



Big Consult of Adopted People

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Introduction



454

Adopted people
responded

The Big Consult summarises the responses of 454 people adopted from the 1950s to the present day to a major consultation by PAC-UK on growing up adopted. Participants were asked about the services they have received, their sense of identity, contact with their birth families under and over 18, their mental health and suggestions for the future.

PAC-UK, which is part of Family Action, is the country's largest independent Adoption Support Agency. Our vision is that all those affected by adoption and other forms of permanent care are supported and enabled to live their lives to the full.

The Big Consults were funded by the National Adoption Strategic Team Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA) leaders programme RAA funded by the Department of Education.

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VIDEO
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Summary Report



Growing up adopted

Respondents tell of a damaging lack of honesty and openness in their childhoods which has shown some improvement in contemporary adoption. "Matching" is perceived as more successful now, while transracial and transnational adoption, which respondents viewed mainly in negative terms, has decreased.

- **17%** received enough information about their birth families.
- **23%** had enough information about why they were adopted.
- **13%** had enough to have a sense of their own identity.

"It would have made me feel like a 'real' person, someone with substance rather than a sort of ghost."

- **64%** felt their adoptive parents were a good match.
- **19%** were transnationally or transracially adopted.

"Hard being the only Brown person in a 50 mile radius. Felt like I had to be the Ambassador for all Brown people."

- **33%** felt supported in their move to adulthood/living independently/further education.



13%

had enough to have a sense of their own identity



Recommendations

- ✓ Increase the focus on openness and honesty in adoption.
- ✓ Prepare adopters to strengthen the child's identity with age appropriate information.
- ✓ Use transracial and transnational adoption only as a very last resort.
- ✓ Enhance transition services for adoptees reaching 18.

"It was hard being the only brown person in a 50-mile radius. I felt like I had to be the ambassador for all brown people."





Education

Adoption affects a child's education and while the awareness of that has grown over the years, support and understanding is still seen as lacking by adoptees.

- **58%** said that adoption affected their experience of education.
- **3%** said their schools recognised adoption as an issue.
- **19%** felt sufficiently supported in school.

"I was not able to manage the school environment due to my trauma and anxiety. I needed a small school who were trauma informed."



58%

said that adoption affected their experience of education



Recommendations

- ✓ Increase teacher training around adoption and attachment.
- ✓ Involve adopted young people and adults in enhancing services.



Contact under 18

For the majority, letterbox and occasionally direct contact has either not happened or been negative. Yet most adopted people of all ages think that contact, including meetings with birth family, should be standard practice in adoption.

- **54%** of those adopted since the 1990s had some contact with their birth family under 18. Of those who had letterbox only 33% received letters for more than 6 years.
- **65%** were involved in writing letters to birth family and 70% received photos.
- **39%** felt positive about letterbox.
- **62%** of those who didn't have any contact under 18 regretted it.
- **76%** of all respondents replied yes when asked if direct contact (e.g., meetings) between adopted children/young people and birth family members, be standard practice in adoption where it is deemed safe? This figure was 62% for those adopted in the 2000s.



76%

said direct contact should be standard practice where it is deemed safe



Recommendations

- ✓ Make direct contact with appropriate members of birth family should be standard practice in new adoptions.
- ✓ Recruit adopters who are open to direct contact.
- ✓ Creation of robust contact services.
- ✓ Invest in digital contact solutions with flexibility around contact.
- ✓ Adhere to National Minimum Standards to review contact arrangements.



Mental health

While there has been a steady increase in therapeutic support for adopted children, needs are lifelong and barriers of cost and access remain for adults.

- **9%** had received therapeutic support under 18.
- **77%** had accessed mental health/therapeutic support as an adult.
- **31%** would find having to pay a barrier to accessing therapy.
- **47%** thought adoption counselling for adults should still be provided by specialist agencies regulated by Ofsted.



77%

had accessed mental health/therapeutic support as an adult



Recommendations

- ✓ Broaden access to quality therapeutic services for adopted people.
- ✓ Review how this quality is maintained through training and regulation.
- ✓ Consider making the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) open to all adopted people.



Adoption records

Of these respondents, very large numbers had accessed their records but high degrees of dissatisfaction remained around support, timescales and content.

- **88%** had accessed their adoption records.
- **56%** of these felt adequately supported.
- **42%** said the process had taken over 6 months and **25%** over a year.
- **48%** were satisfied with what they received with widespread complaints of lost and heavily edited files.



88%

had accessed their adoption records



Recommendations

- ✓ Facilitate access to records with dedicated staff and registers of records and vetoes in record holding agencies.
- ✓ Reward agencies for this work to enable an increase in staff and resources.
- ✓ Enhance training on the preparation of files for these staff.
- ✓ Set minimum timescales and review progress.



Intermediary and reunion

The vast majority of these adopted people make contact with their birth families and most receive a positive response and maintain contact. Although, many do it without the support of intermediary agencies, with very high support for this to be funded.

- **85%** had attempted to have contact with their birth families since reaching 18.
- **55%** used an intermediary agency.
- **77%** said the birth family member responded positively to their initial approach.
- **92%** said they were glad that they attempted contact.
- **58%** maintain a relationship with their birth relative.
- **98%** thought that intermediary services for adopted people should be funded and free.



85%

had attempted to have contact with their birth families since reaching 18



Recommendations

- ✓ Access to affordable intermediary services for birth parents and adopted adults.
- ✓ Prepare adopters to support their children in reunion.

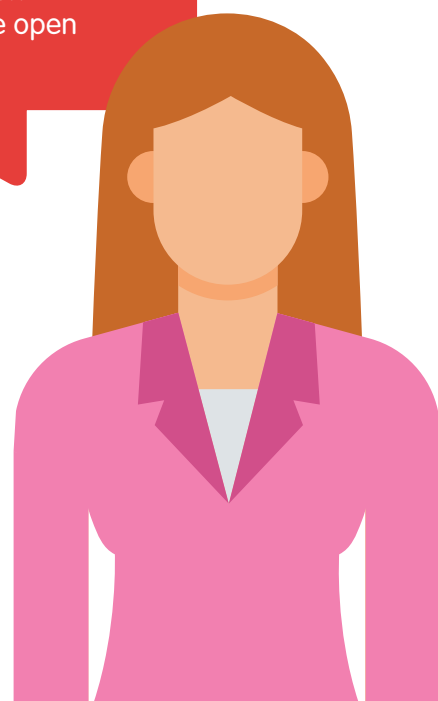


The future

- **66%** thought adoption remains an appropriate form of permanence
- **90%** thought adoption should be more open

90%

thought adoption should be more open



Full Report



The breakdown by the decade in which their adoptions occurred.

1950

17% (78 respondents)

1960s

38% (169)

1970s

22% (101)

1980s

11% (51)

1990s

4% (18)

2000s

7% (32)

Methodology

The Big Consult of Adopted People was launched on Survey Monkey on 27th October 22 and closed on 1st December 2022. Its was advertised through PAC-UK service user mailing lists, partner agencies working with adopted people and social media as widely as possible. We assume respondents had a connection with one of these and actively either engaged with services or considered adoption a significant factor in their lives.

In total 454 adopted people responded to the survey.

Respondents were spread across the regions of England with the highest number from London, Yorkshire and the South East. 72% were female and 81% described themselves as heterosexual. 22% said they had a disability.

71% were white British, 8% white Irish, 2% black African, Caribbean or British, 2% of Asian heritage , 6% described themselves as mixed background and others declined to say.

Transracial adoptee Emma and adoptee JP



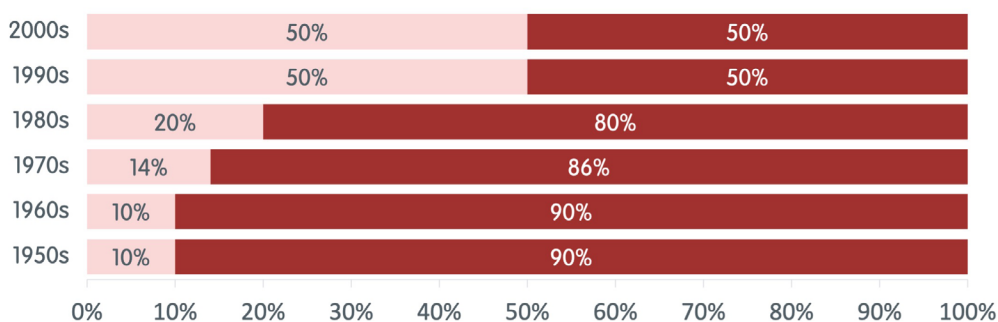


Growing up adopted

Respondents tell of a damaging lack of honesty and openness in their childhoods which has shown some improvement in contemporary adoption. "Matching" is perceived as more successful now while transracial and transnational adoption, which respondents viewed mainly in negative terms, has decreased. 83% of respondents felt they have not been given enough information about their birth family, 77% felt they had not been told enough about why they were adopted, and 87% felt they had not been given enough information to have their own identity.

While under 18, do you think you were given enough information...

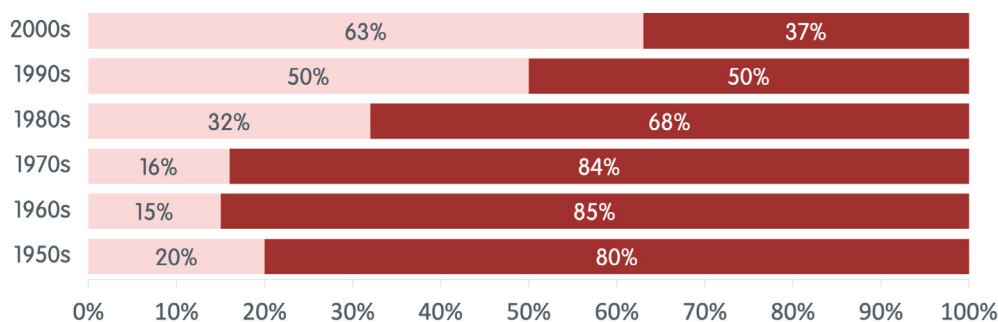
About your birth parents?



About your birth parents

Yes	17%	(76)
No	82%	(370)

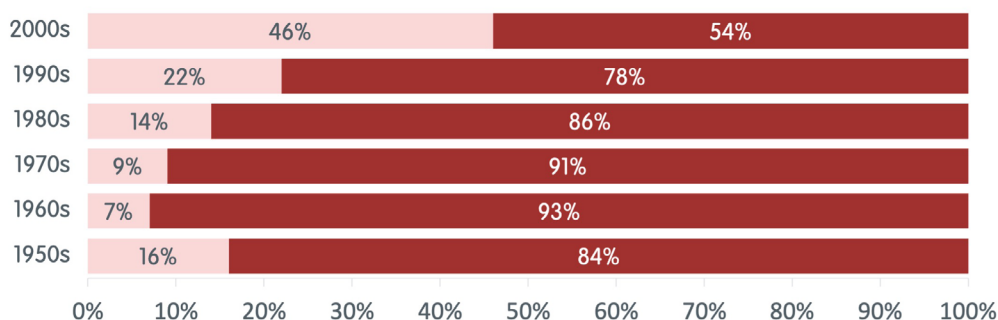
About why you were adopted?



About why you were adopted?

Yes	23%	(101)
No	77%	(339)

To have a sense of your own identity?



Respondents tell of a damaging lack of honesty and openness in their childhood

To have a sense of your own identity?

Yes	13%	(58)
No	87%	(381)



What would have helped?

The vast majority of respondents wished there had been more openness and honesty around their birth family and the reasons for the adoption and regretted their adoptive parents had not managed this or had the support and knowledge to be open. Many also regretted lack of contact with birth family growing up.

"Someone to help me with the language to describe my experience, to normalise my complicated feelings and to help with self esteem & identity issues."

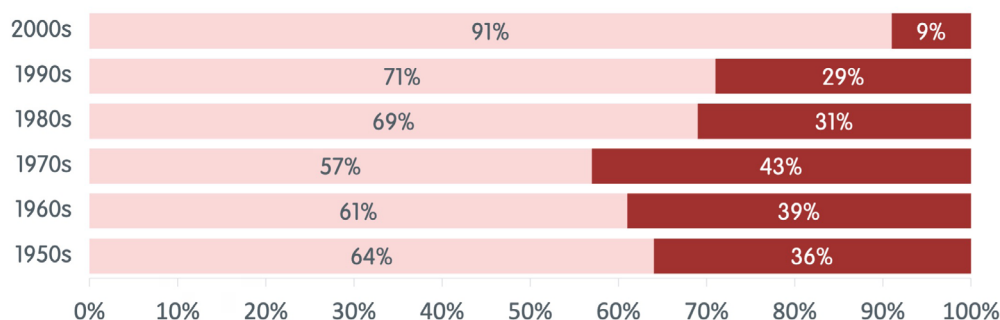
"It would have made me feel like a 'real' person, someone with substance rather than a sort of ghost."

"Access to photos, letters, something to give me some sense of who I am, what my relatives were like. I had no mirrors, no one to reflect back to me that who I was was OK, that I was 'normal' for me for my genetic family and not just some kind of a freak."

"The opportunity to learn Korean. Not knowing the language, alienates me further from the country in which I was born."

"Not having the narrative of how lucky I was and how much I was wanted. Not being expected to cheerfully accept that I had a set of relatives somewhere else and had my identity erased."

Do you think you and your adoptive parents were a good match?



Total		
Yes	64%	(270)
No	36%	(151)

'Matching' of children with adoptive families is perceived as more successful over time, especially during the 2000s. There were a range of comments made by respondents on the suitability of their adopted parents, from "amazing" to "abusive". Many commented on the lack of openness about their adoption, the difference in class background and age gaps as creating distance between them and their adopted family.

"Very poor birth parents - middle class adoptive parents."

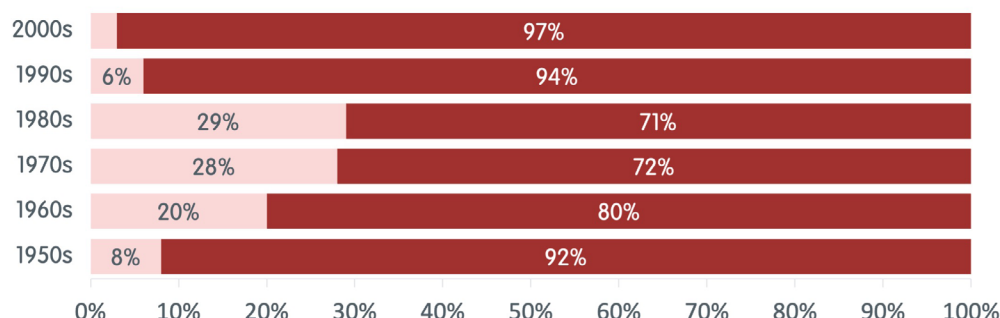
"I think my older parents (Mum 35, Dad 53 when I came to them) didn't always understand me especially as a teen!"

"I love my Mum to bits! She has never, ever walked away from me even when I did so many awfull things."

"I was plan B for my infertile parents. They were and still are grieving their inability to have biological children."



Were you transracially or transnationally adopted?



Total

Yes	19%	(84)
No	81%	(358)

When asked to comment on the suitability of this:

"Hard being the only Brown person in a 50 mile radius.

Felt like I had to be the Ambassador for all Brown people."

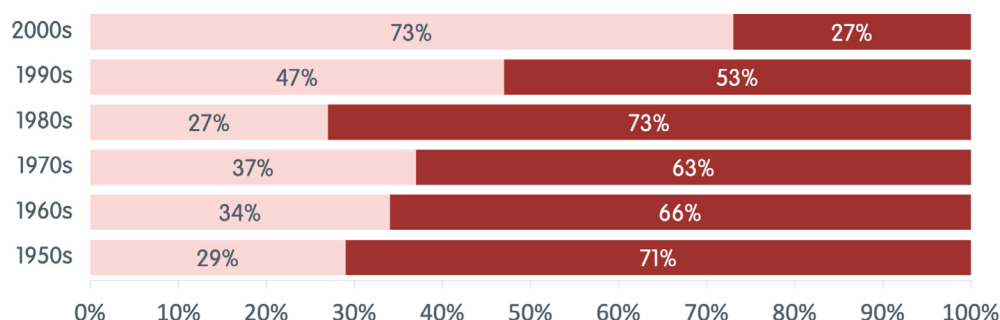
"It helped my parents travelled abroad and I had a interracially adopted brother and others interracially adopted in my street."

"It was hard. An Indian baby with white parents, especially when I experienced racism. I don't think they fully understood how much it hurt."

"Although I had a good childhood there was a lack of reflection even though my parents tried to immerse us in many cultures, when people saw us walking down the street there'd be stares making me feel like little orphan Annie."

"My white British adoptive parents raised me to believe I was as good as white people and have high self esteem."

Did you meet with/know other adopted children?

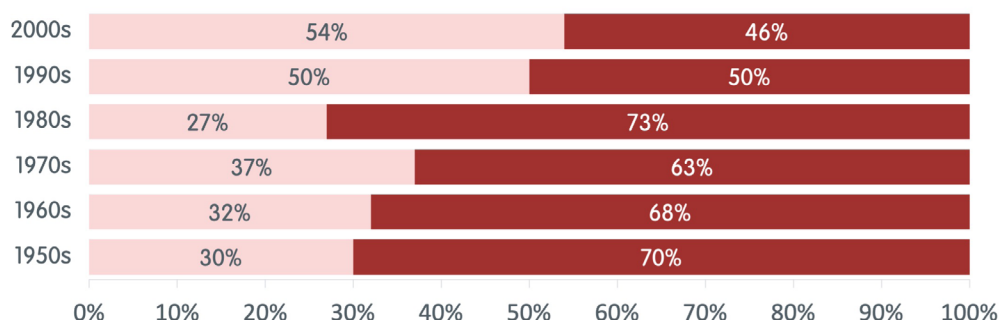


Total

Yes	36%	(148)
No	64%	(259)

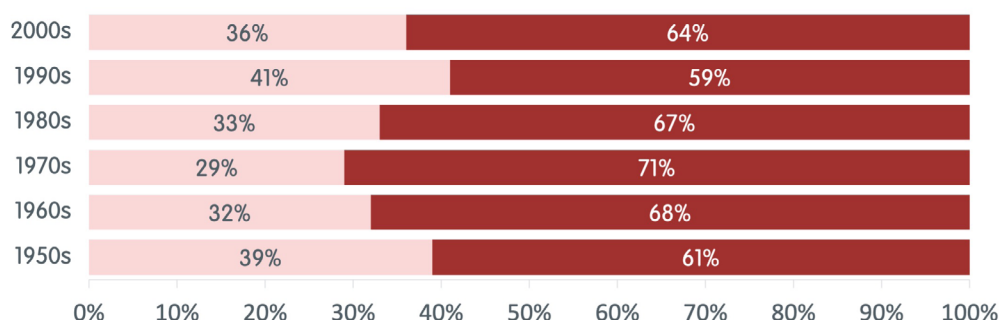


If you did, was this helpful?



Total		
Yes	35%	(97)
No	65%	(178)

Did you feel supported in your move to adulthood/living independently/further education etc



Total		
Yes	33%	(128)
No	67%	(258)

With regards to your move to adulthood/living independently/further education etc, what helped or not?

The most common help cited was the support of adoptive parents, followed by moving out of the family home. Many stressed their own independence and reliance on friends. Services helped and the lack of them were greatly regretted

"Not having adequate signposting to support services, I needed them more than ever as a young adult living independently. For example, I found out about the ASF after I aged out".

"Having an EHCP, a mentor, support from CAMHS and DDP Therapist and parents who fought for me."

"Moving out of home at 16 years and finding other adopted young people and those with experience of living in care. An opportunity to talk properly with others with same or similar experiences and gain solidarity and support, helped end the stigma for me."

"Absence of support/guidance on how my adoption had shaped me and meant I had low self esteem, depression and an unhealthy way of developing relationships with others."

Recommendations

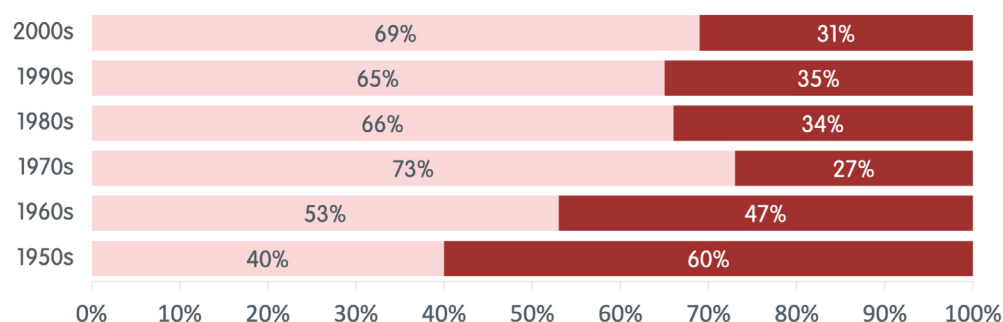
- ✓ Increase the focus on openness and honesty in adoption.
- ✓ Prepare adopters to strengthen the child's identity with age appropriate information.
- ✓ Use transracial and transnational adoption only as a very last resort.
- ✓ Enhance transition services for adoptees reaching 18.



Education

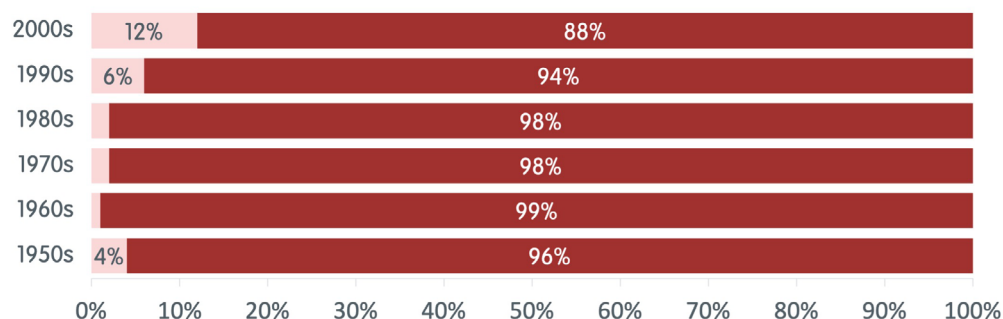
The survey results show that 58% of adopted people believe that adoption has affected their experience of education, and this has mainly increased over time. Interestingly, only 3% said they felt their school recognised adoption as an issue, and 92% felt there was not enough sensitivity shown around family and ancestry. This awareness and sensitivity has been increasing over time, however, the number of people who feel they were not sufficiently supported at school has also increased over time, with 82% overall feeling that they had not been supported enough.

Did adoption affect your experience of education?



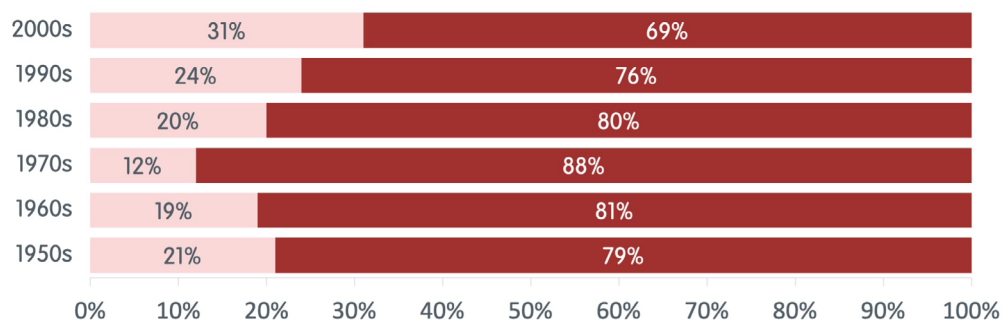
Total		
Yes	58%	(237)
No	42%	(169)

Did your school recognise adoption as an issue?



Total		
Yes	3%	(12)
No	97%	(392)

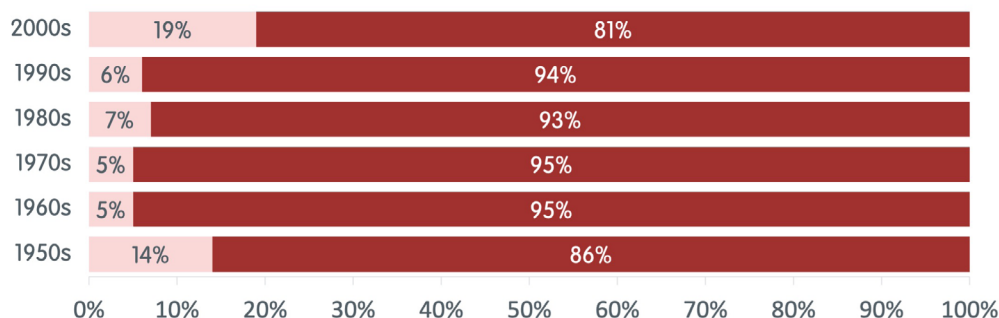
Did you feel sufficiently supported in school?



Total		
Yes	19%	(75)
No	81%	(325)



Was sensitivity shown with study around families and ancestry?



Total		
Yes	8%	(30)
No	92%	(178)

What helped or not?

Some found the lack of acknowledgement of their adoption allowed them to fit in while others found the silence deafening and harmful. While some regretted having named school support and were sometimes bullied others found significant teachers and supportive friendships

"Not being able to manage the school environment due to my trauma and anxiety. I needed a small school who were trauma informed."

"People assuming that because it appeared as if I was fine, clever and from a nice family that I didn't have any problems internally."

Bullying, accusations in relation to heritage,

"Don't you miss your real parents" from both adults and children. "But your so lucky, your real mum couldn't look after you."

"Having to draw a family tree as I had no idea who they were."

"I am mixed race. Being told at the age of 5 that I could not be an angel in the nativity because I was dark made me think that I had to have been a bad child. Also, my adopted mother telling me that my headmistress told her that I would not amount to anything due to my heritage."

"Having to draw a family tree as I had no idea who they were."



Recommendations

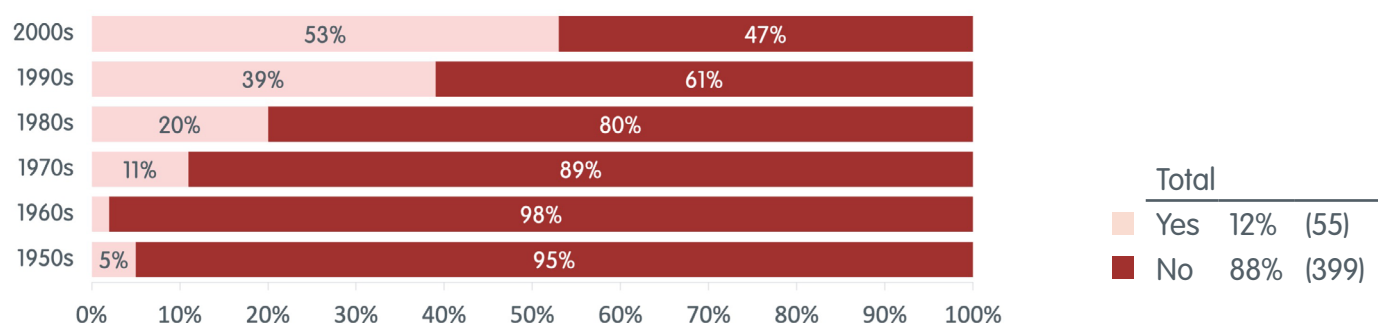
- ✓ Increase teacher training around adoption and attachment.
- ✓ Involve adopted young people and adults in enhancing services.



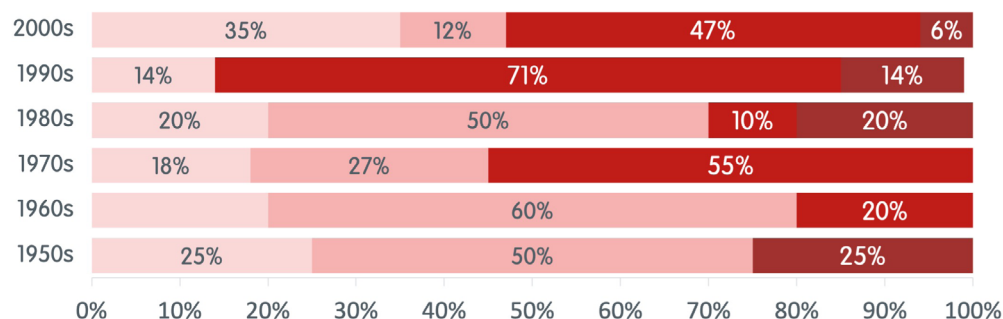
Contact

For the majority, letterbox and occasionally direct contact has either not happened or been negative yet most adopted people of all ages think that contact, including meetings with birth family, should be standard practice in adoption. 88% of respondents had not had any contact with their family members whilst under 18, though this has increased a lot over time, with 53% experiencing contact during the 2000s, compared to just 2% in the 1960s. For those that didn't receive contact, 62% regret this.

Did you have any contact with any birth family members while you were under 18?



Of those who had contact, did you have:



Direct contact

Of the 34 respondents who said they had direct contact, 56% met birth mothers, 50% with siblings and 47% with another birth relative.

78.13% said this was occasional, 19% every 6 months and 3% annually.

When asked how positive /negative they felt overall about their direct contact rating it 1-5, the average was 3.

76% of respondents felt that direct contact should be standard practice where it is safe to do so. Most commonly, they believed that adopted young people aged 11-16 should have the decision about whether contact takes place.

Indirect (letters etc)	25%	(14)
Direct (meetings)	27%	(15)
Both Indirect and Direct contact	38%	(21)
Social media or another unofficial channel	11%	(6)



When asked what could improve it respondents reflected that they would like to be able to talk about the difficult feelings that arise from these meetings with their birth family, and have support with how to address any negative reactions from their adoptive family.

"Being able to talk about the difficult feelings that arise from these meetings."

"It was good for me, as I loved and identified with them very much. My adopted mother was not accommodating to them and resented their presence."

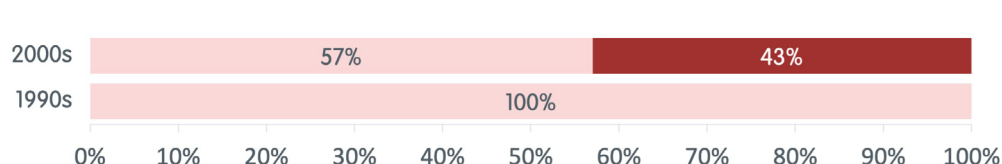
"I could not see my little birth sister for 3 years and didn't even get a birthday card or anything I worried about her a lot."

"More often I'd like to see my sister, i would like to see my birth parents but I want to stay here."

Indirect contact

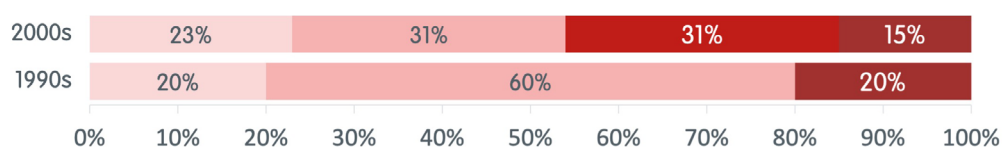
49 respondents said they had letterbox contact with 55% receiving letters annually, 15% six monthly and 30% occasionally. There is a fairly even spread of how long people received letters for. When asked what would have helped, with letterbox respondents noted that not having a response from their birth family was an issue, and wanted there to be support for birth families to write letters. One respondent also noted issues with their own writing ability.

Did you receive photos?



Total		
Yes	70%	(14)
No	30%	(6)

If you had letterbox, how many years did you receive letters?



Total		
1-2 years	21%	(4)
3-5 years	37%	(7)
6-10 years	26%	(5)
11+ years	16%	(3)

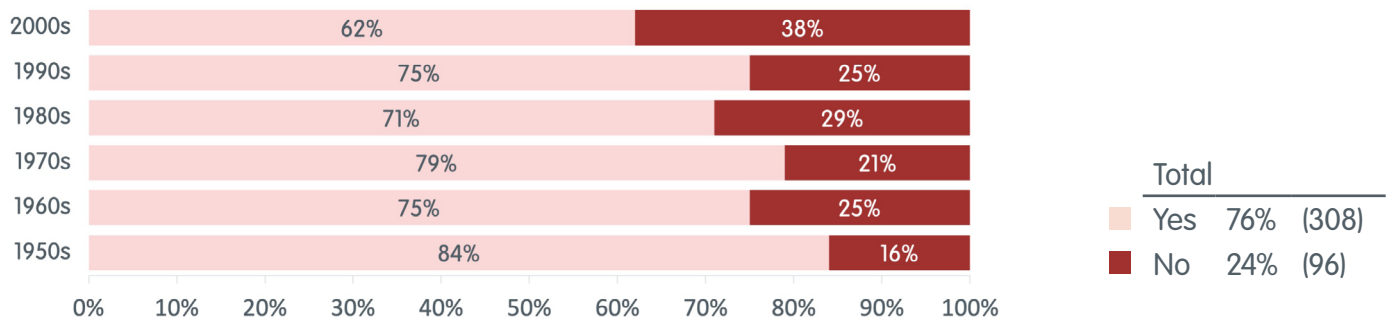
Asked to comment what would have helped:

"By having a response from birth mother."

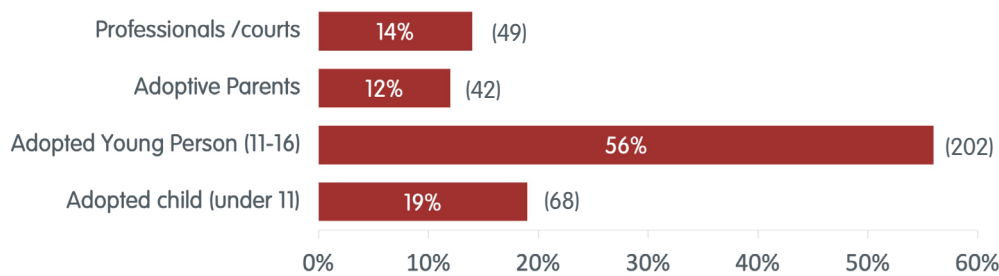
"Help birth family to actually write to me."



Should direct contact (e.g., meetings) between adopted children/young people and birth family members, be standard practice in adoption where it is deemed safe?



If contact is deemed safe, who should have the final say on whether it takes place?



"It is for the person who is adopted to decide. So much of adoption involves other people making decisions on your behalf, which may or may not be the right ones."



Recommendations

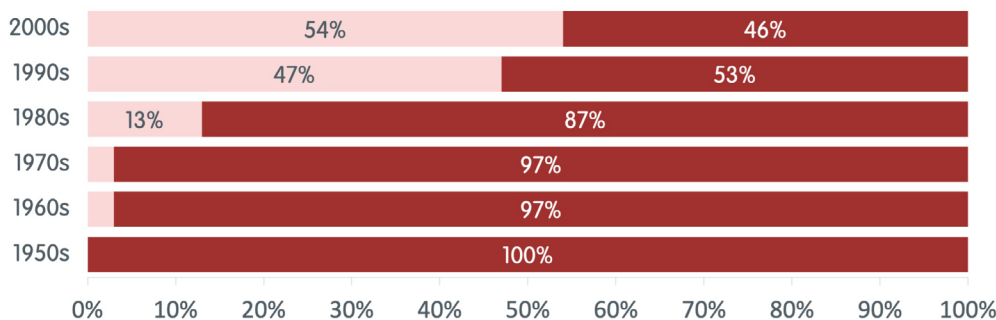
- ✓ Make direct contact with appropriate members of birth family standard practice in new adoptions.
- ✓ Recruit adopters who are open to direct contact.
- ✓ Creation of robust contact services.
- ✓ Invest in digital contact solutions with flexibility around contact.
- ✓ Adhere to National Minimum Standards to review contact arrangements.



Mental health

When asked to rate their own mental health, there was a spread across ratings 1-10 with the mean being 5.81. When asked how much they were affected by pre-adoption experiences, the mean was 6.54 with "10 A lot" being the most common response at 34% of respondents. This suggests that there is a high level of need for therapeutic support, but 91% of respondents had not received therapeutic support under 18, though this has been increasing over time. Where therapeutic support was received, this was as a result of a mixture of the wishes of adoptive parents and the adopted person.

Did you receive therapeutic support under 18?



Total		
Yes	9%	(37)
No	91%	(378)

When asked whether therapy under 18 was helpful, the mean was 5 with the most popular response being "1. Not helpful" at 24%. In order to make therapeutic support more helpful, most respondents highlighted the need for more appropriate services for a longer length of support, transitioning in to adult services and with greater understanding of adoption and trauma.

"Not stopping when I got to 18. I went from therapy every 2 weeks to nothing at all. I tried to kill myself because of that."

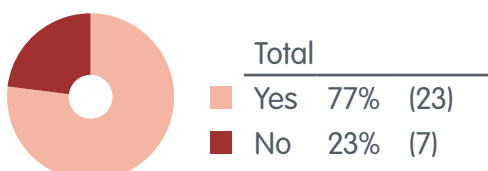
"More of it at weekends and in holidays."

"If I felt more in control. Most support was 1-1, would have benefited from more family support."

Who decided to take up the support? (Can choose more than one option)

Total		
The adopted person	65%	(22)
Adoptive parents	82%	(28)

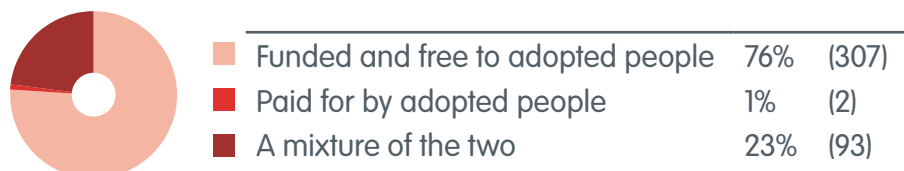
Have you accessed mental health/therapeutic support as an adult?



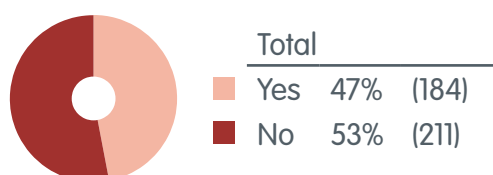
Of these, equal numbers had seen a private therapist and had seen an NHS or voluntary sector one.



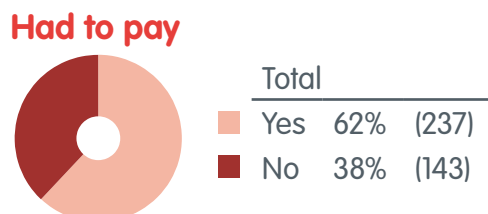
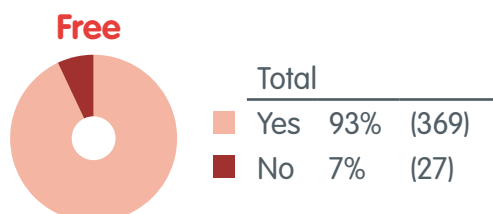
Do you think that therapeutic counselling for adopted people should be:



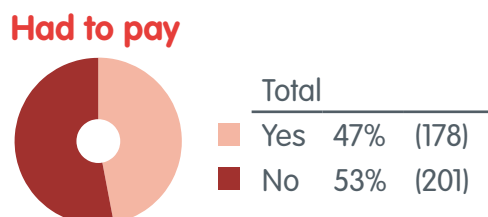
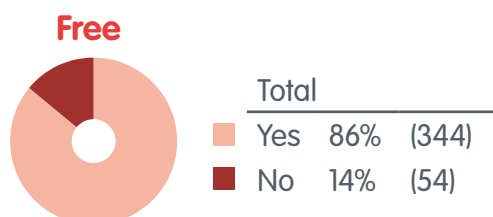
Should counselling around adoption for adults be only through specialist agencies registered with OFSTED as is the current situation?



Would you consider accessing therapy if it was:



Would you consider attending a support or therapeutic group for adopted people if it was:



Recommendations

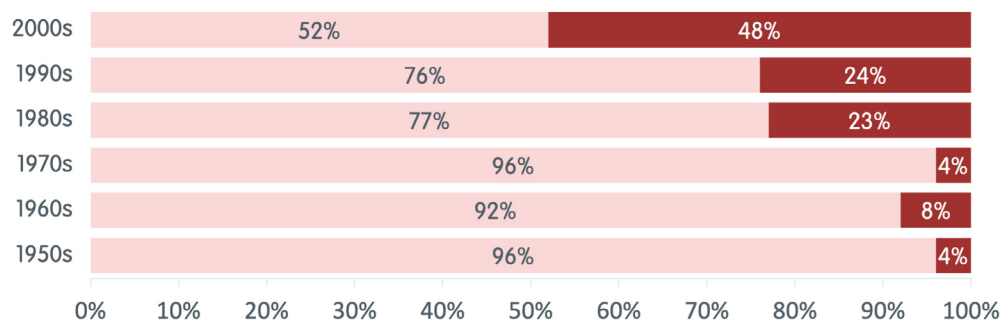
- ✓ Broaden access to quality therapeutic services for adopted people.
- ✓ Review how this quality is maintained through training and regulation.
- ✓ Consider making the ASF open to all adopted people.



Adoption records

Of these respondents, very large numbers had accessed their records but high degrees of dissatisfaction remained around support, timescales and content. Respondents wanted to see follow up support once records were received, to help them to process the information, know what the next steps in the process would be for searching for birth family, and understand how to find an intermediary. They also would like to see more of the original content, rather than summaries, and feel that social workers may be excluding information incorrectly.

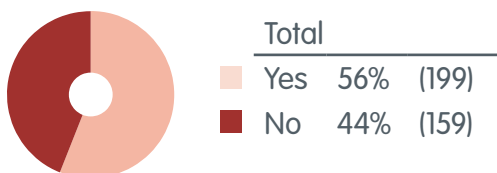
Have you tried to access your adoption records?



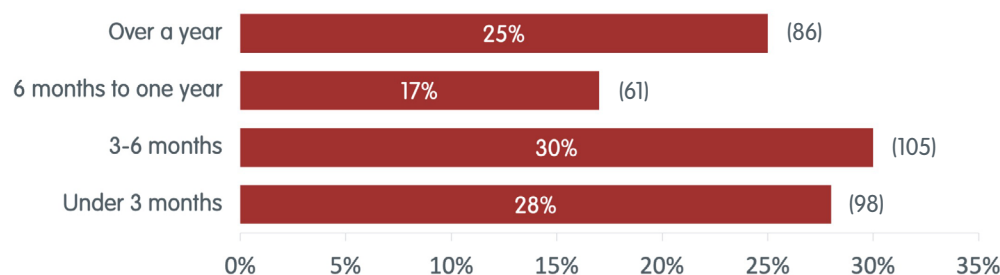
Total		
Yes	88%	(361)
No	12%	(49)

Of those who hadn't accessed their records, 48.98% (24) said this was because they lacked the guidance to do it. 12.24% (6) said it was because they weren't interested.

Of those who had, we asked if you were adequately supported through the process?

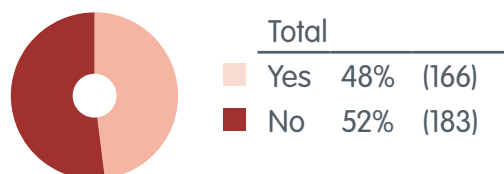


The time it took to get the records from your original application was:





Were you satisfied with the information you received:



If not, why not?

186 responses reporting inadequate information, many lost records, lengthy timescales, lack of support and a failure of trust that agencies or the courts will share what they hold about an adopted person's life.

"Sadly, after given records the follow up was removed so no support for taking the process to the next step in exploring ways to search for birth parents / siblings and definitely no support without having to find own intermediary."

"Limited and initially controlled by social workers so excluding information I later accessed."

"A lot of it was redacted, and it was also disorganised and incomplete. I had to go back. Some of it didn't even apply to me but to my siblings. I was also given a completely incorrect chronology."

"I received a 'summary' prepared by a student social worker. I have no idea what the original records said (and there are a couple of obvious typos over dates etc in the summary)."

"I want to know who was looking after me for the first three months of my life, was I looked after properly, was I just left in a cot, where did the things my birth mum was told to buy for me go?"



Recommendations

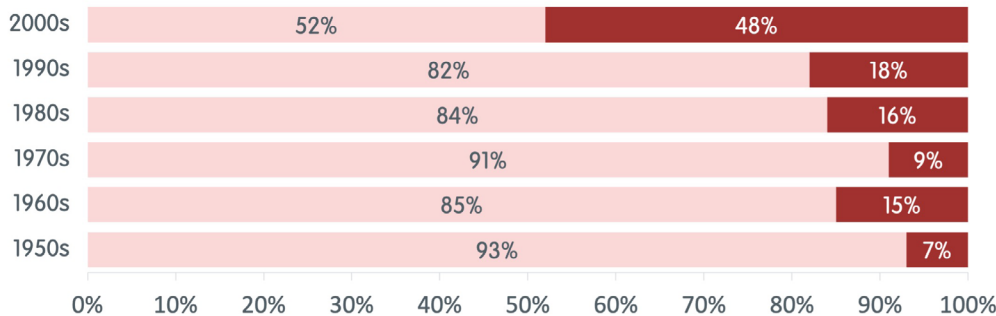
- ✓ Facilitate access to records with dedicated staff and registers of records and vetoes in record holding agencies.
- ✓ Reward agencies for this work to enable an increase in staff and resources.
- ✓ Enhance training on the preparation of files for these staff.
- ✓ Set minimum timescales and review progress.



Intermediary and reunion

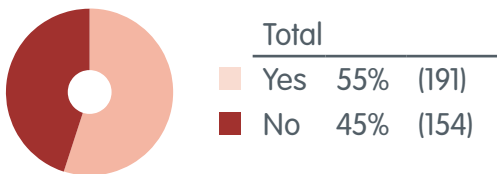
The vast majority of these adopted people make contact with their birth families and most receive a positive response and maintain contact although many do it without the support of intermediary agencies with very high support for this to be funded.

Have you attempted to have contact with any birth family since you were 18?



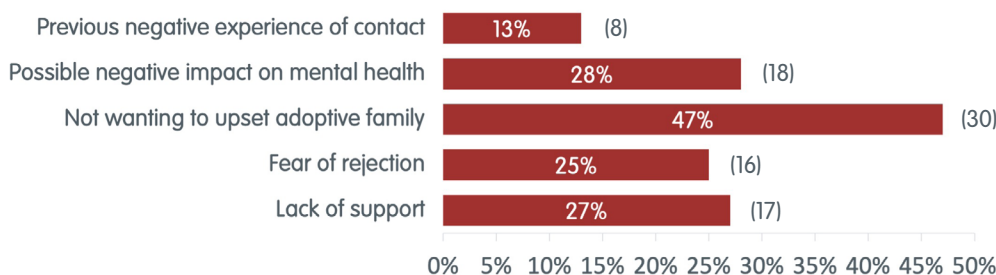
Total		
Yes	85%	(345)
No	15%	(63)

Those who did were asked if they used an intermediary agency?



- **73%** (140) said the intermediary support was satisfactory.
- **86%** (290) did not have to pay for their intermediary service.
- **77%** (249) said the birth family member responded positively to their initial approach.
- **92%** (304) said they were glad that they attempted contact.
- **59%** (190) maintain a relationship with their birth relative.

If they hadn't attempted contact, was this due to: (Can choose more than one option)





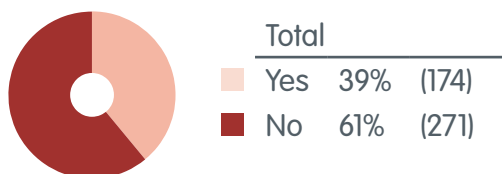
When asked for comment on why not, most answers ranged from not being interested or unable due to lack of information to being hostile to birth family

"I didn't feel it necessary because I viewed my adoptive parents as my true parents."

"My birth parents perpetrated significant abuse against me, I do not wish to ever see them again nor would I want them to receive any comfort or positive experiences from contact with me. I do not wish to give them any impression they have any right or claim over me."

- **98%** (388) thought that intermediary services for adopted people should be funded and free.

Are you aware of any support services for adopted adults in your area?



Across the regions of England this was significantly lower in West Midlands (11%) and South West (10%) responding Yes.

Recommendations

- ✓ Access to affordable intermediary services for birth parents and adopted adults.
- ✓ Prepare adopters to support their children in reunion.

"I think if we change the dominant narrative of adoption to understand that it is trauma that will pave the way to more ethical practices when centring the child, prioritising family preservation and providing support for all adoptees young and old."



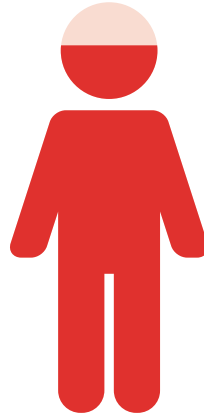


The future



66%

(246) thought adoption remains an appropriate form of permanence



90%

(340) thought adoption should be more open

What would be your one priority for change around adoption? 358 answers.

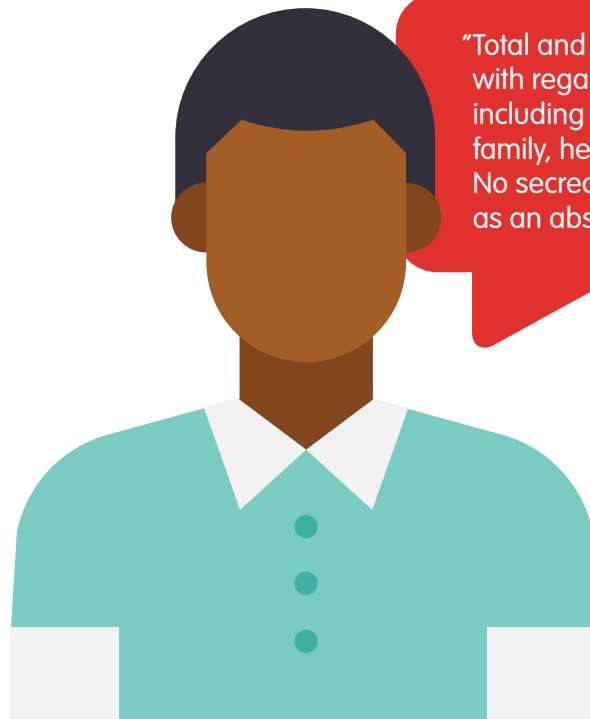
By far the most numerous responses were about the need for more support for adopted people: therapy, intermediary, services to access records and peer support. There was a strong sense that the voices of adopted people were not listened to or trauma recognised. Some commented on the need to change the positive adoption narrative to acknowledge this.

Openness was also a major theme at all stages of the adoption from honesty in childhood to ease of access to adoption records. Many expressed how secrecy had harmed their sense of themselves and in some cases robbed them of their culture.

There was support for more contact with birth family including many advocating for direct contact during childhood while a few thought this would harm a child's sense of family belonging.

Many called for better preparation and support of adoptive parents, often specifically around the needs of the traumatised child and the openness about the birth family that would be required.

And others called for greater resources to keep families together and a few the abolition of adoption and its replacement by a guardianship system.



"Total and complete openness with regards to information, including origins, background, family, health records etc. No secrecy and adoption as an absolute, final resort."



Comments:

"Total and complete openness with regards to information, including origins, background, family, health records etc. No secrecy and adoption as an absolute, final resort."

"That adopted people are supported to maintain contact with their ancestry and birth family throughout childhood."

"Contact with birth family and information to be collected at time of adoption and shared throughout child's life not just at 18. Children need to continue to get support when adults as the trauma is lifelong."

"More funding for counselling for all parties involved, giving the adoptee more support and more of a voice, increase services for adopted adults."

"I feel conflicted by the concept of adoption - I understand the need for children to find secure & loving homes but having their identity changed & their roots shut off to them is not the way. I think all adopted children need to have regular therapy to help them come to terms with their trauma & PTSD and understand how to find their identity."

"Preparation for adopters. The narrative needs to change. It is not a way to replace the family they couldn't have themselves. It is a vocation; providing a home and family to a traumatised child who needs help, care and understanding. Adopters need this for themselves too."

"That adopted people can access free therapeutic support to help us cope with this massive trauma. We are the only ones in the process that have no choice."

"Make sure the adoptive parents don't think there yours fully and tell them before they adopt that we are aloud too see our birth family without being made to feel bad."

"Therapy/counselling for all. I'm adopted and at age 55 it colours many aspects of my life. I avoid relationships, I have issues around control etc. Early therapy would have enabled me to see some of my more destructive traits."

"It's silent social engineering that scars people for life and it's hard to stop becoming unhinged."

PAC-UK is the country's largest independent Adoption Support Agency. From offices in Leeds, Liverpool and London we reach out to individuals, families and professionals from the Scottish borders to the south coast.

The Big Consult was devised and written by Mike Hancock, National Strategic Lead at PAC-UK with Leon Elias, National Operational Lead and data and technical support from Jin Hwang. Thank you to all those who completed the survey and to our staff and partner organizations who disseminated it and gave their experience to the project and Sarah Johal MBE and the National Adoption Strategy Team who commissioned it.



PAC-UK
Adoption and Permanency Support



regional
adoption
agencies

PAC-UK, Hollyshaw House, 2 Hollyshaw Lane, Leeds LS15 7BD

Web: www.pac-uk.org | **Email:** advice@pac-uk.org

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