

Chapter 5

Elective adopters

This chapter explores a group of applicants sometimes referred to as “elective adopters”. Here, this is taken to be applicants, usually heterosexual couples, who could possibly have birth children, but who choose to adopt instead. The survey of adopters undertaken for this guide found that elective applicants had several motives: one respondent cited ethical and financial concerns in relation to fertility treatment, but also that they wanted to provide a home for a child and were concerned about environmental issues and overpopulation. Neil *et al*’s retrospective study (2018) of 319 adoptive families, having excluded those with fertility issues, showed a preference for adoption over having a birth child was expressed by 12 per cent (n=33). A similar proportion (n=26, 10%) had personal experience of adoption and wanted to use the experience to help others. A respondent to the adopters’ survey said that they had several family members who had been adopted and this had been a strong influence for them.

Soares *et al* (2023) emphasise in their recent study that motivation is complex and not just about not being able to have birth children, which has been the focus of many earlier studies. It is a somewhat artificial distinction to separate out some motivations to adopt, as we need to recognise that the decision to adopt is multi-layered and some of the topics addressed here may well also apply to groups discussed in earlier chapters. However, it is helpful to consider these motivations separately when they are the primary one, as this can sometimes raise particular questions and issues for the assessing social worker.

LGBTQ+ families, those not pursuing fertility treatment and single people who have chosen adoption in preference to other routes to parenthood could also be referred to as elective. It may be that some issues are a strong secondary motivation for other groups and the topics explored below can usefully be considered alongside previous chapters.

WHO ARE ELECTIVE ADOPTERS, AND HOW HAVE THEY BEEN TREATED?

There is evidence that, historically, elective adopters have been viewed with caution by social workers and adoption panels. Selwyn *et al*’s study of 86 adopters stated:

Altruistic adopters thought that their motivation to adopt had been viewed suspiciously by social workers even though they seemed more prepared than those motivated by infertility.

She also quoted one adopter with significant experience of young people as saying:

We did it because we wanted to help young people, not because we couldn't have children. But people couldn't understand that, we kept having to justify it, we felt like lepers.

(Selwyn *et al*, 2006)

There will be a variety of motivations within this group, including:

- religious faith;
- values;
- altruism;
- environmental concerns; and
- not wanting to go through a pregnancy.

Such applications have become more common in recent years, particularly following initiatives encouraging members of faith groups to consider fostering or adoption, and increasing concern about environmental sustainability. At the same time, research into this area remains virtually non-existent, due to this being a relatively recent change, and consequently this group still remains a minority within adoption applicants as a whole.

Some of this group may already have one or more birth child/ren, but have decided to pursue adoption to add to their family rather than attempt further conception. Others may not have birth children, nor want to. This latter group is one of the smallest represented and probably the most controversial in terms of how they are often seen by adoption agencies, assessing workers and adoption panels. Many of the social workers responding to the survey undertaken for this guide had no experience of assessing elective adopters with no children, or mentioned that it was more unusual. Exact numbers are hard to ascertain: the Adoption Barometer 2023 shows that for 30 per cent of respondents, adoption was their first choice for starting a family, but this would include many LGBTQ+ couples and single people (the former making up 20 per cent of respondents to that survey). The Barometer also showed that adoption is a first choice for one-half of single applicants. This group would also include adopters who chose to add to their family by adoption rather than have another birth child.

ELECTIVE APPLICANTS WHO ALREADY HAVE BIRTH CHILDREN

Survey results suggest a rise in the number of adopters coming forward who already have at least one birth child. Government data do not show whether there are already children in the household of adoptive applicants, but 14 per cent of respondents to the Adoption Barometer 2023 survey already had a birth child, representing a sizeable group.

The underlying motivations for this group are varied:

- they may have experienced a very difficult pregnancy previously;
- they may have secondary infertility (cannot have a second child);
- they may have children from a previous relationship but a desire to parent together;
- they may choose for altruistic or other reasons to pursue adoption in preference to having another birth child; or
- they may be adopting for a second time.

A more complex dynamic

Assessing a family where there are already children automatically presents a more complex dynamic. It is probable that assessors will need more than the recommended four months to complete such an assessment thoroughly, as it is inevitable that more sessions will be needed. One social worker respondent to the survey said that they saw these families as having considerable strengths in terms of experience, but also significant vulnerabilities. A number of workers mentioned the higher rate of disruption in families where there are already birth children, and some highlighted greater complexity in matching.

Selwyn *et al*'s study of adoption disruption supports this view. Out of 70 families who had experienced significant challenges or disruption in the study, 19 (27%) had other children living in the household (Selwyn *et al*, 2015). One contributor to a focus group explained that their agency had identified having an existing birth child as being one of five main reasons for adoption disruption.

It cannot be assumed that children already in the family will welcome a new sibling or, in the long term, will *get along* well with them. In Selwyn *et al*'s 2006 study, they found 22 per cent of the children already in the adoptive family disliked the new child. They also found that over the longer term, there was conflict between 40 per cent of siblings in "stranger" adoptions, this being particularly marked where the adopted child had a learning disability.

Expectations of future family life

Many social worker respondents to the survey mentioned a strong desire expressed by applicants for their birth child to have a sibling or a playmate, and this often worried them: workers felt that these applicants were focused on meeting a need in their family, rather than thinking about how they could meet the needs of an adopted child. In Soares *et al's* study of motivations (2023), 18 per cent of adopters cited wanting their birth child to have a sibling as one of their motives. This could prove problematic in terms of expectations. One social worker reported that she felt unable to support a positive recommendation for a family where she felt the adopted child would be expected to “fit in” with a birth child (who she felt also had a high level of need). Several social workers spoke about the need to help adoptive applicants understand the impact of adoption on their birth child and how this was often massively underestimated by families. This work is vital and should go alongside the preparation of any birth children. In addition, work with the whole family can be productive, and reveal much to the assessor about existing family dynamics. Specific work around managing conflict, and discussing how the parents can achieve some one-to-one time for each child, is also helpful.

Adopters who have had very close relationships with their own siblings may be unprepared for the level of rivalry they might encounter when an adopted child joins a household that already has a birth child. Social worker respondents pointed out that it was important to emphasise to applicants that it would take time to build a relationship between the children, that comparisons between children should be avoided, and differences respected and celebrated.

This group presents a sharp contrast to childless applicants who have rarely had the experience of caring for a child 24/7. These families will not have so much adjustment to make in terms of day-to-day routines and having to prioritise a child's needs. As experienced parents, they will have a level of confidence around caring for children, and “tried and tested” parenting strategies. However, this has the potential to lead to false confidence and unpreparedness for the possible challenges ahead. Social worker respondents pointed out that if applicants' tried and tested methods fail, they may blame the adopted child rather than look for alternative strategies. It will be important during the assessment for social workers to ascertain how wedded applicants are to their own parenting strategies, and if they can take on board the need for therapeutic parenting and be open to changing their approach.

One social worker talked about the need for adopters to explore their feelings towards their birth child and towards the adopted child. The strong attachment they have with their birth child will take time to develop with the adopted child; how will they manage this? What support will they need? If they see their birth child is unhappy or suffering, this contrast in feelings will be particularly difficult.

Social worker respondents sought a thorough understanding of the basis of the decision to adopt from applicants, what had influenced it and what events had taken place along the way. If a family had had miscarriages, failed fertility treatment or been unable to conceive, there would be similar issues of loss to explore as with those trying for children for the first time. For many, having a birth child does perhaps ameliorate this to some extent, but nevertheless there is an adjustment of expectations and a different vision of the family life envisaged.

Preparing and supporting children in the family

A number of social worker respondents to the survey highlighted the need for in-depth work with the child/ren in the household. Sadly, this can be woefully lacking. Selwyn *et al* (2015) found that in the 19 families in their study where there were birth children, only four felt that they had been offered adequate preparation. Time spent getting to know the child/ren, including them in family sessions and possible family network meetings (Davis and Westwood, 2024) as well as one-to-one work is vital in obtaining an accurate picture of whether an adopted child can join this family. Given that adults underestimate the impact of an adoption placement, children will do so much more. It is a complex task, and challenging to walk the line between preparing the birth child for some difficulties without leading them to anticipate a negative experience before it has even begun. Children will inevitably be aware of their parents' strong desire for another child and may find it difficult to voice reservations or concerns. It is important for workers to be alert to what children are not saying, as well as to observe family dynamics, and to seek the views of others in the network. One social worker respondent explained that she always gives older children the means to contact her independently, and cited the example of an older boy who had refused to meet with her, but then emailed to express his reservations about his family adopting. Another worker cited a case where a family was approved, despite a clear message from their child that this was not something he wanted. The adoption later disrupted.

A panel Chair respondent commented that the Prospective Adopter's Report (Form PAR) does not lend itself to clear coverage of other children in the family. At present, this information is in two different sections and there is limited opportunity to write about family routines and expectations. It may be beneficial to consider how it can be given a higher profile within the existing structure.

One social work manager shared a model of good practice from their agency (see box below).

The safeguarding review following the death of Leiland-James Corkhill in his adoptive placement in 2021, in which other children were part of the family, identified that, while appropriate work was done during the assessment with these other children, this was not continued:

When prospective adopters have another child, that child should be engaged with in an age-appropriate way to understand their day to day lived experience, at each stage of the process.

(Pettitt, 2022)

This has implications for continued dedicated support to the children already in the family through the matching process and post-placement, and the need to continually assess the impact of the adoption on all the children in the family and to provide an outlet for their wishes and feelings.

THE PREPARING CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY FOR ADOPTION MODEL

In this model, the child/ren have their own worker. This person carries out a minimum of four separate sessions with the child/ren, and continues to be involved throughout matching and placement. It is provided for any children in the family – birth children and adopted children.

Parents are briefed as to the purpose of the work, and advised of the need to assess the whole family with a view to careful matching and planning future support.

It's not only the parents who adopt a child – it is the whole family.

This leads to an independent assessment of the children in the family, which is presented to the panel alongside the Form PAR.

The assessing worker and the worker for the children work closely together. The child/ren are encouraged to speak in confidence, but feedback is provided to parents.

(With thanks to Adoption Matters)

ELECTIVE ADOPTERS WITHOUT CHILDREN

Some applicants in this group may be able to have a child in terms of their fertility, but they have specific reasons to choose adoption over trying to conceive. Social worker respondents to the survey spoke about those who knew from the beginning they could not conceive, or those who had medical issues or concerns about genetic medical conditions, or were of an age where conception was unlikely. However, these applicants may still have ideally wanted a birth child, so coming to terms with that, even if they were not in a position to try fertility treatment, puts them on a par with those who would have ideally liked to have had a birth child with a partner. They may well have had to process the loss of their imagined birth child or let go of

the family life they had dreamt of. Where the choice to adopt over trying to become pregnant is more pragmatic, others seem to find this easier to understand.

Where issues such as these are not involved, social worker respondents commented that elective adopters elicited a degree of caution from placing social workers and generated more questions and concerns at the family-finding stage, than for any other group of applicants. However, not all workers agreed with this and reported that while they did not always know why a family was not chosen by family finders, motivation was not a factor that usually came up. It seemed more common to encounter a greater level of scrutiny at the adoption panel, one social worker stating that they had found panel members to be very critical of this group. It is particularly important to think about social, cultural and individual values in approaching an application from people who have made a proactive choice to choose adoption over having a birth child.

There was a level of agreement amongst social worker respondents that the issues of loss for this group were not the same as for many other adopters. However, it was recognised that there may be a sense of loss later on if an adopted child did not meet the adopter's hopes and expectations, but this is potentially true for all adopters.

MOTIVATIONS FOR ELECTIVE ADOPTERS

These may vary for different people, or there may be a mixture of factors influencing applicants' decision to adopt.

No desire to experience pregnancy

This may apply to some female applicants, and social workers and panel Chairs cited some specific examples. Some social worker respondents highlighted that they had experienced, or were concerned about, an apparently clear decision by an applicant to choose adoption over having a birth child masking other issues. Two respondents gave examples of where this was linked to difficulties with body image, and with further exploration this was a cause for concern. One social worker cited an applicant who had a fear of pregnancy. This family were approved, but she had struggled to find them a match.

Another social worker respondent suggested that the reluctance to have a birth child could be linked to past trauma, and this, like with any unresolved trauma for adopters, had the potential to become triggered by caring for a traumatised child. In one case, a panel asked for a psychological assessment of the female applicant who had cited environmental issues as the reason for wanting to adopt, but also had said she had no desire to be pregnant. The

psychologist was satisfied that there were no issues of concern. One social worker reported that she had assessed four such families and in only one case had she felt there was an underlying issue.

However, many workers had never encountered such applicants. Consequently, building up expertise in separating those who have emotional issues that could impact negatively on their suitability to adopt from those who have made a considered and thought-through decision, albeit an unusual one, is a challenge. Social workers may also be influenced by their own value base and unconscious bias. One social worker reported, very honestly, that she had had to address her own unconscious bias as a birth mother herself. For many people, perhaps the majority, there is possibly a need to accept that others may be in a very different place to ourselves when it comes to the desire to procreate.

Motivated by altruism

A number of elective adopters are motivated by altruism. Eight out of the 14 respondents to the adopters' survey undertaken for this guide had chosen adoption either in preference to having fertility treatment or in preference to having a birth child/another birth child. All of them mentioned wanting to provide a home to a child who needed a family as one of their reasons.

One-third of the 126 participants in Soares *et al*'s (2023) study of adopters mentioned altruism as one of their motives, amongst others. The idea of helping a child is frequently mentioned by many adopters, but is rarely reported as being the sole motive. Soares *et al* also found that this was sometimes linked to either personal or professional experience of the child protection system: 'To provide children that were deprived of parents with a family – altruism often stemmed from personal experience'. One respondent to the adopters' survey also mentioned professional experience with children from care.

Where altruism is the sole motive, this was a source of concern for some social workers, who wondered if those who adopt for altruistic reasons may have a "desire to rescue" and if there is the potential to expect that the adopted child will be thankful or grateful. More than one worker felt that it was important to emphasise that a child who has experienced multiple losses may not see it this way, and never feel their adoption is something to be thankful for: 'The child will never view their situation as having been rescued'.

Another social worker respondent felt that this view could also be held by the adopter's support network, adding to this expectation. This idea of wanting to "save" a child was felt to need careful exploration. It was felt that "rescuers" can struggle with learning a child's history and lack empathy for birth parents, and this is something that needs to be worked through. For people who can empathise with a child, a way to do this may be to consider the sad and difficult childhoods many birth parents endure.

Adopting for altruistic reasons can be seen as a “good thing to do”. One social worker respondent wondered whether in that case, was there sufficient emotional investment from the applicant, or was it more an ethical or rational decision? They suggested that without that emotional investment and a strong desire to be a parent for its own sake, altruism or ethical considerations would not be enough to carry applicants through the challenges they could face. Another social worker respondent speculated that, perhaps at a subconscious level, such applicants sought the approval of others and liked the idea of being seen to do something selfless and admirable. Another social worker described this mindset as ‘my good deed’. This would be difficult for assessors to explore, but is a valid question. It is natural to enjoy the approval of others, but the assessor would need to feel confident that this was not the driver behind the application, and that wanting to bring up a child and help them heal was the primary motivation. Where people want to be seen to have helped a child, challenges with that child could provoke a crisis of confidence and they may find themselves unable to manage not only the situation but their own feelings of failure.

For some applicants, adoption is a considered altruistic decision as the way to add to their family. For others, they may not even have envisaged a larger family, but are prompted to offer a stable family life to a child in care. With these applicants, it will be necessary for assessors to explore some of the issues raised when working with childless elective adopters: the dangers of a “rescue mentality”, wanting to do the right thing, issues around wanting to avoid a further pregnancy and birth, or post-natal depression, which may not have been shared immediately. One social worker stated that it is important that people understand that adoption will be different to parenting a birth child, not easier. At the same time, these families can be an excellent resource. Their children may be older, or they may simply feel that their need to parent birth children has been fulfilled and they have more to offer. One social worker said that they felt this group was more able to accept child’s birth family history and sometimes willing to consider children with disabilities, although there is a need to think carefully about the impact of a high level of need on other child/ren in the family.

Motivated by faith

For adopters whose primary motive is to want to help a child, this is frequently rooted in a religious faith, and some will talk about a sense of being “called” to adopt. This group has seen an increase in recent years, with organisations such as Home for Good and My Adoption Family, which aim specifically to encourage and support those with a religious faith to consider adoption. This is potentially a fruitful place from which to recruit: 31 per cent of respondents to the Adoption Barometer stated that they had a religious faith (Adoption UK, 2023).

Home for Good, an organisation for Christians interested in adoption and fostering, started in 2013 in response to national publicity concerning the

shortage of foster carers and adopters. Kandiah, in his book *Home for Good* (2019), writes:

This book unashamedly asks you to pass on the blessings you have received as adopted children of God and consider stepping forward and getting involved in the lives of children who need your care, your wisdom, your experience, your voice, your attention, your friendship, your love and maybe even a place in your home.

Home for Good emphasises the theological basis for adoption, but also puts children at its heart.

Our two core values are the twin threads that run through every aspect of our work. All that we do is shaped by, built upon, and fuelled through being child-focused and faith-rooted.

(<https://homeforgood.org.uk/about-us>)

From the outset, Krish and Mariam Kandiah emphasise very definitely that love is not enough: 'As foster and adoptive parents ourselves we know we couldn't do it without the whole church sharing the vision and working together'.

They discuss embedding a church culture that can manage and support children who have had difficult experiences and/or are perhaps neurodiverse, and their adoptive parents or foster carers. They ask people to consider their motivation and list 10 reasons to adopt, suggesting people consider them in order of importance (Kandiah, 2019).

Home for Good takes very seriously the responsibility of educating enquirers and would-be adopters about the needs of children who have suffered trauma. They see themselves not only as an "inspiration space" but as a "preparation space", offering a six-week course of 90-minute sessions for those who want to explore further before approaching an adoption agency. The organisation also offers peer support groups. They partner with local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies and churches to raise local and national awareness and to pass on suitable applicants. The organisation is very clear that their aim is to provide families for children, not children for families, and emphasise the need for placements for children who may often wait longer for adoption.

My Adoption Family is a non-profit organisation based in Bradford, dedicated to supporting Black, Asian and minority ethnic families through the adoption process, focusing predominantly on Muslim adopters. Their website states:

As a member of the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group and the Special Guardianship Leadership Board, My Adoption Family is proactive in the sector helping to raise much needed awareness and support for people from BAME backgrounds to become adopters in the UK.

They offer seminars to enquirers and pass on suitable and interested families to partner agencies. See www.myadoptionfamily.org.uk/.

Religious faith can be a barrier for assessing social workers if not properly understood. A mixture of social worker responses from the survey and focus groups showed a range of attitudes to this area. Staff from one voluntary adoption agency, which partners with Home for Good, said that they were originally a faith-based organisation and this, together with the partnership, means that it 'sits fairly comfortably'. They added that faith awareness training provided by Home for Good had helped with this. The social work manager stated:

Christian adopters go the extra mile, faith helps them to stay committed. In concurrency, they are better able to accept a child going back to birth family. There are often high levels of support from the Church community.

At the same time, other respondents found faith as a motivation unsettling – one social worker talked about a couple being 'overly cheerful' in relation to this. Workers may feel sceptical about faith as a motive, and some expressed concerns about naivete and a "rescue mentality", as described above. Clearly, there is significant overlap between being motivated by faith and by altruism. Having said that, organisations such as Home for Good and My Adoption Family work hard to dispel the myth that "love will conquer all" when it comes to adoption, and to ensure that those who wish to proceed have grasped the complex nature of many children's needs and what this might mean in terms of parenting.

In any assessment, it is important to be very aware of our own cultural context and the cultural context of a family whom we are assessing – where values and beliefs may overlap or may seem very alien to what we know or experience. Religion or faith may be a central part of some people's lives, while having little or no significance for others. A worker who has the same faith as applicants may be able to better understand their motivation, but may also be in danger of colluding or may make assumptions about what others reading their report know and understand. Conversely, a worker who has no faith, or a different faith, or has a negative view of faith may be overly sceptical when considering this motivation and arrive with assumptions that applicants are naïve or "too good to be true".

Reviewing our own cultural context and those of applicants prior to starting an assessment can be helpful, thinking about where our values, knowledge and beliefs come from and whether we need to educate ourselves further. Faith awareness training is provided by both Home for Good and My Adoption Family, and both organisations report that this is an important part of their work.

Case example

My husband and I had spoken about fostering and adoption even before we were married; we both knew people who had looked after children in care, and we both came from big families. Every now and then it would come up in conversation, but it never felt like the right time.

We had had three birth children before we attended a Christian conference where we heard a Home for Good speaker. We were so moved and inspired by what they shared; we felt compelled that caring for children who were in need of the stability, security and care of a family was something we needed to be part of in some way. They helped us see that this issue is one that matters to God – and so therefore, it should matter to us as the Church. We're always learning and talking about love, justice and hospitality. To share these things as best as we could by welcoming a child or young person into our family made too much sense for us to ignore.

We spoke with a member of the Home for Good team immediately after that talk, and gave them our details, and that same week Home for Good got in touch with us to help us figure out our next steps. Our Home for Good caseworker was so kind and helpful – we were right at the beginning of our journey and had so many questions, but nothing was too small or silly. We really valued that time – it was far too soon for us to think about approaching our local authority, but Home for Good were able to walk with us in those vital first steps.

When we shared with our birth children that we had been thinking about adoption, we asked what they thought. We needed them to be part of the process; we wouldn't proceed with anything before we knew we were approaching it united. We were so moved by my eldest daughter's response: 'We should do this. If we don't look after them, Mummy, then who will?'

We attended a Home for Good information session, and then took part in their online Foundations course. We also invited a Home for Good speaker to come and share at our church, helping them understand the need in our local area and the ways in which the church can make a difference for children in care. When the time came, Home for Good referred us to our local authority, and remained available to us throughout our assessment for encouragement and prayer.

The assessment process was long and in-depth, but we enjoyed a good relationship with our social worker throughout it all. We'd heard some people share that they were worried their faith could be held against them in their assessment, but our experience couldn't have been further from that. Our social worker could see that our faith was a really positive motivator in our lives, and understood that it was part of the reason why we were exploring fostering and adoption. She mentioned how brilliant it was to have our church community around us, who were so willing to offer us support.

We were approved to adopt through concurrent care/early permanence, and after a little while, a baby girl joined our family. We fostered her for about a year-and-a-half while decisions were being made about whether or not she would be able to return to her birth family, and then we became her adoptive parents. That was such a bittersweet time for us; we held in the same hand the joy that this little girl brought to our lives, and the grief we felt that she wasn't able to remain with her birth family. Our faith was something that kept us strong in this period, and I think gave us a perspective that allowed us to show the birth parents grace, compassion and understanding.

Fast forward a few years, and our little one has just started school. She faces some challenges – she has FASD (Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) and struggled to form attachments early in her life. Being part of a Home for Good peer support group has been so helpful as we've navigated these things; to be with others who just “get it” is so valuable. But our daughter's challenges don't define her – she is a beautiful, precious child, created with intrinsic worth and value, and this is something we celebrate every day.

(With thanks to Home for Good)

Motivated by environmental concerns

This is an emerging discussion as concerns about the environment and sustainability, particularly in younger people, gather momentum. An article published by Friends of the Earth about youth protests against climate change quotes young people as saying they feel there is a lack of awareness amongst older generations and that this needs to change: ‘Young people are genuinely scared about the future of our planet and it can't be left up to us to sort out such a terrible mess’.¹⁶

An article in the *Guardian* about choosing to be child-free cites research that identifies choosing not to have children or another child will have one of the greatest impacts on carbon emissions possible for an individual (Wynes and

¹⁶ (<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/climate/adults-are-failing-us-climate-thats-why-im-striking>)

Nicolas, 2017, quoted in <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/series/childfree>).

As these powerful messages become more widespread, it seems likely that more elective adopters will cite this as a primary motivation or part of their motivation. Members of CoramBAAF's Panel Chairs' focus group had come across several cases. Focus group members noted that these applicants were worried about the environment and sustainability and did not feel that having children was an entitlement. Two respondents to the adopters' survey mentioned environmental concerns, amongst other motives.

As with applicants who do not want to be pregnant, assessing workers may want to be satisfied that this motivation is what it seems and that there are no other "hidden" issues. However, it seems likely that this motivation will become more common, and as with faith, it may be important for workers to educate themselves about current issues to identify and understand the strength of feeling some adoptive applicants may have in this area.

POSITIVES OF ELECTIVE ADOPTERS

Some respondents to the social workers' survey spoke very positively of elective adopters. One social worker felt that these adoptions were usually more successful than those involving infertile applicants, as these adopters were not trying to meet the need for the birth child they never had. The social worker also felt that it was usually an informed and empowered decision, and noted that these families seemed more accepting of a child later on if there were challenges post-adoption. Another social worker stated that they felt these applicants' willingness to "go against the norm" and do things differently can indicate a strong sense of self. They observed that these families were not overly worried about what others think and were therefore often quite robust emotionally. Other social workers felt that some applicants had researched more thoroughly than most prior to applying.

Some workers noted that elective adopters, particularly those who already had children, were more positive about contact with birth family and seemed to find it less threatening. This is supported by Sorek *et al's* small study of Israeli adopters (2020), where he found those who were motivated primarily by a desire to help a child (most of whom already had children) were much more able to manage and be positive about open adoptions.

KEY POINTS FOR PRACTICE

- Where families already have children, careful and thorough preparation with all family members is essential and assessments may need to take longer to achieve this to a good standard.
- Support for children in the family needs to continue through the matching process and into placement, and opportunities given for them to voice their feelings and any concerns.
- Depending on circumstances, there still may be issues of loss to be explored with these applicants, particularly if there has been failed fertility treatment or miscarriages.
- Some motives for adoption may be exactly what they seem and be a carefully thought through decision. However, they may mask other issues. There is a need for caution and thoroughness, where presenting motivations might not in reality be the primary one. It may be helpful to obtain detailed, or possibly more, references, and to ascertain the views of the wider family.
- It is still important to understand how applicants arrived at this place. How have these applicants arrived at this point, and what have been the influences along the way? A useful starting point may be to look at how the applicants had considered the pros and cons of having a birth child versus adoption.
- Given that some elective adopters are making what is still an unusual choice, it is particularly important to ensure that both applicants (if a couple) are equally on board.
- Consideration should be given to what will would happen if the applicants have a birth child later on. What if the couple then find that they cannot have birth children?
- The issue of expectations versus the reality of parenting an adopted child is as relevant here as for applicants with other motivations. This may be slightly different for this group, who may potentially have a less well-developed idea of what any birth family may have looked like, and/or may have a “dream of rescue”.
- Workers need to be particularly aware of their own value base and cultural frame of reference when assessing families whose motivation seems unusual to them or something with which they cannot personally identify. A cultural review may be a useful reflective tool for this. As with some other families, the use of contraception would need to be discussed.