

Chapter 1

Introduction

The need for adoption support is now well established. Prior to adoption, most children will have experienced a broad range of adversities, which can have long-lasting negative effects. These adversities may affect their physical, emotional, cognitive, educational, behavioural and social development.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

The overarching aim of this guide is to improve outcomes for, and promote the development and well-being of, adopted children and their families, by enhancing the quality of social work assessments for adoption support. The guide's main objectives are to encourage social workers' close partnership working with adoptive families, and to support and enable practitioners to carry out assessments informed by the best available research evidence and practice wisdom. It should also support and enable practitioners to conduct assessments in accordance with their statutory duties.

The quality of assessments is not the only factor that will affect the outcomes of adoption support services – many other factors will have an impact. Turney *et al* (2012) carefully explored how and whether social work assessments may enhance outcomes for children by meticulously analysing a large body of research published in the 2000s, including data concerning the assessment of children in need. They concluded that despite the methodological challenges:

Good assessment is unequivocally important and contributes to good outcomes for children.

(p.189)

This guide provides a synthesis of key knowledge needed by social workers who undertake adoption support assessments. It also signposts readers to further information and resources.

Chapter 2 briefly describes the changing nature of adoption and adoption support, and changes in the need for adoption support over the last 20 years. After **Chapter 3's** short description of the changing policy context for adoption support, **Chapter 4** summarises the origins and nature of

the statutory duties from which adoption support assessments should flow. Other influences on assessments for adoption support – including practice approaches, models and frameworks often used in other services for children and families – are outlined in **Chapter 5**. The principles and values that need to guide assessments for adoption support are set out in **Chapter 6**. **Chapter 7** identifies the key stages of the assessment process, which are also determined by the statutory framework. **Chapter 8** describes recent innovations in models for adoption support assessment. The next two chapters address the use of structured screening and assessment tools and therapeutic interventions for adoptive families. To encourage reflective practice, the provision of support for adoption support social workers in meeting the many challenges of their professional roles is explored in the final chapter. The guide ends with a brief conclusion.

More generally, this guide highlights the importance of the relationships between adoption support social workers and adopted children and their families. Positive relationships – good “connections” – have been found to help ensure that adoption support is well matched with adoptive families’ needs (Burch *et al*, 2022b). Research with adoptive parents (Burch *et al*, 2021) also suggests that in recent years there have been improvements in the extent to which adoptive parents’ views have been taken into account in assessments.

Adoption support social workers are keen to work in close partnership with adoptive families. They value highly adoptive parents’ expertise, and recognise that their skills, knowledge, insights and strengths are vital to the process of developing shared understandings of the families’ needs (Burch *et al*, 2021).

Related to the importance of relationships between social workers and adoptive families, the guide is also in part a response to adoption support professional stakeholders’ suggestions that there is a need for support assessments to be “reimagined” in the context of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) (previously the Adoption Support Fund (ASF)).¹ It addresses calls from professionals working within adoption services for support assessments to be thought of once again – as they were prior to the introduction of the ASGSF – as the start of therapeutic interventions with families, rather than simply a means to accessing the ASGSF to pay for future therapeutic interventions.

There have been more specific calls in CoramBAAF’s practitioner training events² for assessments to be viewed as valuable opportunities for social workers to work directly with adopted children and their families. Direct work is needed to understand families’ issues, including the history of issues and their development, to inform plans for support.

¹ A description of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund is provided in Chapter 2.

² A series of CoramBAAF training events on assessment for adoption support was held in the summer of 2022. The events were commissioned by Adoption England.

Many adoption support social workers are hungry for more opportunities to use their own specialist knowledge and skills to build on and extend adoptive parents' insights. They would value, for instance, more chances to apply systemic approaches to their assessments, which help them to understand and work with adoptive families in their extended family relationships, including adopted children's birth family relationships; schools; communities; and wider social environments.

Regional adoption agencies (RAAs) have also been expressing concerns about a perceived deskilling of social workers in their assessment roles. Furthermore, during the development of RAAs, some adoption support social workers moved from their statutory roles to therapeutic roles in the private sector, which they considered to be more attractive. Consequently, some RAAs have had too few adoption support social workers to cope with the increasing demands on them for assessments and review (Burch *et al*, 2022d).

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide has a focus on the professional duties and responsibilities of social workers and their managers in England,³ who assess the post-order support needs of adopted children and their families in local authorities, RAAs, voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) and adoption support agencies.⁴ It has also been developed with the interests of other professionals in mind, such as those working in education and children's mental health services, who contribute to assessments of support needs.

The guide is specifically designed for social workers and their managers undertaking "responsive" assessments for adoption support – those conducted when someone who asks for one is also entitled to an assessment in accordance with the Regulations. They are usually undertaken *after* an adoption order has been made. The process for "responsive" assessments differs from that for assessments for adoption support for children and prospective adopters *prior* to matching, and which are subject to reviews at each stage of the adoption process.⁵ It is important, however, that "responsive" assessments build on any assessments for adoption support undertaken earlier in the adoption process.

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- 3 Some of the guide's messages may also be useful for social workers responsible for assessments for adoption support in other parts of the UK.
 - 4 The ASGSF does not accept assessments carried out by VAAs and other adoption support agencies to support applications for funding.
 - 5 A standalone Adoption Support Plan, with accompanying guidance for social workers, is currently being developed by CoramBAAF. This will be separate from the Adoption Placement Report (APR).

Some practitioners – especially those with extensive experience in adoption support – will already be familiar with much of the information provided in this guide. Nevertheless, experienced practitioners will hopefully value the new collation of key information and can use the guide's content selectively to fill any gaps in their knowledge.

THE FOCUS OF THIS GUIDE

The guide's focus is on assessment for post-order adoption support for adopted children and their families, although many of the issues addressed also apply to special guardianship. Adopted children and those living with special guardians will often have similar support needs related to experiences of similar kinds of adversities in their lives. However, special guardianship and other forms of kinship care have some unique characteristics. For instance, children living with special guardians are more likely than adopted children to be living with carers who previously cared for them, and/or where there was a pre-existing bond (Hunt, 2020). There are also some significant differences in the statutory guidance for assessment (Department for Education (DfE), 2017). For instance, the right to receive an assessment on request only applies to special guardianship where the order was made on a child who was previously looked after. Where the child was not previously looked after, there is no such duty, although the local authority is required to act responsibly in exercising its discretion. Furthermore, the review of the ASGSF Covid-19 Scheme recently found that special guardianship families may need a slightly different offer and approach to that for adoptive families, including the marketing of support for them (Institute of Public Care at Oxford Brookes University, 2021). Separate and tailored guidance for social workers undertaking assessments for support for special guardianship is needed.

Separate and tailored guidance is also needed for adoption support assessments for:

- birth relatives, who have the right to request an assessment of need regarding support services, including contact arrangements. Birth families must have access to a range of support services such as counselling, advice and information, both before and after adoption. (There are resources available about adoption support for birth parents on the Adoption Research Initiative website. See: <http://adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html>. Also, a Research in Practice open access website provides resources for practitioners in making evidence-informed post-adoption contact plans and supporting birth relatives and adopters through contact and planning for their child. See: [https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/open-access-resources/contact-after-adoption/.](https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/open-access-resources/contact-after-adoption/))

- adults adopted as children. At the time of writing, the University of East Anglia (UEA), in partnership with the National Adoption Strategic Team and PAC-UK, is leading the project, 'Improving adoption services for adults: a time for change' (IASA Project). This has been set up to identify and urgently address barriers to tracing and support services which adults affected by adoption have increasingly encountered since the Adoption and Children Act 2002 was implemented.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS GUIDE

The development of the guide has been informed by research, practice wisdom and adoption agencies' statutory duties.

Research

There is a growing body of research evidence on adoption support, assessment for adoption support services, and assessment for children's services more generally. In developing the guide, particular attention has been paid to the voices of adoptive families who participated in these evaluations about their "lived experiences" of assessment for support.

As part of the DfE's 2014/15 prototyping of the ASF, the Government supported BAAF's (now CoramBAAF) early development of a Good Practice Guide, maps and a proforma for adoption support assessment. The DfE recognised that the Fund's success would in part be determined by the quality of local authority assessments of adoptive families' support needs. They supported a trial of these tools by the prototyping authorities in advance of the national roll-out. These prototyping projects and tools laid the foundations for this guide.⁶

The guide has been further developed over several years to take account of findings from evaluations of the:

- prototyping of the ASF;
- early national roll-out of the ASF;
- RAAs (see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>);
- ASGSF (see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluations-of-the-adoption-support-fund-asf>);

⁶ The trial involved data collection visits to adoption and adoption support teams, during which BAAF (now CoramBAAF) explored ways in which assessments had been undertaken and informed applications to the Fund.

- One Adoption West Yorkshire's Centre of Excellence's developments in adoption support assessments (Young and Neil, 2020).

Collectively, these evaluations have identified a need for further support for the development of assessment skills and knowledge for assessing professionals. The evaluations also made recommendations relevant to the strengthening of these skills and processes, including recommendations focused on:

- innovation in service models to strengthen access to clinical expertise (from Child and Mental Health Services (CAMHS), psychology services or the independent sector) – see Chapter 8.
- the appropriate use of structured screening and assessment instruments in assessments – see Chapter 9.
- understanding of the focus of therapeutic interventions, their evidence base and the developmental issues they are designed to address – see Chapter 10.
- professionals having opportunities to discuss, reflect on and understand the high levels of stress and uncertainty experienced by adoptive families and in turn the stress and uncertainty experienced by professionals – see Chapter 11.

Practice wisdom

Practice wisdom is difficult to define. However, the application of the concept in social work has been explored well in recent years by Cheung (2017, p.619):

...not only the wisdom of analytical experience, but it is also the wisdom or a quality characterised by courtesy, kindness, consideration, compassion, and benevolence.

The need for social workers and other practitioners to be well supported to practise with courtesy, kindness, consideration and benevolence, and to be guided by the principles that underpin high-quality assessments, are themes that run throughout this guide.

To inform thinking about practice wisdom and the guiding principles and values that need to underpin adoption support assessments, we have drawn on:

- findings from research and evaluation about adoptive families' lived experiences of adoption support assessment;
- the advice of expert practitioners and academics from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including child psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy and social work;
- learning from the Centres of Excellence for Adoption Support;

- discussions in CoramBAAF's various practice forums and learning events; and
- discussions during a series of national webinars with adoption support social workers and managers in 2022.⁷

Statutory duties

The statutory duties relating to adoption support are currently determined by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005, and Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014. This legislation and its supporting regulations and guidance were informed by extensive consultations with representatives of adoptive and birth families, policy makers, service providers, practitioners working in local authorities and VAAs, and health and education professionals, as well as research. They set out a comprehensive framework for providing a consistent minimum level of service, wherever adoptive and birth families live.

The framework also aims to support adoption agencies to deliver excellent (rather than minimum) levels of adoption services across England to ensure 'best practice becomes the norm' and to promote a 'culture of continuous improvement', as required by the Government's latest Adoption Strategy (DfE, 2021). It allows for creativity and innovation in both practice and the organisation and delivery of services.

The process for the assessment of need for those eligible for adoption support services set out in this guide is informed by these regulations and guidance, as well as many other influences, such as the Assessment Framework for Children in Need, Signs of Safety and the Secure Base model. The regulations and guidance are especially useful in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of those involved in assessments. They support "co-productive" and "adopter-led" approaches to the formulation of adoption support plans. They also promote transparency in the process by requiring written records of the plans to be shared with families.

EXAMPLE FORM FOR RECORDING AN ASSESSMENT FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT

The guide includes an example form for recording an assessment for adoption support (see Appendix). The form includes shortened guidance notes and flow charts representing the assessment process, and is informed by the statutory guidance.

⁷ The webinar series was commissioned by Adoption England as part of the Government's National Adoption Strategy.