





Big Consult of Birth Parents

Contents

Introduction	3
Summary Report	4
Full Report	8
Methodology	8
 Before the adoption	9
 Court proceedings	10
 After the adoption	11
 Contact with their adopted child	14
 Reunion over 18	17

Introduction



151

birth parents
responded

90%

Birth mothers

A major consultation of parents whose children have been adopted since 1990 on their experience of adoption and the services they received before and after, contact with their children under and over 18 and their thoughts on how these can be improved

The responses of 151 birth or first parents of whom 90% were birth mothers in October-December 2022.

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 leaders programme RAA funded by the Department of Education).

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CONTENT



Summary Report



Before the adoption

The consultation confirms domestic violence as the factor most cited by birth mothers in the removal of their children and parents raise questions about the response and capacity of services.

This accompanies the worryingly high numbers reporting mental health problems as a significant factor and describing themselves now as having a disability, usually around mental health.

- **57%** cited domestic violence or abuse and **50%** mental health problems as the factors in their child's removal.
- **71%** rated support at the time of the adoption was poor.
- **43%** of respondents described themselves currently as having a disability, **84%** of those involved mental health.
- **34%** were aware of services for birth parents where they now live.



57%

Cited domestic violence or abuse and 50% mental health problems as the factors in their child's removal



Recommendations

- ✓ "Increase understanding of Domestic abuse and circumstances and if this is the reason for adoption to get help and support to escape this so you can keep your child", as one parent wrote
- ✓ Increase recurrent proceedings projects for birth parents which are regionally patchy and insufficiently resourced
- ✓ Increase support to disabled parents to continue their role in their child's life



Court Proceedings

Many respondents see court as a process in which they are neither encouraged or assisted to actively participate.

By definition our respondents were not successful in keeping their children but their feelings of exclusion suggest more could be done around advocacy and court process to enhance participation.

- **81%** had no support except a solicitor.
- **43%** said the court process was not made accessible so they could take part.

"It would have helped to have an advocate and be listened to. I just felt like I was left in the background and I didn't matter."



43%

said the **court process was not made accessible** so they could take part



Recommendations

- ✓ HMCTS review accessibility and processes with representatives of this client group
- ✓ Adherence to minimum standards and access to advocacy services Nat Minimum Standard 12.4 Birth parents are given information on how to obtain legal advice, contact details of local and national support groups and services, and support to fulfil agreed plans for contact.



After the adoption

Many parents express that once the child has been removed they become an expendable part of the adoption process. Large numbers disengage from services and do not participate in aspects of the adoption which help to build the child's identity: life story work, meeting the adopters, contact etc. The statutory obligation on agencies to provide independent support which can help with this are also not being met among our respondents.

- **68%** said the information from the agency was poor.

"I wanted someone to help explain to me other than just give me paperwork."

- **47%** contributed to their child's life story book.
- **12%** said they had input into the choice of their child's adoptive family.
- **40%** of birth parents met the adoptive parents.
- **22%** said they were offered post adoption support.



68%

said the **information from the agency** was poor



47%

contributed to their child's life story book



Recommendations

- ✓ Adhere to Nat. Minimum Standards Outcome: Birth parents and birth families take an active part in the planning and implementation of their child's adoption.
- ✓ Regulation 14 of 2005 Act: Requirement to provide counselling and information for, and ascertain wishes and feelings of, the parent or guardian of the child and others.
- ✓ Review of agency information around adoption and how it is imparted to parents.
- ✓ Ensure access to local independent support services for birth parents with robust referral pathways immediately adoption is considered. Look at automatic referral to agencies.
- ✓ Make one meeting between birth parents and adoptive parents a minimum and look at further meetings over the course of the adoption.
- ✓ Review the gathering of life story information and who undertakes this.
- ✓ Embed birth family representation within RAAs.

"I wanted someone to help explain to me other than just give me paperwork."



Contact with their adopted child

Respondents confirm that the post adoption contact system isn't working. Of our total respondents, only **12%** reported that they had received letterbox letters for more than 6 years.

There has been a steady increase in contact over the decades but from a very low base. Not being able to receive photos of their children has been a major cause of frustration and loss to birth parents and the contact system is perceived as one in which they have no say. Adopted children then grow up without a sense of knowledge and identity around their birth family.

There is strong enthusiasm for direct contact in the future.

52% had any contact-indirect or direct -with their child under 18.

Of those who did ...

- **70%** had letterbox and **26%** direct meetings and **4%** through social media etc (that's **36%**, **13.5%** and **2%** of all respondents).
- **69%** were overall positive about direct contact.
- **30%** received photos of their children
- **17.5%** said their letters were always on time. **26%** said they never were on time. **56%** said they were sometimes on time.

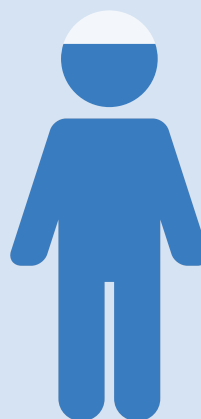
"It always late. I always have to phone up to ask them if my letters here. It gets later every year."

- **12%** of the total respondents received letterbox letters for more than 6 years.
 - **93%** said that direct contact should be standard practice between adopted children/young people and birth family where it is deemed safe.
-



52%

had any contact-indirect or direct -with their child under 18



93%

said that direct contact should be standard practice between adopted children/young people and birth family where it is deemed safe



Recommendations

- ✓ Make direct contact with appropriate members of birth family standard practice in new adoptions.
- ✓ Recruit adopters who are open to direct contact.
- ✓ Enhance training and preparation around the importance of identity and birth family for the child.
- ✓ Adhere to Nat Minimum Standard 7.40. The agency must keep the arrangements for contact under review.
- ✓ Review the sending of the child's photo on a case by case basis.
- ✓ Invest in digital contact solutions with flexibility around contact.



Reunions over 18

Given the time range of this survey, high numbers of birth parents had had contact with their adopted children over 18 with roughly equal numbers of parents and children being the initiators.

Many will require good intermediary support to make the best of this which may often not be available.

- **62%** of those whose children were over 18 had had contact with them as an adult.
- **48%** of these had been contacted by the adopted adult.
- **43%** had used an intermediary agency.



62%

Of those whose children were over 18 had had contact with them as an adult



Recommendations

- ✓ Access to affordable intermediary services for birth parents and adopted adults.
- ✓ Information and support for adopted people, adopters and birth parents around the transition to adulthood of the adopted child and the options available.



Birth parents Kristy, Andy and Jill

Full Report



The breakdown by the decade in which their adoptions occurred.

1990

12.5% (17 respondents)

2000s

13.97% (19)

2010s

45.59% (62)

2020s

27.94% (38)

(15 did not answer)

Methodology

The Big Consult of Birth Parents was launched on Survey Monkey on 27th October 22 and closed on 15th December 2022. It was advertised widely to birth parents who had had children adopted since 1990 through PAC-UK service user mailing lists, partner agencies and social media. We must assume that most respondents had connections to one of those and actively either engaged with services or as a birth parent on social media. We know many do none of these and their voice remains unheard.

In total 151 birth parents responded to the survey.

Respondents were from all areas of England with the highest numbers from Yorkshire, London and the North West. We tracked responses to each question by region but the wide spread across England did not give us large enough samples for each region to confidently report how they performed relative to each other.

Respondents were overwhelmingly female (89.76%), heterosexual (87.4%) and white British (82.4%) spread between 18 and over 65 with 68.51% between 25 and 44.

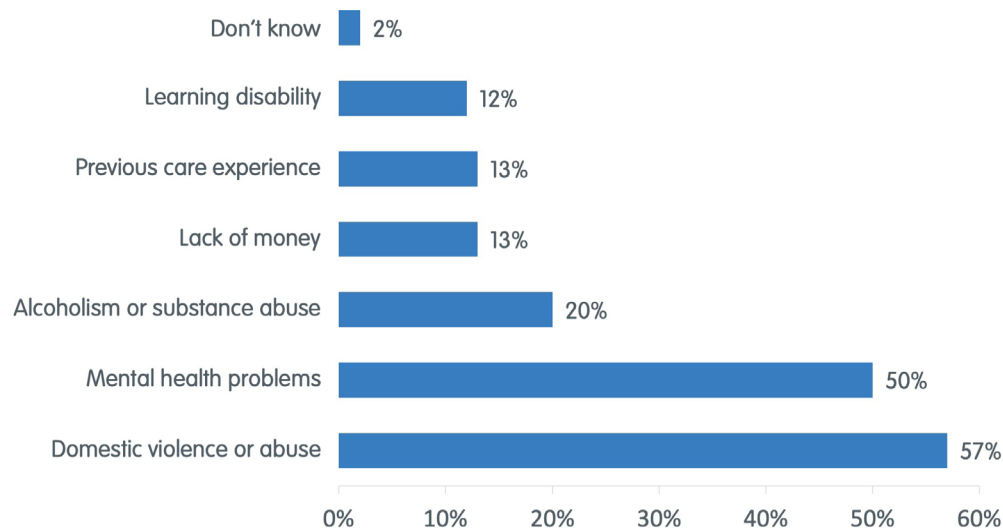
42.74% described themselves as having a disability.

84% who chose to comment on their disabilities described these as mental health conditions sometimes accompanied by learning disabilities or physical illness.

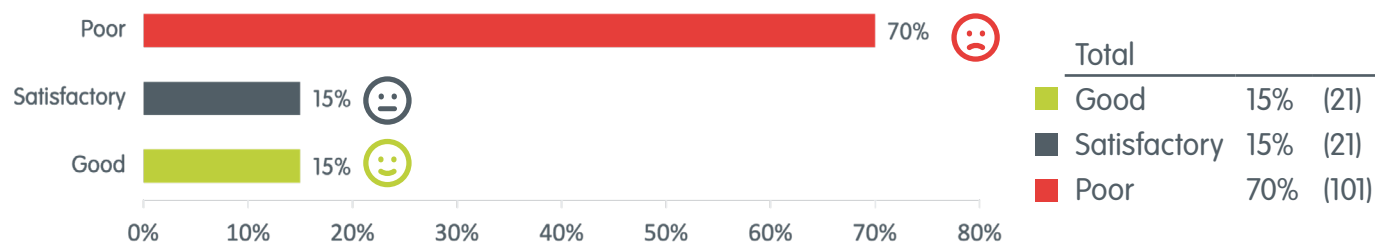


Before the adoption

What factors were involved in the reasons for their adoption?
(Can choose more than one option).



How would you rate the support given to you and your family at this time?



Some commented on what might have helped;

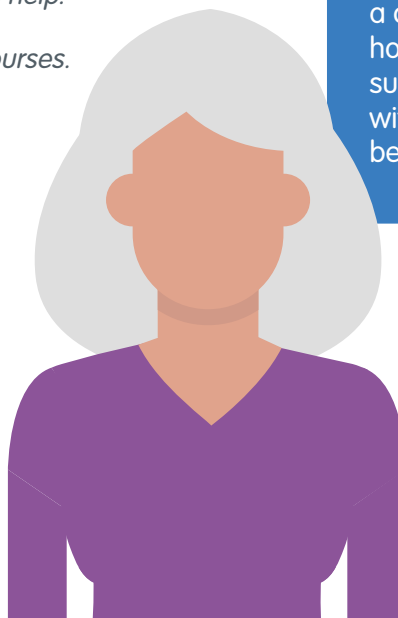
"Help me with what they thought I was lacking in."

"Actually getting restraining orders to protect me and my girls. rather than take my girls and leave me with no help."

"Mental health support, access to parenting courses. Better communication."

What might help

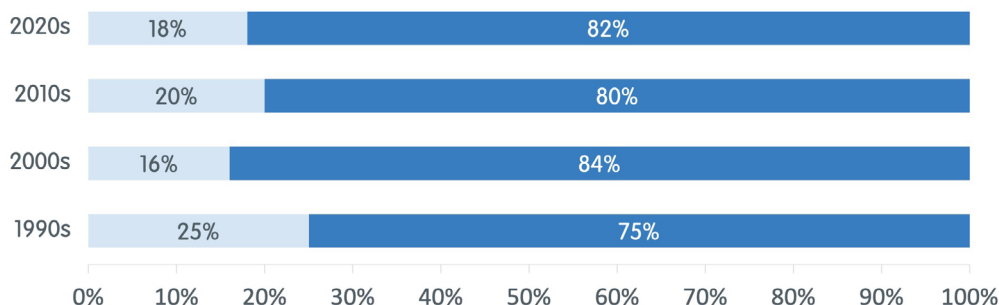
"Being able to prove that I am a capable mother in my own home with supervised visits, supervised days out, support with problems rather than being penalised for them."





Court proceedings

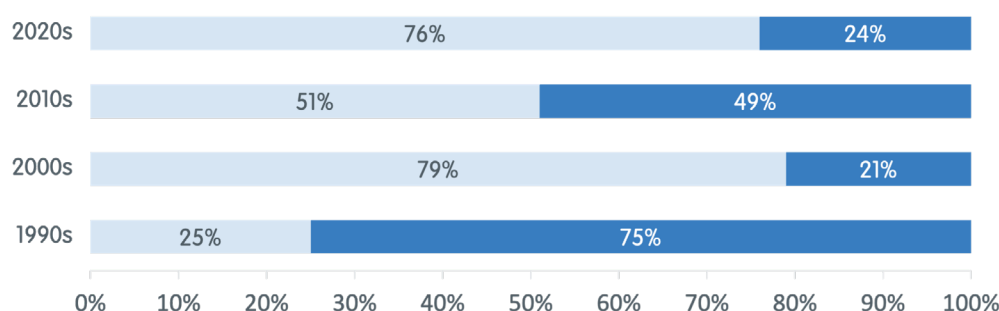
Other than a solicitor did you have support during adoption proceedings?



Total

Yes	19%	(27)
No	81%	(115)

Was the court process accessible to you? (could you sufficiently take part?)



No clear movement is shown on these questions over time.

Total

Yes	57%	(79)
No	43%	(59)

Of the 42 who made comments on this, most reported not feeling heard or being able to participate due to lack of support, their disabilities, lack of familiarity with the court process and ability to comprehend the paperwork or because they simply weren't asked to. Some thought more support and advocacy in court could have helped.

"I was able to speak very little under an uncomfortable amount of pressure whilst dealing with the potential of having your children taken away."

"It would have helped to have an advocate and be listened to. I just felt like I was left in the background and I didn't matter."

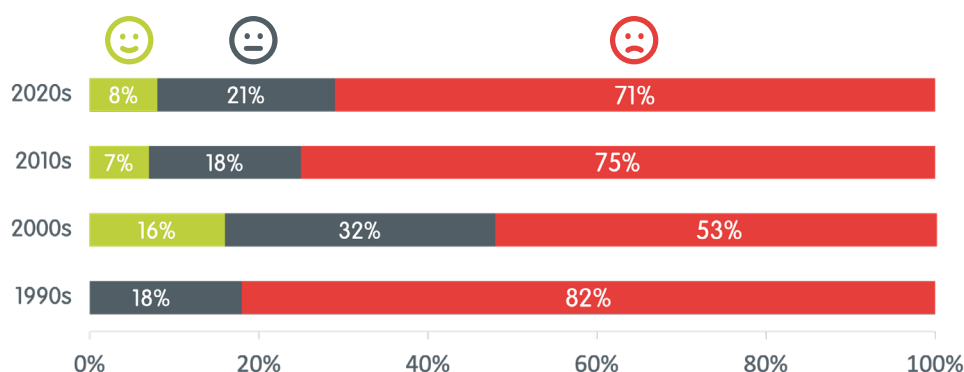
"It was online and with my disability's I struggle to take it all in compared to if it was in person."



After the adoption

Was the information given to you by the social worker and agency about your child's adoption good, satisfactory or poor?

No clear movement over time



Total		
Good	9%	(13)
Satisfactory	22%	(32)
Poor	68%	(98)

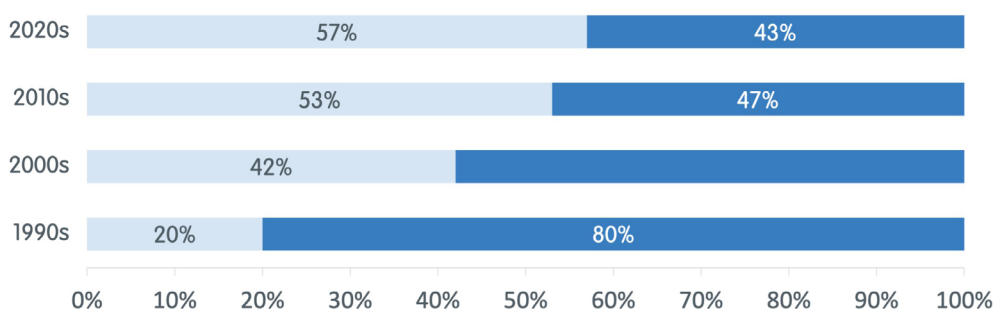
What birth parents said;

"I was not prepared for how post adoption worked. One minute I could take pictures of my son and tell him I love him. The next I wasn't allowed to do any of that. No one explained how it would work beforehand in the slightest and even now I can't get that information years later."

"They told me my children was getting adopted and gave me a leaflet to read."

"Someone to help explain to me other than just give me paperwork."

Did you contribute to your child's life story book ?



Total		
Yes	47%	(66)
No	53%	(73)

Despite a gradual positive progression many commented that they did not know what it was and had not been asked. Others explained that the breakdown of relationships with social workers had led to this.

"I wasn't told they was doing a life story book for my children."

Of those who did contribute only 28.69% were satisfied with their input.

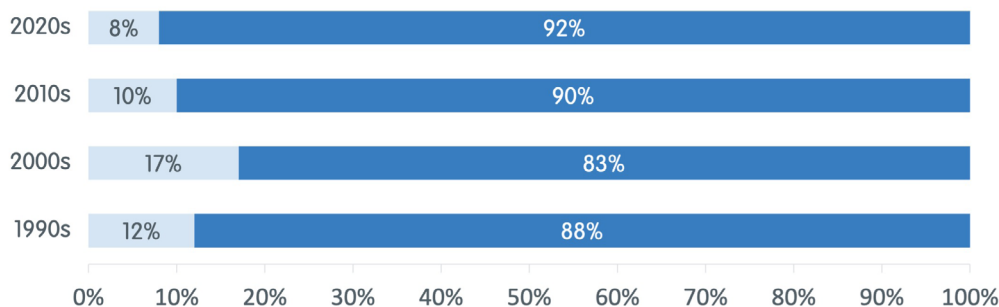
"Wasn't enough one session to talk about 5 years of life."

"There were limitations and barriers of what I could or nor include. I didn't understand."



Did you have input on the choice of adoptive family for your child ?

No progress over 30 years



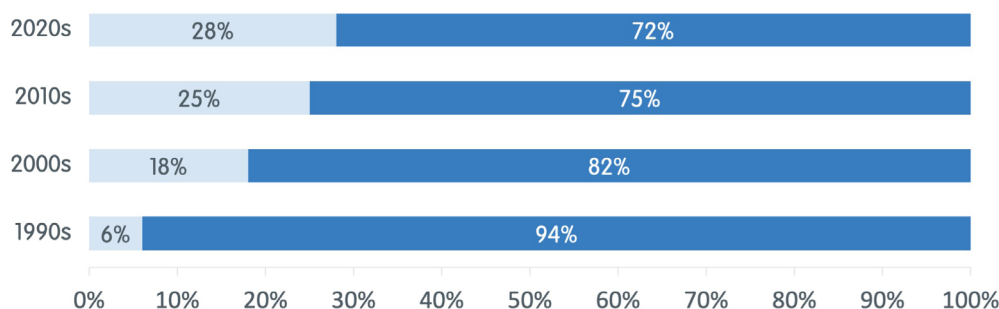
Total

Yes	12%	(17)
No	88%	(129)

Of those who did 50% thought their views were listened to.

Were you offered independent support after the adoption of your child ?

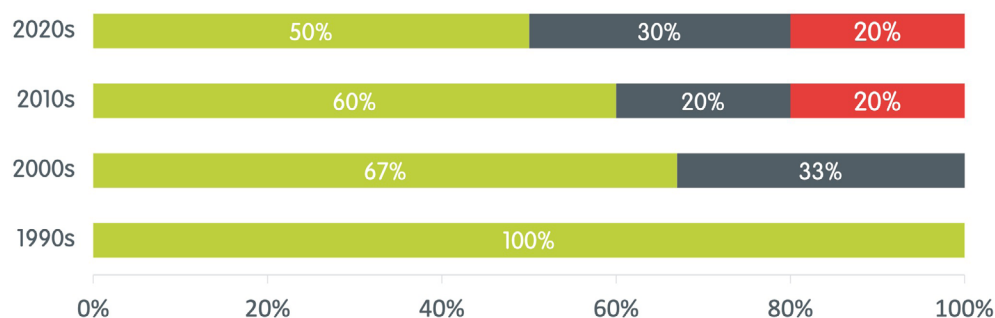
Minimal positive movement on those who responded that the statutory requirement had been met



Total

Yes	22%	(31)
No	78%	(112)

If you received independent post adoption support, was your experience of this:



Good
 Satisfactory
 Poor

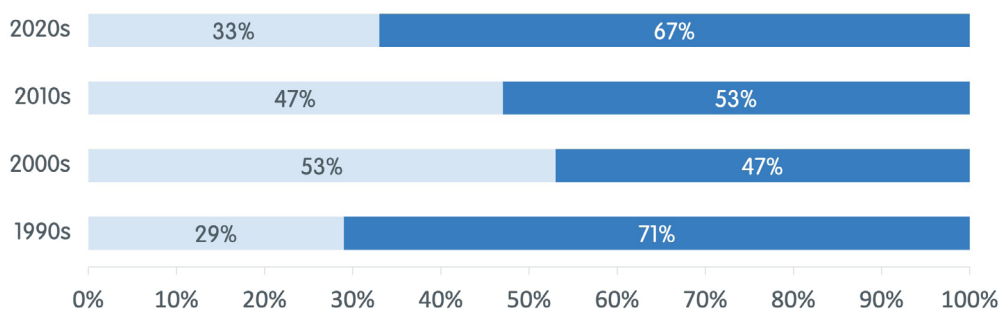


Did you receive: (Can choose more than one option)

Total

Emotional Support	52%	(14)
Letterbox/contact support	93%	(25)
Group support	33%	(9)
Advice about adoption	26%	(7)

Did you meet your child's adoptive parents?



Total

Yes	41%	(58)
No	59%	(84)

When asked for the reasons most said they were not allowed or it wasn't offered

"This was never offered to me. I would have liked to have met them."

"A few thought it would be too distressing. "Too painful."

Those who did meet the adopters, rated the meeting:



Total

Good	43.10%	(25)
Satisfactory	37.93%	(22)
Poor	18.97%	(11)

Good

Satisfactory

Poor

When asked what could have improved it there were a range of responses:

"If the meet had taken place in a neutral place (in a park etc) as it was very awkward sitting across the table from then in a meeting type structure."

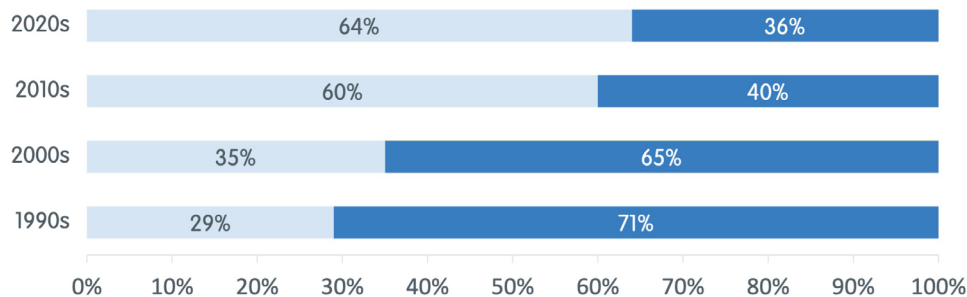
"More time. Maybe a couple of meetings because it was very overwhelming and I wasn't allowed to bring anyone to support me."

"The adoptive mother could have been more open and at least have shared a picture of my children even if it was just on the phone. Instead of putting silly hats and glasses on to disguise what my children look like."



Contact with their adopted child

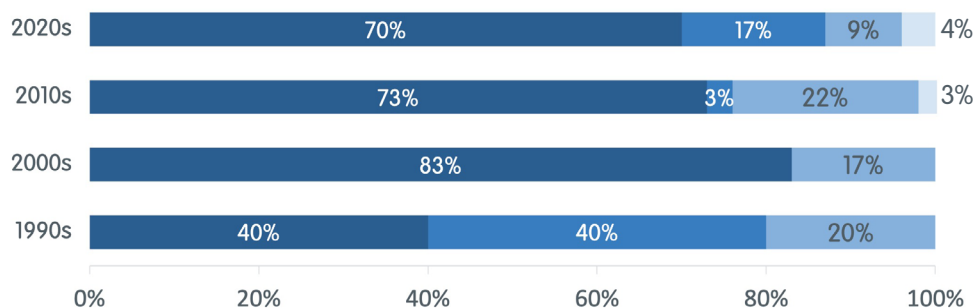
Did you have any contact-direct or indirect- with your adopted child when they were under 18 ?



There was **an increase** in all contact over the period

Total		
Yes	52%	(73)
No	48%	(68)

When asked what that contact was



Of those who had direct contact, 69% described it as positive and 31% as negative.

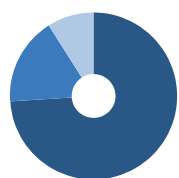
- Indirect (letters etc)
- Direct (meetings)
- Both Indirect and Direct contact
- Social media or another unofficial channel

"I would most like positive relationships between the parents and the adoptive parents. If the adoptive parent doesn't like the birth parent the child may feel like they have to choose between one or the other when the simple fact is the adoptive parent and the birth parent are going to be in the child's life either way."





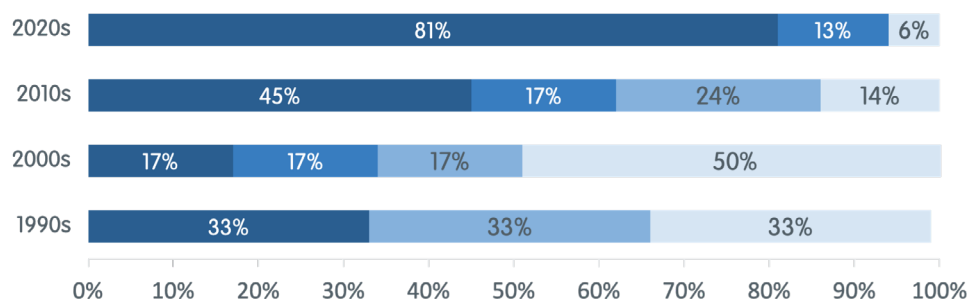
Of those who had letterbox



The frequency was

Annual	74%	(43)
6 monthly	17%	(10)
More or less frequently	9%	(5)

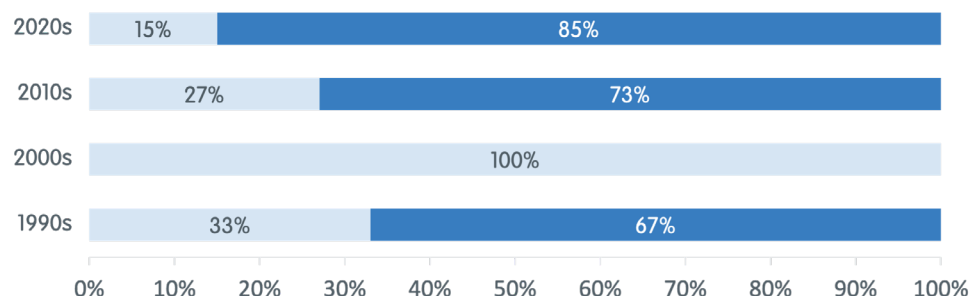
How many years did you receive letters?



Total

1-2 years	51%
3-5 years	16%
6-10 years	16%
11+ years	16%

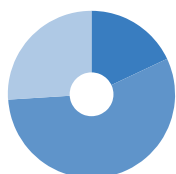
Did you receive photos?



Total

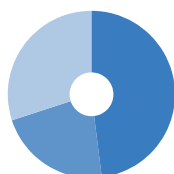
Yes	30%	(18)
No	70%	(42)

Were your letters on time?



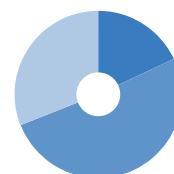
Always	18%
Sometimes	56%
Never	26%

Was letterbox overall positive/negative?



Positive	48%
Negative	22%
Neither	30%

What would have improved it?



More information	18%
Less information	0%
Photos	51%
Other	31%



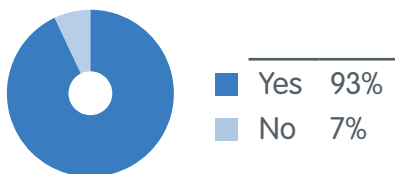
What people suggested to improve;

"Building a bond with adoptive parents instead of a 1 way conversation. If letters are not opened we need to be told. Chances to progress to further contact"

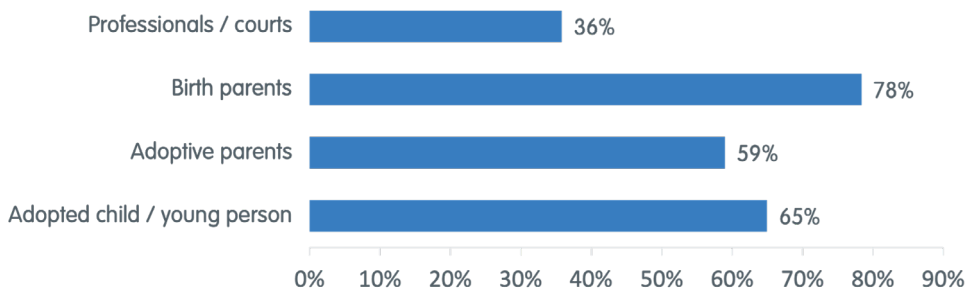
"To have a picture my son had drawn and a picture of him"

"Been able to actually enjoy my letters without worry of asking and reading things that can trigger me. Being able to be in my child's life without feeling like a criminal having to be careful with what I write and if they will write back."

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



Who should decide about this (You can choose more than one option)



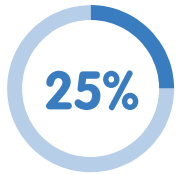
Birth parents said;

"Depending on the situation and why they was removed. If they're dangerous, have professionals part of it... otherwise, if agreed and get along, just the birth parents and adoptees and adopters"

"I don't believe social services should choose this because they will most likely say no"



Reunion over 18



25% (34) of respondents had adopted children now over 18

Of these, 62% (21) had had contact with them as an adult
Of these, 42.86% (9) had used an intermediary agency
52% (13) had initiated the contact. 48% (12) had been contacted

What would your one priority be for improving things for birth/ first parents?

Most answers were around the need for contact, often direct contact. Followed by the need for preventative work to keep children at home and more support specifically therapy.

"Being able to see your child even though they are adopted even if its once a year or even photos or video calls once a year"

"Making contact between the adopter and birth parent open a bit more so all support is there for the children"

"Make contact (direct/indirect) a legal requirement along side adoption orders"

Put the child's needs first. Always and every time.

Take all the help given to you, and that your not alone

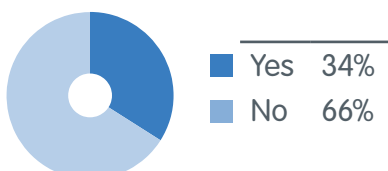
To have letters on time and to be given more help from social service when one of the parents ask for help to be moved out of the area so we as parents can keep are children also for the adoption team to keep children i.e. sibling groups together as my boys have suffered being separated from each other and if they can't to have phone calls with each other

Positive relationships between the parents and the adoptive parents, it impacts how the child will see their birth parents. It's important to ensure the child isn't pressured to feel a specific way. If the adoptive parent doesn't like the birth parent the child may feel like they have to choose between one or the other when the simple fact is the adoptive parent and the birth parent are going to be in the child's life either way.

The courts of family's remove the 26 week period for case proceedings to be done as this makes everything such a panic on birth parents because it all seems rushed and especially forced through the legal system also more meeting with the child guardian because they have a massive say in what happens to the child and in my eyes it's not fair that they can side with a party like social services just off paperwork or history

Unless clear evidence of abuse or neglect use money paid to foster cares to support birth parents Proper comprehensive assessments of all needs including mental and physical health, earning difficulties, poverty, lack of confidence and support

Are you aware of any local support for birth families where you live now?



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.



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