoption social worker and the support group, she conveyed an impression that the adoption arrangements were an emotional journey of discovery, which required time being spent when things needed 'figuring out', involving some isolation and pain:

... until you go through it, you don't really trust the process until after... looking back on it... but when you're in the position of waiting for someone to choose a child for you... it's very frightening. And I'm being very honest I don't think there is

any course or any book or any advice of any one that can help you with that... it's a really personal, personal experience... every parent has to just figure out how to do that ... I think all parenting is a journey... I don't think you have an understanding of what it is until you are in the middle of it... so you think you're going to do it this way you realise the child is not like that erm that's been my experience. It doesn't matter what you think it's going to be like there's a little boy or girl at the end of it and they have the needs the way they have it; you have figure that out... you work on it you identify the problems and you work through them as best as you can... (Jean, adoptive parent).

The realities of forming their relationship with Scott were difficult for Jean and Shaun. Jean described how she had begun to understand that too much information was causing her confusion and that she realised that her existing models of relating were insufficient; she required different strategies. Within this emotional period she described feeling stressed with Shaun:

We talk too much ...you can over analyse something... sometimes the answer is simple ... maybe it's about having his fire engine at breakfast... there was one point when I said... you can't read anymore articles... there was one point I was so confused, I didn't know what to do anymore... I was overwhelmed... the literature... the attachment issues, I don't know what to do..... I'm lost. Whereas for Shaun when it was working so well for him obviously.... and he was trying to give me advice about what I was doing and I was getting frustrated with him... anyway that's a learning curve for every couple and we've moved over that. I have had to work more consciously and I've had to change a lot of my thinking and a lot of... my approach. And I could not rely on anything that I grew up with to do that... it was foreign (Jean, adoptive parent).

Jean's observations are a reminder of the importance of the need for support for personal, 'internal' feelings.

Jessica and David described some unexpected challenges that they had experienced and the support they had received. Faith, who was aged 8 when she was placed for adoption, was continuing to attend play therapy sessions. Jessica described her reactions, following therapy, on the way home in the car:

... before she came to us she was having play therapy... and that carried on when she came here... it would be in the car and she would come up with something quite shocking and I didn't know how to respond... And the one time she said something about killing the baby... and... I went into over drive thinking oh God you know did someone tell her this or is she just imagining it or what... and I didn't know how to respond (Jessica, adoptive parent).

Jessica was provided with filial therapy⁴³ training and mentoring, in their home, for therapeutic sessions between Jessica and Faith:

⁴³ Filial Therapy – coaching/mentoring of parent in non-directive play and nurturing skills with their child at home (www.playtherapy.org.uk accessed 13.2.14).

... and when I did the filial therapy training - which is play therapy at home - it was learning that you don't always have answers to everything it [is] accepting what she's saying and not reacting and letting her actually get.... that out there [and]... when we did the sessions there might be some violence and she would be the fairy with the fairy wings making it all better and you know, that was a very common theme throughout the play (Jessica, adoptive parent).

A further challenging event occurred when, unexpectedly, Faith bumped into her birth sister at a public leisure venue. This encounter caused confusion for everyone, as only indirect contact had been agreed, at the time of the placement:

It's just letter box contact... and with brothers and sisters it's letter box contact... the only time that could change if anyone is adopted and there is an agreement between the adopters that they could talk to one another. So when we do the report we've got to keep it general and keep it to activities but no names... Faith has had cards from her siblings... [she remembers her birth mother and birth father]... yes she knows them all... she had a photograph of one sister and brother which she brought from [the] foster carer and had it by the side of her bed... but these photos are quite recent (Jessica adoptive parent).

Following the unexpected encounter between Faith and her sister, Jessica sought advice from both the adoption agency and the placing authority:

I rang our agency and [the placing authority] and said we bumped into one of her siblings and they said it was highly unusual... and I thought we can tick that off the list then, we've done that bit... and [I] asked could we do a letter out of sync because I think she needs it at this time... and they said yes, and I said is it completely out of the question not to see each other and they said no it is [not]... But I think since she did the letter she's ok and she's had another letter from one of them... so it's important (Jessica, adoptive mother).

Jessica acknowledged that Faith knew her birth family and that these relationships were significant for Faith. There was no mention that Faith had at any time been involved in discussing her views about contact with her siblings. Managing and mediating appropriate birth relative connections for and with older children is recognised as a significant part of support in adoption (Logan, 2010). Risks need to be managed and fear should not result in defensive practice (Loxterkamp, 2009; Thomas, 2013).

... but actually after the recent little thing she [social worker] had they've said she [Faith] can have it [direct contact] if she needed it... we are open to it but it would have to be on a neutral ground so they didn't know where she lived and we've got to be careful about the information she does give because it'll end up getting back to her birth parents (Jessica, adoptive parent).

Jessica seemed to be seeking permission from the placing authority to change the contact arrangements, raising questions regarding how contact was initially mediated.

Jessica and David also noted other issues, such as their surprise regarding Faith's lack of awareness of time, their adjustment to her 'obsession' with food and her dislike of them having 'private' conversations:

... what I didn't expect was the day to day experiences that Faith had never been part of... erm for example she couldn't tell the time when she came... she didn't know which was morning or afternoon or evening... she hadn't a clue, she had no concept of time... and that was really weird. The other things we had to get used to was food ... food is an obsession... and see food and she's hungry... and she'll make herself ill and the other thing is she doesn't like us going out into the kitchen and talking ... she's out there wanting to know what's going on... insecurity... sort of thing... (Jessica and David, adoptive parents).

At this stage Jessica and David were positive regarding the way they were coping and in their assessment of Faith's emerging self-confidence. However, the research literature does point to particular needs for support where older children are adopted. Identifying the developing support needs of the child and those of the adopters is arguably the role of the social worker and a function of the ASP document (Randall, 2013).

The support that was present and available from social workers and the support group was experienced by the adopters as 'tangible', valued and accessible throughout the arrangements. This contrasts with the ASP document, which refers to a 'set menu' of Basic Support with limited specific detail as discussed in Chapter 4. The support group included adopters from all stages of the process, as well as continuing to welcome those who had adopted some years ago:

... there was lots of support... support from parents who have been through the process... and oh we have been contacted by UK Adoption as well. We're building some friendswe've met outside the formal structure... we can talk candidly... and they're on your side... so they'll advise you as someone whose been through it... that was really helpful... (Jean, adoptive parent).

... in terms of the support from [our adoption agency] they've been absolutely amazing through the entire process.... although I haven't any other experience, but from our own point of view, they've been amazing (Jessica and David, adoptive parents).

The adopters also referred to experiences of support that they had received in other ways during the arrangements, through visits, *hand-holding* and *tea and sympathy*. The support from the relationships with the social workers was seen as significant due to their expertise, and emotional and professional commitment:

... I think what it needs and what it gets, in our experience, is some really quite dedicated individuals... I think what the most important thing for me has been to have people around who have been understanding and sympathetic and supportive which [has] been the experience... and if you've got... people [with] tea and sympathy to a certain extent, then it just... means that... you're kind of more able to deal with whatever particular... issue (Jade, adoptive parent).

... she [adoption social worker] knows how it works, she guides us through the process, she's holding our hand... really you know... they're transparent... she's telling us.... I feel trust... (Jean, adoptive parent).

Earlier Jean had expressed feelings of fear and of '*not trusting the process ...until after*', whereas later in the interview she described more positive experiences, perhaps reflecting the need for different types of support during the different stages of the adoption process (Quinton, 2012).

Luke expressed his feelings regarding support in terms of personal gratitude and valuing his *discussions with an expert*:

... I think [our social worker] in particular seems to be conversant with a lot of... child developmental theory and stuff and maybe it appealed to my ego as a scientist or something, I don't know, but... I think as well as tea and sympathy I felt I was having discussions with an expert, an expert with regard to the theory of child development ... which was an additional source of support as well as the tea and sympathy which were very important... (Luke, adoptive parent).

... well from my own subjective experience I think [the adoption agency] has been absolutely excellent and really, really helpful... and you know I'm really very grateful to them... (Luke, adoptive parent).

The adopters in this study were still involved with their adoption agency, adding to the sense that if advice or help were required, then either a phone call or the next support group meeting would afford the opportunity for discussion.

6.3 Professionals' perspectives of support and relationships with the ASP

This section explores the ways in which the acceptance of the principle of support and the complexities of providing support emerge through the data of this study (O'Neill, 2003). The practitioners acknowledged that adoption today is different and that support is 'a good thing', although transforming this into practice was challenging. The analysis in this section discusses some of the barriers emerging from the practitioners' perspectives.

6.3.1 Adoption today requires support

Adoption practice has changed from babies being adopted in secret and information being limited (Mather, 2003). Chapter 2 set out the context of adoption today in the UK. Sam, an adoption social worker, accepted the need for support in adoption today:

I think that it [adoption] is more complex isn't it these days, we are placing children with more [difficulties], we are aware of the complexity of children's future needs I think... I think that it is different these days and I think that our appreciation of the impact of that in the long term is different (Sam, adoption social worker).

Sam did not explain these *future complexities*, but suggested that knowledge of children's early adverse experiences linked to an *appreciation* of the future outcome of the adoptive relationship. Sam suggested that this different *appreciation* influences the adoption service and its support. Thus, Sam, an experienced adoption practitioner, acknowledged the professional understanding of the complexity and changes in adoption today, and the need for support (Argent, 2003). Shula, also an experienced adoption social worker illustrated how she believed support should be responding:

I think that we should just still be there for them [adopters and child] and providing things at different levels, at different [points] you know, I think that it [support] should be more flexible. Do you know what, I think that it is one of the exciting bits of the adoption; I think that there is such potential there and it is so under resourced, it's.... scandalously under resourced. I just think that it is a really complex area and I think that it goes on into adult hood, I think that we should be in there, I think that you know therapeutic parenting we should be doing things all the time around it - Yeah (Shula, adoption social worker).

The idea that Shula was promoting is an approach to support that is woven through the life-span of the adoption, perhaps incorporating the interrelationship elements of support at the individual level, as well as for the family system and linking with wider networks (Palacios, 2009).

6.3.2 Uncertainty existing as a barrier to support

The practitioners identified difficulties in formulating future support due to the uncertainty of identifying needs that may develop in the future, as illustrated by Jonah, who had seen many ASPs in his role as Panel chair. One issue is that the ASP was seen as identifying short to medium term needs which, he felt, fell into two groups; those needs that can be more specifically

defined, *surety*, and the other group of more uncertain needs, which he described as *nebulous and foggy*:

... however generally I think that there are immediate to medium term needs which are sort of.... covered in the Plans... other potential needs are left should they develop then you will have to sort of seek support elsewhere... so... [at] that point the support is a bit *nebulous*, there isn't a clarity of you know well should this child develop psychological or psychiatric needs in a particular way then.... you contact this person and you will access this service. It is you know - go to the local council, or you know whatever it is. So I think the *surety* of the plan depends on the clarity of the diagnosis... if there are.... undiagnosed issues, I mean you could suppose that these were possible given the background and experiences of the child, however they have not been realised at the point of adoption, then the Plan is *foggy* at times (Jonah, Panel chair, highlight added).

Jonah's view of these difficulties is also reflected in the findings of Chapter 4, where the limited definition of future support was discussed. Identifying and specifying support for developmental uncertainties or for potential adjustments to be faced during periods of transitions, could be identified into the availability of support or advice when needed, perhaps facilitating a less *foggy* basis for the construction of the ASP (Ryan et al, 2009; Brodzinsky et al, 1993).

6.3.3 Barriers to support from competing narratives

Jonah also suggested that embracing and developing support in adoption is a *learning curve*, which he believed is negatively influenced due to competing narratives. Firstly, adopters believe that their love will overcome any difficulties and secondly there is the assumption within adoption policy and practice that problems will be resolved through the adoptive relationship itself:

.... yes, it definitely is a learning curve but I think you know there possibly has been a hangover from the view that actually adoption will cure all ills and so at times there is a sort of law of optimism on both sides, on the placing side and on the adopters side that yes we will be able to cope with this, love is all you need as it were, you know (Jonah, adoption Panel chair).

The idea that adopters bring qualities of reparative parenting to address the child's early adverse experiences is one of the intrinsic assumptions underpinning the policy of adoption for children from local authority care (van Ijzendoorn and Juffer, 2006; Luckock, 2008). This notion was also found in the findings in Chapter 4, where the content of the ASP frequently identified adopters themselves, and the adoptive relationship, as being a Service and an Outcome for the child. Additionally, it was the adopters' qualities that formed

the basis of the matching justifications. Jonah seems to suggest that the ongoing *learning curve* regarding the formulation of support for new adoptions is a consequence of this optimism.

Ruth, a manager of the children's social workers, acknowledged that she and her team had possibly underestimated the challenges within the adoptive relationship. The notion that the adoption placement and order represent a *happy ending* has, she stated, contributed to their attitude of *underestimating* support for adoption:

... really probably we have underestimated perhaps some of the challenges that those children face and perhaps viewing adoption as the end of the process for us, but is it really...? But are we just too much focused on the **happy ending** rather than actually putting in the Plan, something that we think a child might struggle with in the future (Ruth, children's social work manager, highlight added).

Turning the idea of the *ending* of the child's time of being 'looked after' into the *beginning* of the child's journey in adoption is a deceptively simple and interesting concept, which resonates with the findings in Chapter 5. The post-placement stage is recognised as a period of significant adjustment, such as losses for the child that affect how new attachments are formed (Lanyado, 2003) and for the adopters embarking on becoming a family (Jones and Hackett, 2011). Involving adopters, children and social workers in the co-construction of the ASP during the early period of the placement could create opportunities for exploring the value of support for the present and the future.

6.3.4 Support affected by complexities and contradictions of information sharing

Throughout the arrangements for the adoption, the provision of information is viewed as a significant role of the ASP and other documents, as discussed in Chapter 5 and above in this chapter. Conveying the child's background details to the adopters requires skills of communication and negotiation and knowledge of community resources, as Rose, a children's social worker described:

Trying to make that Plan come to life to a set of what I hoped would be new parents is really difficult. To try and say to them this is a 3 year old who still wakes throughout the night every 2 hours, who shouts through the night because he has bad dreams, who is awake all day with oodles and oodles and oodles of energy, it is one thing to say it to somebody, it is quite another to have that level of needs living with you, even though you are going to love that child, it is really difficult to make it [ASP] come to life (Rose, children's social worker).

Rose explained the dilemmas regarding sharing information about the child with the prospective adopters. She was concerned to emphasise the demands that she believed this child would present to and for the adopters, based on their behaviour in their foster home. Rose's intentions were to ensure that the adopters were aware of the physical and emotional demands that living with this child's present behaviour would certainly bring. Describing the adopters' enthusiasm at the prospect of being introduced to a child, Rose believed, links with the adopters' inability to remain open to considering the pressure and potential stress that the child could bring to them both individually, and as a couple:

And of course from an adopters point of view... they couldn't wait, they were so excited and they were like, we don't care, we can manage anything and I had to really really hold back and do quite a lot of work with their social worker and me going back and forth to explain to them the challenges that the arrival of a 3 year old would bring to their home. Any 3 year old would be difficult but this was a particularly difficult 3 year old and of course it brings us back to that conversation we had earlier about adopters being fearful about the truth really and not being able to raise sometimes some really real issues because they were fearful that perhaps [it] would mean that we thought they didn't have the skills required (Rose, children's social worker).

The challenges for Rose in this process were real: conveying the reality of living with an active child, where the adopters' enthusiasm may affect their honest communication of the difficulties, in case the social workers interpret this in a way that the adopters don't accept, namely that they cannot cope (Ryan et al, 2009). The strategy that Rose employed to resolve her concerns involved slowing the pace of information sharing, allowing time for the adopters to give meaning to the information, as well as ensuring that there were opportunities to communicate feelings, and that support was negotiated that was acceptable to all. Rose described the outcomes of this approach:

In [this] case we were really fortunate and we were able to, through myself and their social worker, put a really good support Plan in which included really good provision of playgroups where [adoptive] mum would go... 3 times a week [with her three year old] and we knew that there were other adoptive parents going to that playgroup... (Rose, children's social worker).

Exploring information in an abstract context, in circumstances where the adopters are only able to 'imagine' the child, are seen here to be complex. Reading about and discussing a child who is, as yet, unknown to adopters, will of course be different to their experiences when they come to live together (Randall, 2013). Using the ASP as information about the child's present needs

may affect the potential value for the ASP to function as a vehicle for future support. Of note in this illustration is that Rose, in her narrative, engaged the adopters in the arrangements for support as preparation for the placement.

The stages of the ASP's 'journey' pre-placement, discussed in Chapter 5, highlighted a 'consultation' stage. The ASP and the APR documents are given to the adopters to read, add their comments and sign. The 'consultation' period seems to be the first opportunity that the adopters have to see the documentation (the ASP and the APR) that is used to take the match forward to the Panel. Sandra, an adoption manager and ASSA⁴⁴, raised her concerns about how this 'consultation' is handled:

And I think, I mean one of the dangers for me when it comes to using the Support Plan is the speed at which we expect adopters to receive the Plan and address the issues and then return and respond in the Adoption Placement Report to everything, and I have known the report going out one night and needing it back the following day. And that is not good enough, so there are huge demands on adopters... But also adopters buy into that because they are keen, they don't want to put it off going to Panel. They don't want to delay Panel, and so they feel, yes they are happy to turn it around and send it back to us (Sandra, Adoption manager/ASSA).

This 'consultation' stage was not commented on by any of the adopters in this study. Of note is that Sandra raised concerns regarding the process of 'consultation' as well as justifying the continuation of this practice, because adopters did not want to *delay Panel* and thus were *happy to turn it around*.

The possibilities of changing the procedures to facilitate different arrangements for consulting were not considered here. Whilst Sandra's roles as adoption service manager and ASSA, afford her some power and influence in developing the procedures for support, here she accounted for the gap in the 'consultation' process as a consequence of the adopters' wishes. Sandra's perspectives suggest subtle contradictions, potentially compromising the ways in which the negotiation and incorporation of support into the adoptive arrangements could change.

6.3.5 Tensions underlying attitudes to support

The combination of the acceptance of the principles of support linked with criticisms of adopters who choose to '*wave goodbye*', suggests a fragility

⁴⁴ ASSA – Adoption Support Services Adviser

within the processes of arranging support and in the relationships between practitioners and adopters:

I see support as being crucial. But you will have some adopters who want to go through the process and you know want to come out the other side and want to wave good bye to the local authority and intervention by social workers; and then you have other adopters who will... want that support, who will be coming back, who will be accessing... you know we offer post adoption training, we have... adopters groups, we have coffee mornings, and things like that and you will have your adopters who will ... become part of that support network, and you'll have other adopters who really don't want to take part in that... I think the worry for me is quite often, and again maybe this is about assessing adopters, is those adopters who will wait until they are completely in crisis before they access support; now how do we get to those before that crisis situation happens (Sandra, Adoption Manager/ASSA).

Sandra referred here to the provision of '*Basic Support for the adoptive family*', as identified in the ASP and discussed in Chapter 4, and this is intended to be available for adopters to select as they choose. Exploring the complex relationships between those seeking support and those offering and providing support, discussed in Chapter 2, is beyond the focus of this study (Hupcey, 1998), although hints of these tensions are evident in Sandra views above, and Sam's perspective below:

.... I think as an agency we are doing very well though, I think that we provide an awful lot for adoptive parents before and after, it is about the willingness to take up on what is on offer, you know around the training, around the support groups about contacting us early enough if they see or if they are concerned about anything. How we get involved with families in advance of any issues, I really don't know how we do that (Sam, adoption worker).

The suggestion that adopters wait until the 'situation is quite desperate' before requesting support (Selwyn et al, 2014: 264) is associated with the view of adopters *waving goodbye or about the* [lack of] *willingness* [of adopters] *to take up what is on offer*. Both Sandra and Sam seemed unable to imagine different ways of negotiating support, locating the responsibility for accessing support with the adopters. This study however has shown that opportunities for using the ASP proactively, involving adopters and the child following the placement, such as during the Review, are not generally utilised. The responsibility for encouraging adopters to utilise and value support, it is argued, rests on practitioners resolving the organisational and practice tensions within which the ASP operates (Ryan et al, 2009; Ottaway et al, 2014). Additionally, practitioners' attitudes and the ethos within organisational systems are recognised as being significant to facilitate a positive culture that values the role of support for adoption (Williams, 2004; Ottaway et al, 2014).

6.3.6 Barriers between adoption support and the notion of ‘mainstream services’

The relationship between mainstream services and adoption support services present further tensions influencing the role of the ASP and the negotiation of support. The changes in the social construction of adoption, discussed in Chapter 2, have highlighted two policy agendas. The first develops adoption as an option of permanency, especially for young children in local authority care (Quinton and Selwyn, 2009). The other seeks to integrate adoption support within mainstream provision (Luckock, 2008; DOH, 1998b).

In particular circumstances, mainstream services imply the availability of services for all, for example, any person falling ill should be able to access health services. Bracketing adoption and mainstream services intimates that adoptive families should and can access all relevant provisions, and fails to acknowledge the barriers within mainstream services to adoption and matters of support (Selwyn et al, 2006). Whilst many adoptive families have sought access and received support through health, education, police and CAMHS services, adopters have also experienced the service as ‘too little, too late’ (Sturges and Selwyn, 2007:26).

In this study, three themes emerged that highlight the existing tensions for adoption support being available through mainstream services. The first theme suggests that following an adoption order, the Needs identified during the construction of the ASP document, can become re-interpreted as non-adopted related, as illustrated by Dilla, an adoption social worker:

... because a lot of the needs [adopters]... come back with might not necessarily be adoption, it might not necessarily be therapeutic support, it might be [the child's]... health and their development that we have to access mainstream services for and the most that we [adoption social workers] can do is to accept yes, we understand this is a need, we understand this was agreed, we will do everything we can but we are still sort of beholden to their [mainstream services] criteria and their waiting times. And that has been the hardest for some of our adopters... to deal with and... the sense that they [agencies] should be working together and of course they should be seeing us [adoptive family].... (Dilla, adoption worker).

The second theme links to perceived expectations that families should be responsible for resolving their problems, as Shula, an adoption social worker, suggested:

... once the order is granted that is it, you know, the child is yours and you get on with it. And I suppose there... is still a view that you know it is the adopter's child, the child becomes part of that family and so therefore it is their responsibility to deal with any problems on their own. But I mean we have moved on from that as a service... (Shula, adoption worker).

The re-interpretation of adoption support needs coupled with beliefs that families should manage their own problems creates tensions for adoption support accessing limited mainstream resources. The legal entitlement to request support and the presence of a document, entitled Adoption Support Plan, which is constructed during the adoption arrangements, suggest that support will be available. However this support can become experienced as conditional, ambivalent, contradictory and problematic (Selwyn et al, 2006, 2014; Luckock and Hart, 2005; Luckock, 2008).

The third theme relates to the relevance of adoption support in the context of the adopters' social class, as illustrated by Bill, a children's social worker:

... Erm, I think it [adoption support] is a **good thing** and I think from my own point of view erm the problem we have with adopters is that from my limited experience, we have a certain type of adopters which keep getting brought forward really which are a lot of the time adopters who are middle class people or adopters who are financially secure, so... a lot of the time they are people who wouldn't need support or who'd feel they would be able to meet the needs of the child themselves or be able to identify any support they need and address it themselves, whereas adopters, you know, if we had people willing to put themselves forward for adoption but might need to be supported more ... yeah, not so financially well off, would be a bit more **dependent** on adoption services to support them through the adoption perhaps [for] the initial six months or eight months of an adoption (Bill, children's social worker, highlight added).

Bill implied that adoption support is more relevant for adopters with less social and financial capital and less self-agency, who will thus *be a bit more dependent on adoption services*. This theme also emerged in Chapter 4, where the adopters' status as teachers was interpreted as them therefore needing no support regarding educational matters. The attitude towards support, linked to the economic and social status of the adopters, seems to overlook the knowledge available in which a child's history in the adoptive relationship can impact upon the psychological aspects of 'gaining' and 'maintaining' family life, irrespective of the social class or status of the adopters (Jones and Hackett, 2011).

Although not all adoptive families seek or require support, assessing and negotiating support, at any stage, through mainstream or adoption services,

must, it is argued, be able to take account of the life-long psychological aspects of adoption and the potential value of support (Brodzinsky, 2013).

6.3.7 Limitation of contact support and risks from social media

Contact is an important concept in adoption linking with a child's sense of self and their changing identity (Neil, 2012). Logan (2010) identifies the significance of agency practices in determining the Contact plans, for preparing and supporting adopters in understanding the significance of Contact for their child, as well as the ways in which the adoptive family manages the impact of such changing relationships. In this study the ASP content illustrated a formulaic tone for support for Contact. Sam and Shula, adoption social workers, considered that the ASP document had little relevance for identifying support in Contact, mainly as the arrangements could be undermined in the future:

They (ASP) can be used both ways in that you know if you look at the post box issue if it not down there in black and white they (adopters) can say no sorry we don't want to have letters, we don't want to have photographs, it wasn't in the agreement ... (Sam, adoption worker).

A form is sent to adopters to sign but it is a very general agreement saying something along the lines of erm you know that named below agree to the contact agreement as set out in the Support Plan... I know... other agencies [who]... have a very clear contact agreement where the adopters and the birth family agree to sending whatever, to receiving whatever and you know it is there in black and white then... (Shula, adoption worker).

The findings in this study indicate, as discussed in Chapter 4, that the ASP's content regarding support for Contact is non-specific for the individual child or other significant people. The impression given was that Contact was expected, more as a right that seemed 'taken for granted, without any analysis of how Contact might help a particular child or [be] handled' (Quinton and Selwyn, 2006:471). The ASP also indicated little connection between support for Contact and the domain of Identity, Ethnicity, Culture and Religion, where the life story book was highlighted as the main vehicle for adopters to talk to their child about their birth history, relationships and the reasons for their adoption. The potential support for the child in their new adoptive family seemed overshadowed by the structural issues of Contact type and the logistics of agreements. Adopters, practitioners and the ASPs in this study appeared unaware of the concept of 'communicative' openness, which is seen as

important for nurturing the way in which the child's identity and sense of self within their adoptive family is developed (Neil, 2012; Brodzinsky, 2005:316; Jones and Hackett, 2011).

However, concerns about social networking sites and support for the adoptive family's ability to respond to such potential risks, was a gap highlighted by Rose, children's social worker, who noted that the ASP document makes no reference to this form of contact:

And I think that we have to, both in the organisation where I work but in Wales, we have got to start addressing social media and how we manage it.... it has got to be part of the Support Plan because I think that as a parent it must be really difficult. We talk about contact in terms of direct contact, indirect contact, letterbox, supervised and we forget actually the biggest form of contact now is via social media and that is nowhere to be seen on the form and I think that has got to be addressed Yes [we] have got to move with the times (Rose children's social worker).

Concerns here have developed as technology has developed. MacDonald and McSherry (2013) highlight several issues: the adopters' unpreparedness, their fear of risks for their child, as well as the adopters' identifying feelings of loss of control, which contribute to an unsettling of family cohesion. Preparing adopters for being able to respond and manage these risks was flagged up as a priority of support.

6.4 Concluding summary

The focus of this third empirical chapter has been upon the ASP, and support beyond the ASP, from the perspectives of adopters and professionals. The adopters were largely unaware of the relevance of the ASP, which was 'invisible' to them during the arrangements for their adoptions. The adopters were, however, positive about their experiences of support during the arrangements for their adoption, which were outside the construction of the ASP document. Support identified as significant for adopters related to the availability of different types of information, the role of foster carers, and the adopters' relationships with other adopters and with social workers, particularly the social workers from their adoption agency.

Factors affecting the practitioners' perspectives towards adoption support in general, and the value of the ASP, may be summarised as being associated with the wider political and policy ambivalences inherent in support for adoption. The practitioners presented contradictory views about support. Whilst the principle of support was acknowledged, adopters were seen as being responsible for accessing the contingent provision of support. Adopters were largely excluded from the processes of discussing and considering the value and role of support. The practitioners demonstrated little awareness of the connections between the Life Story book, contact and developing identities within adoptive relationships and thus the potential relevance of life-long support.

This chapter builds on the findings that propose integrating the discussions regarding support into the post-placement stage, and locating the development of the ASP from 'inside' the newly formed adoptive relationship. Establishing support as a norm for new adoptions following the placement would enable adopters to become aware of the value and place of future support. The known challenges for adoptive families today, discussed in Chapter 2, would perhaps be able to be openly considered following the placement, when the child's details have become real for the adopters. Inclusive practices for exploring and negotiating support are well established in social work, through reflective and reflexive practices (Fook, 1996; Taylor and White, 2001), solution focused practice (Ferguson, 2008), and through the practices of co-production⁴⁵ (Needham and Carr, 2009). The final chapter draws together the key findings from this study and identifies recommendations for policy and practice.

⁴⁵ Co-production was introduced into the Social Services and Well-being Act (Wales) 2014 through the Codes of Practice for Part 3 and 4 of the Act.

7.1 Introduction

The thesis has set out the changes in adoption practice and the significance of support for the adoption of older children from local authority care (Lowe, 1997; DOH, 2002). Adoption affects those involved throughout their lives, in various ways and at different times, (Livingstone Smith, 2013; NAW, 2012; Neil et al, 2010; Ryan et al, 2009) but linking support and adoption outcomes is difficult to establish due to the various complex factors involved (Quinton and Selwyn, 2006; Selwyn et al, 2014). This study has aimed to contribute to the knowledge and practice gaps regarding the processes involved when introducing support into new adoptions.

The first section of this chapter summarises the key findings, which address the research questions relating to the ways in which the Adoption Support Plan (ASP) functions for introducing support into new adoptions. The second part of the chapter considers the policy and practice recommendations evolving from the findings. The adoption landscape in Wales has changed significantly during the lifetime of this study and the chapter ends with some reflections regarding opportunities for change in how support may be introduced into new adoptions.

7.2 The key findings

The overarching focus of this research has been to explore how the ASP ‘brings’ the promise of support, as the title of the document suggests, into new adoptions (Argent, 2003). The research aimed to disentangle the process in three specific ways. The first priority for the study related to the ASP’s design and how this influences its content. The second aspect of the enquiry aimed to explore, describe and understand the administrative and operational systems within which the ASP is created. Thirdly, the aim was to highlight the ways in which the ASP is used by adopters and practitioners, as well as within the system of adoption support more widely.

Whilst the ASP has been a part of the adoption system in Wales since 2006, Luckock (2008) suggests that the place of support in adoption is contested, in

terms of its entitlement within the wider social policy context of family support and for agencies providing services. A key finding that emerged from each of the empirical chapters was the lack of status and the associated invisibility of the ASP throughout the arrangements for adoption. The benefit of deconstructing the ASP through the processes of arranging an adoption are that it highlights the interrelated nature of the ASP's low status and its virtual invisibility (Burr, 2003; Fish et al, 2008).

Although this is a relatively small study, the findings enable the possibility of a wider discussion of the theoretical and practical relationships between support and adoption, at a time when the political spotlight is upon adoption in England and Wales. The arrangements for support in adoption are seen to be inextricably linked between the conceptualisation of adoption today and the expectations from adoptive parents. The findings from the study are 'grounded' in two theoretical perspectives. The first perspective sees adoption as an intervention for children from local authority care who experience a range of early emotional difficulties. Here adoption, through the adoptive parent(s), is providing reparative parenting and therapeutic nurturing for the healing of the hurt child (Luckock, 2008). The second perspective, in contrast, envisions the role of adopters, and that of the adoptive family, as 'replicating' biological family life. Here the expectation is that the family promotes security and belonging for the child together with their future wellbeing in society (Luckock 2008). This notion of adoption replicating the normative family model is also associated with expectations of privacy, autonomy and self-responsibility (Moss et al, 2000). However the notion of adoption replicating family life is seen to be complicated in two fundamental ways. The first concerns the context in which the adoptive family comes into being, that is through the state's role in brokering the adoptive relationship (Luckock and Hart, 2005). The second issue concerns two specific differences relating to adoptive families. Those involved in adoption, that is the adopters, the child and the adoptive family are each seen to face 'unique psychosocial tasks' across their adoptive life span (Brodzinsky, 1987:30). The other issue relates to the processes of forming an adoptive family unit through the stages of 'gaining' and 'maintaining' their family, in addition to the task of 'retaining' connections with the birth family (Jones and Hackett, 2011:45).

The poor profile of the ASP document in the arrangements for new adoptions, it is argued, is a consequence of such uncertainties underlying the nature of adoption today as understood by adopters, practitioners, the media and politicians. The argument from this study is that the focus of support for adoption needs to encompass both perspectives: adoption today is an intervention for children from local authority care within a model of ‘doing’ family (Luckock and Hart, 2005:133). The ASP’s invisibility is also seen as a consequence of the ambivalent and contingent nature of support for adoption within the wider policy context of family support. The discussion turns to develop four specific aspects seen to contribute to the difficulties for the ASP within the arrangements for new adoptions.

7.2.1 The Adoption Support Plan is overshadowed by the system of adoption

Many documents exist within the arrangements for an adoption. The practitioners noted the duplication of information in the range of documents involved, particularly between the CARA⁴⁶ and the ASP. The requirement for similar information was seen by some as contributing to the practice of text being ‘cut and pasted’ across documents. The ASP’s structure was seen to consist of several Plans, such as the Plan for matching, the Plan for birth relative support, and the Plan for the ‘ought to be placed’ decision. This lack of clarity created confusion regarding which document, if any, was viewed as constructing support during the arrangements. Within the content of the ASPs there were references to other plans, such as a plan for transition to the adoptive placement and plans for Contact. The plethora of other plans dilutes the potential for the ASP to have a distinctive status and visible profile as *the* Plan for support. The content of the ASP revealed little recognition of possible future needs for support (Quinton and Selwyn, 2009; Rushton, 2007).

The ASP’s limited role during the lengthy journey (Chapter 5) through the system to arrange an adoption added to its invisibility. Through the analysis of the ASP’s text, it was found that adopters were identified as providing the Services for the child, and seen as being responsible for the stability and future well-being of their child in the Outcomes column. Additionally, the findings

⁴⁶ CARA – Child Assessment Report for Adoption – Reg. 17; structure specified in Schedule 1 of the AAR, 2005.

suggested that the author sees the ASP, and adoption itself, as providing the reparative parenting; the adoption and the adopters are acting as an 'intervention' to address the child's needs, some of which are as a result of trauma due to their early experiences (Livingstone Smith, 2013). The status of the ASP as a document for negotiating support is overshadowed by the ASP's focus being the matching event, which takes precedence throughout the main stages of the adoption journey.

7.2.2 Practitioners' ambivalence towards the Adoption Support Plan

The practitioners involved in the study, including managers and front line social workers from Children's Services and adoption agencies, gave a range of perspectives reflecting the ASP's value and purpose. For some practitioners, the objective was to have no needs for support identified in the ASP, as unmet needs were perceived as meaning an unsuitable match, again linking the ASP with matching rather than support. Social work practice relating to direct work in preparation for an adoption was not viewed as adoption support, although Quinton (2012) suggests that this is '*essential*' to the ways in which adopters '*come to meet* the needs of adopted children' (2012:100 italics in original). The ASP was seen to end following the adoption order and become a 'closed case', reinforcing its role for matching and its lack of agency in terms of galvanising future support. The tenuous relationship of the provision of support in adoption was further illustrated (Chapter 6) where the ASP was represented as a document that practitioners were responsible for completing, but not as a document that represented the provision of support services. The ASP perhaps functions more to secure compliance with the regulations, than as a means of securing a commitment to the principle of and the provision of support (Broadhurst et al, 2010). Some practitioners suggested that adopters' resistance to considering support beyond the adoption order was part of adopters wishing to reclaim their privacy. For these practitioners support is perhaps associated with intrusive practice, seen as moving beyond the family's wishes.

The findings also highlighted the limited understanding of the normative issues within adoption that may need support from Children's Services and from other agencies (Brodzinsky 2013). Completing the ASP was procedurally the responsibility of the child's social worker. Some adoption social workers felt

that this task was inadequately undertaken, due to the children's social worker lacking expertise in adoption issues. Some adoption social workers felt helpless due to not being able to affect the quality or status of the ASP. The ASP's low profile and weak focus on identifying future possible support were also attributed to the lack of priority given to the ASP within the wider organisation of Children's Services and other agencies.

7.2.3 The invisibility of the Adoption Support Plan to adopters

The adopters interviewed as part of this study were largely unaware of the ASP (Chapter 6) and some were unable to bring the relevant document to mind, given the number of other documents they had received. Support was experienced as something they recognised through their relationships with the social workers, not through the presence of the ASP document. The adopters had few expectations or little understanding of the relevance and need for identifying support for the future; nor did they anticipate that the ASP could potentially represent a meaningful vehicle or pathway for accessing support. The practitioners' ambivalence towards support, and their views regarding the marginal role and value of the ASP for support in the adoption, were perhaps, implicitly conveyed to the adopters. The ASP was not a document that adopters were invited to 'sit and consider' at any time during the process, not even, it seems, during the adoption Review. Adoption was seen as 'an end' of the process for Children's Services, overlooking the reality that the placement for adoption is the 'beginning' of the new adoptive relationships. Within the existing system, the ASP has limited opportunity to present the value of support to adopters. The ASP's present focus on matching excludes the adoptive family from co-constructing or co-producing its content as a 'beginning' for potential support (Jones and Hackett, 2011; Needham and Carr, 2009).

7.2.4 Problems with the Adoption Support Plan design and content

The structure of ASP documents was found to be lengthy, perhaps due to the regulations requiring support to be considered during the arrangements for an adoption (AAR, 2005). The ASP documents also contain sections relating to 'prescribed' support, such as Financial Support, Contact and Basic Support (ASSR, 2005). The analysis highlighted that the nature of the design of the document contributes to a number of problems relating to how support is or is

not identified during the adoption arrangements (Chapter 4; ASP template in Appendix F).

The initial problem relates to the title of the ASP, which suggest that the document bears some relationship to support for adoption, whereas in practice the document's main use is for the matching aspect of adoption, as reflected in its subtitle (Chapter 4). The second problem may be attributed to the ASP's layout and design, which indicate that the document is intended to achieve a number of purposes that are incompatible with a focus on support for a new adoption. For example, the birth relative section seems misplaced in a document for matching a child with prospective adopters. Support for birth relatives is intended to be independent of the other systems involved in the adoption of the child. The support for birth relatives is to help their understanding of the adoption process and also to help them to participate as appropriate, such as in the contact planning (Neil et al, 2010). The third problem identified in the ASP's design relates to the first section of the ASP (Figure 3, p 63), which is structured according to the domains of the Framework of Assessment (DOH, 2000b), thereby inviting the document to be used within an assessment relationship (Holland, 2011). In practice, the findings highlighted that the ASP does not engage directly with the child or the adopters, as its content gazes backwards (Thomas, 2010), is drawn from other documents and sources, and is used for the matching process, not as a plan for the future. The columns in the ASP design, (Figure 2, p 62) signal that the expected accountability of Outcomes (of the needs for support) rests with an agency service, but the findings from the ASP content analysis reflect that the adopters are seen as being the Service, the Service Provider and responsible for the Outcomes. The ASP structure here was seen to dominate the content, further illustrating the ASP authors' focus on the matching and placement.

An exception to the focus on matching was evident in the final section of the ASP, relating to Contact, Finance and Basic Support (Figure 5, p 66). The Financial Support section content was mainly linked to reimbursements of expenses for introductions between a child and adopters. In some ASPs there was provision for adoption allowances and funding for practical help. The text in the Contact support section had limited relevance to the potential future need for support (Selwyn et al, 2006a). The Basic Support section followed a set menu of provision, to which the social worker had inserted either a tick or

the single word ‘yes’ in the text, perhaps suggesting that the ASP author was ambivalent regarding the relevance of this section. Finally, within this third problem regarding the ASP’s design and content, it was seen that it mirrors the wider environment of adoption support: ambivalent and largely invisible; contingent and of low status; whilst also being confused in its purpose (Adoption and Children Act, 2002; Luckock, 2008; Quinton and Selwyn 2009; NAW, 2012).

These findings suggest that the present design and functioning of the document within the adoption system place the ASP in an untenable position. The two recommendations discussed next propose a strategic commitment to adoption support within mainstream Family Support policy and provision, and the re-design of the ASP so that it focuses on support following the adoption placement.

7.3 Policy and practice recommendations

Planning for adoption support provision in the face of limited data and many inherent uncertainties presents particular strategic demands (Dhami et al, 2007). The number of adoptions is relatively low in Wales and the needs for support vary over time. Typically, requests for support emerge between 2 to 7 years after the granting of an adoption order (Ottaway et al, 2014).

In this context the first recommendation rests upon the findings that highlight that support for adoption should be securely positioned within the mainstream Family Support policy, requiring strategic multi-agency planning and commitment. The second recommendation highlights the need to raise the ASP’s status and visibility, suggesting that it should be redesigned to prioritise the introduction of support following a placement. These two recommendations are further developed below.

7.3.1 Raising the position of support for adoption within the context of Family Support Policy and mainstream services

Adoption support is a small part of the wider family support provision within a local authority area, where resources are finite and demand is strong. Beyond Children’s Services, agencies such as education and health authorities also provide services to children and families, including adopted children, according

to differing levels of need. This study has illustrated that some of the tensions involved in identifying the needs for adoption support exist as a consequence of ambivalences in defining adoption related needs, and in the contingent nature of support in adoption (Luckock, 2008). Ottaway et al (2014), in their report for the Welsh Government, also highlighted the presence of barriers through which practitioners and adopters need to navigate⁴⁷ when seeking support (2014: 37).

The provision afforded for adoption support in the politically competitive environment of Family Support should be clearly formulated and resourced (Ottaway et al, 2014). The key argument underpinning this study is to secure an effective ASP, which has status, agency and visibility within the system of arranging adoptions; this requires a background commitment, at senior level, across all agencies involved in mainstream family support provision. The significance of such a commitment embodies the acknowledgement that adoption today is an intervention for the most vulnerable children, and invariably many adoptions will require some level of service and support over time. Adoption, it is argued, should become the beginning of a new commitment from Family Support Policy, rather than the end of a commitment from the 'Looked After' System.

In summary, the first part of this recommendation seeks to secure a strategic commitment and planning to provide for both the entitlement to and provision of adoption support.

To carry forward the multi-agency strategic commitment for support in adoption, it is argued there should be three strands for managing the implementation and communication elements (Shonkoff and Bales, 2011). The first strand should focus upon engaging with all of the agencies involved in providing services to children, including adopted children, to underscore the value of support for adoption. The purposes for support should be linked with findings from research regarding the value of support to the adjustments needed for all involved in adoption (Brodzinsky, 2013), the benefits to a child of the therapeutic adoptive family relationship (Selwyn et al, 2006) and the

⁴⁷ Some of the barriers include: distinctions between adoption and non-adopted related issues; barriers in social front door referral processes; workforce with limited adoption expertise; competing service priorities; assessment process that may identify a need but not provide a service; time delays in responding to requests.

economic benefits to public services of investing in adoption support identified (Bonin et al, 2013). Additionally, agencies should appropriately adjust their ‘front door’ responses and assessment arrangements when adoptive families request support to take account of the purposes and value of support (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Ottaway et al, 2014).

The second strand should ensure that adopters have information about support and how this can be accessed. This study found that the ASP itself has a role in strengthening and normalising support for new adoptions. In England, the adoption Passport is intended to improve communication with adopters regarding entitlement to support (DfE, 2012). In Wales, Ottaway et al (2014) suggest that using the Welsh National Adoption Agency website may be a useful way forward.

The third strand relates to improving practitioners’ knowledge and skills in terms of the assessment for adoption support and for the provision of appropriate responses. Practitioners should be able to respond in ‘adoption smart’ and sensitive ways towards the particular issues of adoption (Foli and Gibson, 2011: 465). Practitioners should develop appropriate skills in order to negotiate support within new adoptions, as well as responses to subsequent requests for support. Although little research exists regarding what type or level of provision ‘could generate improved outcomes’ in terms of support (Bonin et al, 2013:6) the notion of ‘differential susceptibility’ may offer a way forward when co-producing a new ASP (Woolgar, 2013:247).

Establishing and implementing innovative multi-agency responses for adoption support could draw on models from sea changes that have occurred in other social care arenas, such as the multi-agency strategic responses to domestic violence, substance abuse or Local Safeguarding Boards. This study found that the intentions in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 relating to the strategic role of the ASSAs⁴⁸ were compromised through their other responsibilities as managers in the adoption service. Developing dedicated regional adoption support teams with specialist multi-disciplinary services, as proposed in the study by Ottaway et al (2014), could facilitate the refocusing of the ASSA role in Wales (2014: 94-95), thereby strengthening the strategic multi-agency leadership commitment to support for adoption.

⁴⁸ Adoption Support Services Adviser Adoption Support Services Regulations, 2005: 6

In summary, the second part of this recommendation relates to introducing, across Wales, an overarching commitment to support for adoption, integrated within the policy of support to all families and children, through a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary implementation strategy of communication and training for agencies, and information for the public. Following on from an anticipated improved strategic commitment to support for adoption, the second recommendation focuses on the ASP itself.

7.3.2 Reframing the value and space of support within the adoption system

The findings from this research have painted a picture of an ASP document that is largely invisible and has limited status and agency in its current role. It has been argued that these problems stem from the ASP's poor design, the ways in which it functions within the adoption system, and the uncertain expectations regarding support for an adoption. The literature underpinning this study identifies the following expectations for support in adoption:

- Support for the ways in which adopters may 'come to meet' the needs of their child following the matching (Quinton, 2012:100)
- Support to strengthen adopters' resources for therapeutic and reparative parenting (Brodzinsky, 2013)
- Support for adopters to learn how to 'decode the child's psychological needs' (Rushton, 2007:310)
- Support for revisiting the child's information for a deeper understanding of what their history will mean in this adoptive family (NAW, 2012)
- Support for the adjustments into adoptive family life (Jones and Hackett, 2011)
- Exploring how support for the future may be of value and how this can be accessed (Selwyn et al, 2014)

Drawing on the findings from this study, together with the above expectations for support, three proposals are highlighted for the ways in which scaffolding for support in new adoptions may be developed:

1. Design a new document with a title representing its purpose, such as Support for New Adoption.

A starting point could be to create a new document, which is less prescriptively styled, to function as a basis for introducing what is known about

the benefits of support (Taylor and White, 2000). The document structure does not need to function as a gatekeeper as adopters are committed to becoming parents to their child (Selwyn et al, 2014). Matters relating to matching or support for birth relatives should be disentangled from the focus on support for the new adoptive family.

2. Introduce discussion about support following the placement of the child with their adoptive family.

Following placement, the child and the adopters are faced with many new situations. Exploring possible areas where support may be of benefit for the new family requires expertise and understanding of the relationship building processes for new and continuing adoptions (NAW, 2012). Several benefits have been identified in terms of discussing support following the placement. The information that the adopters have been given regarding their child's history will resonate differently when they are living with their child (NAW, 2012). Support can be discussed in the context of the known potential future challenges, such as:

- family communication to enhance stability
- preparing for significant transitions
- telling and talking about adoption with support for contact
- managing the dual connections as children grow older
- using the life story material and ensuring that it remains updated

Children placed for adoption are generally older making it important that their feelings for support are also considered (Boswell and Cudmore, 2014). Discussions with adopters following placement may stimulate adopters' understanding of their child's early maltreatment, which Wijedasa and Selwyn (2014) note 'has become a key feature of working with adoptive families in difficulty' (2014:11). The age of the child at placement was found to be significant, in terms of settling into new family life, as was the length of time taken to apply for an adoption order, adding to the importance of the ways in which support is introduced following placement (Wijedasa and Selwyn, 2014). Whilst the relationship between support and placement stability is difficult to establish, many adopters and practitioners recognise the importance of the manner in which support is introduced (Kaniuk, 2010). The value of support being well presented during this early stage in the adoptive relationship has

been shown to impact on adopters' subsequent take up of support services (Wind et al, 2007).

3. Through the adoption Review meeting, chaired by the IRO⁴⁹, ensure that the agreement for support document can be 'signed off'.

Adoption Reviews are part of the existing adoption agency regulations (AAR, 2005: 37). Although the requirement to include a review of the arrangements for support already exists through the Review process, the study found that this rarely occurred. Extending the remit of the Review meeting, to incorporate the endorsing of the agreement for support, would allow status and visibility to be secured for the redesigned document. Reviews are chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who already has the powers to review support. Strengthening the function of the adoption Review and its role to ratify the support arrangements, would secure the new document's positioning regarding introducing support into new adoptions, as well as clarification of the means to access future support when needed.

In summary, this recommendation suggests an agenda for refining the focus of support for new adoptions; it proposes that there should be a newly designed document that prioritises support which is discussed and co-constructed/co-produced following the child's placement with the adopters and their social workers; the chair of the Review meeting (IRO) should endorse the arrangements of support presented in the newly designed document with a suggested title 'Support for New Adoption'.

7.4 End note

The seemingly straight-forward activity of introducing support into arrangements for adoptions has been shown to involve complex systems within relational processes (Ryan, 2009; Fish et al, 2008). At the beginning of this thesis, the adoption world in Wales seemed stable, with little indication of the organisational and social work changes proposed through the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWb Act), which are scheduled for implementation in April 2016. At this stage it is not clear to me how the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and thus the ASP will interface within the new legislation. However, the SSWb Act does propose new arrangements, through

⁴⁹ IRO – Independent Reviewing Officer.

Parts 3 and 4, for assessments (section 21), the meeting of needs, including a test for eligibility (section 32), and arrangements for care and support planning (section 54). It is intended that Regulations and Codes of Practice will become available, which will set out the details for matters such as ‘creating the right environment’ and ‘co-production’ (Codes of Practice for Parts 3 and 4 of the SSWb Act). The notion of co-production is seen to offer something different to the ideas of partnership or co-construction:

Co-production is a potentially transformative way of thinking about power, resources, partnerships, risks and outcomes, not an off-the-shelf model of service provision or a single magic solution (Needham and Carr, 2009:1).

The concepts of ‘co-production’ and ‘creating the right environment’ in the SSWb Act could create a framework to enable the Welsh National Adoption Service to develop the strategic multi-agency arrangements for locating adoption support within mainstream family support provision and introducing a redesigned ASP document entitled ‘Support for New Adoption’; the findings from this study provide a contribution with regard to strategically defining adoption support thus raising the value and profile of support into new adoptions.

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Appendix A [1]

On university headed paper

My Address

E-mail:

To Director of Children's Services

Date:

Dear

RE: Professional Doctorate Research – Adoption Support Plans

I am seeking your agreement to undertake a small qualitative research project in your authority. I am a registered social worker, undertaking this research as a self-funded part time student at Cardiff University. The research project has been approved by the University's Ethics Committee.

The focus of the research is to explore the processes involved in developing the Adoption Support Plan. There has been little research undertaken regarding this particular area of adoption support and I hope that this research will be able contribute to policy and practice for adoption support in Wales.

This study will involve two phases:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Phase 1 | An analysis of the Adoption Support Plan content [total 12 Plans] |
| Phase 2 | Explore the processes involved in producing Adoption Support Plans using qualitative methods [stakeholder interviews] |

I am seeking your written permission to undertake this research and to contact the Adoption Agency to explain the focus of this research, respond to questions and secure their participation in this research.

This letter is intentionally brief at this stage; should you require further information, I would be more than pleased to provide this. My contact details are:

Post: Tram Road Cottage, Cefn-y-Crib, Hafodyrynys, Newbridge, Torfaen NP11 5BN

E-mail: mawktramroad@yahoo.co.uk

I will be in touch to follow up this request and to provide you with further information if you wished.

Thank you for your time in considering this request and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix A [2]

On university headed paper

Open letter to Adoption Support Services Adviser

My address

23rd August 2012

mawktramroad@yahoo.co.uk

Dear Adoption Support Services Adviser,

Re: Professional Doctorate Research – Adoption Support Plans

I have approached Roz Waterhouse [BAAF] to request that she seek your agreement to my taking about half an hour of your time on the 1st November 2012 at your ASSA meeting.

Attached is an information leaflet outlining brief details regarding my research project.

I wonder whether you would be prepared to participate in a focus group type discussion regarding your views about Adoption Support Plans. The Plans I am focusing on are the ones drawn up in preparation for the adoption placement and the subsequent adoption order.

The discussion would need to be recorded as I would not be able to note people's comments adequately and I can guarantee complete anonymity in the subsequent report/thesis.

My best guess is that the interview should not go over the half hour depending of course on how much you may have to say! There could always be the option of arranging individual follow up interviews if that would be helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Ms M Kempenaar

Appendix A [3]

Letter to adopters

14th September 2012

Hello,

Re: Professional Doctorate Research – Adoption Support Plans

This is an open letter to introduce myself and to ask whether you would be prepared to participate in my research. This research will have no identifying information in the report and I can assure complete confidentiality.

My background is social work, and I am interested in exploring the ways in which the Adoption Support Plan is developed and used. I believe that the research findings could potentially raise awareness regarding the purpose and value of the Adoption Support Plan; this is relevant at this time as adoption services are being reviewed by the Wales Government.

I am in the process of approaching several local authorities and adoption agencies as well as adopters.

What I am specifically looking for is to look at your Adoption Support Plan and talk to you about your experiences and opinions regarding your Plan. I am using a documentary analysis approach to highlight themes from Adoption Support Plans and completing semi-structured [recorded] interviews to gather people's views. You would be asked to complete a consent form. I have received approval from Cardiff University ethics committee and my research is supervised by two university staff who are experienced researchers.

If you wish to know more about this research or are interested in participating please do contact me.

I have approached Adoption UK and they have agreed to pass on my request.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

My contact details are:

Post: Tram Road Cottage, Cefn-y-Crib, Hafodyrynys, Newbridge, Torfaen NP11 5BN

Phone: 01495 246894/mobile: 07980109012

E-mail: mawktramroad@yahoo.co.uk

Yours sincerely,

Appendix B

Information Leaflet

Title: Adoption Support Plans: Exploring the processes

Research focus?

This small qualitative research project will explore the information provided in the Adoption Support Plans and how the Plans are completed. I will ask those who are involved for their views about their experiences of the process.

I will undertake a content analysis of a number of Adoption Support Plan documents.

Why am I doing this research?

To provide information about Adoption Support Plans: how they are produced and to explore the views of those involved in this process. Adoption Support Plans were introduced as part of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 which aimed to strengthen adoption support provision. Children who have been adopted following 2005 are expected to have an Adoption Support Plan.

The planned outcomes for this research are to provide information to adopters, practitioners and policy makers about themes highlighting the ways in which the Plans are produced.

Who can take part?

Adopters and professionals involved in developing the Plan; given my limited resources, I hope that adopters and professionals will be approached by their Adoption Agency with an invitation to participate.

I hope that there will be an interest in contributing to this small study to explore the processes involved in constructing Adoption Support Plans.

What would be involved?

At this stage I expect that there will be two phases to the study:

- | | |
|---------|--|
| Phase 1 | An analysis of the structure and content of the Adoption Support Plan documents |
| Phase 2 | Talking to key people involved in producing the Plans. The interviews will use a semi structured guide and will be recorded. |

When and where will this happen?

Following agreement from key people in the organisations, I will negotiate gathering the data according to participant's availability and my commitments. I am hoping that I will be able to gather data during the summer of 2012.

What will I do with the information?

As I am able to access the actual Plan document I will analyse them, highlighting key themes.

With your permission I will tape record the interviews and transcribe the interviews -- all the interviews will contribute to the process of analysis and theme development.

The research will form a significant part of my thesis and will be assessed by examiners. I am expecting to present the findings from this research to other researchers during the project. On completion of the thesis presentations may be given to adopters, policy makers and practitioners involved in developing Adoption Support Plans.

Will the things you say be kept private and confidential?

It is an important priority to ensure confidentiality in this sensitive area of study. The steps I intend to take are:

- As I transcribe the interviews I will ensure that names and identifying information is anonymous.
- I will keep the recordings and transcripts in a secure location in my home office.
- If you wish I can give you a copy of your transcript.
- The context of the location will not be identified.

The research is supervised by the university and the personal identifying information will be confidential and not shared without your specific consent.

I appreciate that adoption is a personal and sensitive area involving the private lives of children and adoptive families; every effort will be made to respect and safeguard this personal contribution.

What if you change your mind about taking part?

I hope that this leaflet provides you with sufficient information. Should you have further queries, please let me know.

You can change your mind about taking part at any stage of the research.

Who am I?

My name is Marja Kempenaar; I have been a social worker for over thirty years; I am in the middle of the part time Professional Doctorate [Social Work] programme with Cardiff University.

My thesis supervisors are Amanda Coffey [Professor] and Dolores Davey [Doctor].

My contact details are:

Mobile: 07980109012

E-mail: KempenaarMA@cardiff.ac.uk;
mawktramroad@yahoo.co.uk

Appendix C

Interview Consent Form:

Title: Adoption Support Plans: Exploring the processes

Name of Researcher: Marja Kempenaar

	Please initial
1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that this interview will be tape recorded and will be part of the information contributing to this research project	
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.	
4. I understand that my personal contact details will be kept secure and confidential; they will be destroyed at the end of the research. I understand that no identifying information will be used in the thesis report. The University guidelines require research material to be securely stored for five years following the research.	
5. I agree to take part in the study.	

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Appendix D

Interview Guide

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Experience [length of time qualified]:

Role title:

Role description:

Involvement in the ASP:

1. What is the back ground of the ASP?
2. What is your understanding of why they are part of the process?

Prompts:

- Who are they for
- What is their purpose

3. Can you describe how you go about constructing an ASP?

Prompts:

- What 'material' is used
- Where has it come from
- How is the material selected
- What professional knowledge, theories, practice experience do you use
- What are the stages in developing the ASP
- Does anyone check it or help you

4. Timeframe in which ASP is constructed

Prompt:

- How long does it take

5. Are there difficulties/challenges in any stage of the above
6. What do you think [opinion] about adoption support
7. What is the value of the ASP

Prompt:

- How does it work
- How is it used
- Does it work
- Who uses it
- Who owns the ASP

8. Where does the Plan framework come from

Appendix E Schedule of Data

Documents

Adoption Support Plan	Child		Placing authority	Adopters		Receiving authority
	Age months	Gender		Type	Gender	
1	54	m	A (Wales)	single	f	B (England)
2	34	f	A (Wales)	couple	m	C (Wales)
3	39	f	A (Wales)	couple	f	D (England)
4	62	m	A (Wales)	couple	m	E (Wales)
5	45	m	A (Wales)	single	f	F (England)
6	62	m	A (Wales)	single	m	A (Wales)
7	21	m	A (Wales)	couple	f	G (England)
8	33	f	A (Wales)	couple	m	A (Wales)
9	18	f	A (Wales)	couple	f	H (Wales)
10	15	m	A (Wales)	couple	m	A (Wales)
11	11	f	I (Wales)	couple	f	A (Wales)
12	21	m	A (Wales)	couple	m	J (Wales)
					f	

Adopters

Names	Adoption order	Child's age
Luke and Jade	March 2013	2.5
David and Jessica	2012	8
Jean and Shaun		2.7

Professionals

Name	Age	Gender	Qualified experience years	Role title
Becky	37	F	15	Practitioner manager
Mara	-	F	10	Agency adoption social worker
Abigail	39	F	10	Adoption social worker
Naomi	63	F	17	Adoption social worker
Matty	31	F	5	Adoption Support Officer
Flora	33	F	2	Adoption social worker
Shula	48	F	24	Adoption social worker
Sam	54	F	30	Specialist adoption worker
Dilla	25	F	5	Adoption social worker
Irene	59	F	27	Senior adoption social worker
Rose	32	F	10	Senior Practitioner Children's social worker
Poppy	-	F	13	Children's social worker
Linda	30	F	5	Children's social worker
Bill	29	M	16 months	Children's social worker
Jonah	61	M	34	Panel chair
Ruth	57	F	13	Manager – children's team
Sandra	41	F	9	Adoption manager/ASSA

FOCUS GROUP				
Solomon	-	M	-	Adoption manager/ASSA
Esther	-	F	-	Adoption manager/ASSA
Mary	-	F	-	Adoption manager/ASSA
Deborah	-	F	-	Adoption manager
Sarah	-	F	-	Senior Practitioner/ASSA
Doreen	-	F	-	Adoption manager/ASSA

**Appendix F The ADOPTION SUPPORT PLAN INCLUDING MATCHING REPORT
FOR PANEL**

PROPOSED ADOPTION SUPPORT PLAN

Pages 1 – 8 to be completed at time of referral to Panel for Best Interest decision. Pages 1 – 8 to be reviewed and Pages 9 – 13 to be completed at matching meeting

Pages 2 – 5, 7 – 8 and 11 – 12 to be reviewed at Adoption Reviews

Child's Name:	Date of Birth:
----------------------	-----------------------

Placing Local Authority:

Legal Status of Child:	Date of Panel for Best Interest Decision:
-------------------------------	--

Date Proposed Plan was Completed:
--

Name of Family:	Date Approved:
------------------------	-----------------------

Approving Local Authority or Voluntary Adoption Agency:	Date Reply to Request re Support Services:
--	---

Local Authority where the Family Lives:
--

If this is neither the placing nor the approving local authority, date of the required consultation and name and position of person with whom this took place:

Date of Matching Panel:

INDIVIDUAL WORKER RESPONSIBLE FOR CO-ORDINATING + MONITORING THE DELIVERY OF THE SERVICES IN THE PLAN (Link Worker)	
Name:	Agency:
Telephone:	Address:
E-mail:	

SUPPORT PLAN

Child/Young Person's Identified Developmental Needs, Strengths, Difficulties	Services to be Provided	Person/Agency Responsible	Frequency, Duration and Starting Date	Planned Outcome and Plans for Reviews
HEALTH (including any special needs which a disabled child may have)				
EDUCATION				
EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DEVELOPMENT				
IDENTITY INCLUDING ETHNICITY, CULTURE, RELIGION				
SOCIAL PRESENTATION INCLUDING PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION, PERSONALITY AND INTERESTS				
SELF CARE SKILLS				
FAMILY BACKGROUND AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, INCLUDING ATTACHMENTS				
WISHES AND FEELINGS OF CHILD <i>if appropriate</i>				
PREPARATION WORK COMPLETED (Life Journey Work)				
WISHES AND FEELINGS OF BIRTH FAMILY MEMBERS				

SUPPORT FOR BIRTH RELATIVES Adoption Plan version 1 (2003)					
Birth parent(s) identified needs and strengths	Services to be provided	Frequency and length of service e.g. hours per week	Person/agency responsible	Date services to commence/ Commenced	Planned outcome: progress to be achieved by next review or other specified date
CONTACT (What arrangements for contact have been made?)					
Person	Frequency and venue	Type <i>Face to face, telephone, letterbox</i>	Do they support the adoption plan?	Is the contact ordered by a Court?	
Birth mother					
Birth father					
Step-parent/other main carer					
Brothers/sisters					
Grandparent(s)					
Other significant people for the child/young person: including foster carers					
SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS IN RELATION TO CONTACT					
Support Needs of Child and Adopters	Services to be Provided	Person/Agency Responsible		Plans for Review	
(please details this in relation to each contact arrangement if necessary)				(Is there a written contact agreement? How will this be reviewed?)	

FAMILY FINDING WORK COMPLETED <i>(Date and Summary)</i>	
Family identified to proceed for matching:- Name and Address	Local Authority in which they live

MATCHED/LINKED FAMILY

FAMILIES BEING CONSIDERED	
APPROVAL DETAILS	
Health and Age	
Employment and Income	
Identity including Ethnicity, Culture, Religion	
Social Presentation including Personality and Interests and Physical Description	
Family Composition	
Family History and Functioning	
Locality	
Support Networks and Community Links	
Parenting Capacity including Childcare Experience	
Preparation and Training	
What contact able to consider	
Financial Considerations	
MATCHING CONSIDERATIONS	
RECOMMENDATION	

FINANCIAL SUPPORT (CONSIDERING CRITERIA AS LAID DOWN IN REGULATIONS)				
Support Needs of Child and Adopters	Services to be Provided	Person/Agency Responsible	Frequency, Duration and Starting Date	Planned Outcome and Plans for Review
(e.g. to get to contact sessions, to fund therapy sessions, etc)	(these could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single lump sum • A series of lump sums • A regular on-going payment • Home adaptations, etc.) (Financial assessment completed)			
ADOPTIVE FAMILY				
BASIC SUPPORT SERVICES (available to all members of adoptive family)			PROVIDED BY	
			Own Agency	Other (please specify)
SIGNATURES				
	Signature	Print Name	Date	
Child/Young Person (where appropriate)				
Child Care Social Worker				
Child Care Team Manager				
Prospective Adopter(s) Social Worker				
Adoption Team Manager				
Adopter				
Adopter				
Co-ordinating Link Worker (listed on first page if not above)				
Other				

Appendix G Ethics Committee Letter of Approval

Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Director Professor Malcolm Williams
Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol Caerdydd
Cyfarwyddwr Yr Athro Malcolm Williams



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26th September 2011

Our ref: SREC/757

Marja Kempenaar
PhD Programme
SOCSI

Dear Marja

Your project entitled "*Adoption support plans: Exploring the processes*" has been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University, subject to the following. **Please note, you do not need to respond to the Committee on this.**

- Please include text in your information sheet to confirm that this research will not compromise any relationships you may have with participants as part of your social work practice.

If you need clarification concerning this, please contact me.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

All ongoing projects will be monitored every 12 months and it is a condition of continued approval that you complete the monitoring form. Please inform the SREC when the project has ended. Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Professor Tom Horlick-Jones
Chair of the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

cc: E Renton
Supervisors: A Coffey
D Dayey

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