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# iAdopt: digital marketing programme

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## Stage 1: Research & Development Report

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# 1. Executive Summary

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## The Project

- Caritas Care (a North West-based voluntary adoption agency) have received funding from the DfE to develop and deliver a digital marketing strategy, with the aim of supporting and encouraging adopters to come forward by reducing the barriers and addressing the misperceptions that prevent some people offering themselves as adopters.
- As part of this successful funding bid, University of Salford researchers were enrolled to undertake collaborative research, which involves feeding into and evaluating the development of this digital marketing strategy.

## The Context

- Globally the United Kingdom has the fifth highest number of adoptions.
- Over the last decade the number of British children adopted has increased by 15%.
- The number of children not adopted because of a lack of suitable adopters has quadrupled.
- Research demonstrates the importance of the relationship between the prospective adopter and adoption agency in creating and supporting successful adoptive families.
- There is a scarcity of research specifically focusing on the experiences of British prospective adopters.

## The Research

- Three focus groups were held with a total of 17 participants, aged between 35 and 50; 3 were male and 14 female.
- The participants were selected from a database of existing and potential adopters held by Caritas Care.
- This research has been subject to an internal University ethical approval process, all data is stored securely, and the participants fully briefed on the aims of the project and their role within it.

## Finding an Adoption Agency

- Many participants held largely negative opinions of local authority adoption agencies.
- The experience of initial contact with the adoption agency was seen as crucial, and generally Caritas Care was viewed positively here, as being 'open', 'friendly' and 'supportive'.
- Reasons that people specifically chose Caritas Care included: recommendations from a friend or family member, the locality of the organisation, or for some it was Caritas Care's former association with the Catholic church.

- However, it is important to note some felt that the organisation's Catholic heritage might turn some potential adopters away from Caritas Care, while other participants indicated that they were totally unaware of the organisation's Catholic heritage.

## The Adoption Process

- Most participants indicated that they entered the adoption process with some idea of the kind of child(ren) they wanted to adopt, though this did vary from participant to participant.
- The majority indicated that this changed or became more open through the initial stages of the adoption process, most commonly due to conversations with social workers.
- Most suggested that the idea of adopting harder to place children should not be broached too soon or pushed too hard in advertising as this may put some potential adopters off.
- Most participants highlighted the adoption process as difficult and at times very stressful.
- The vast majority had worries and concerns throughout the entire process, such as thinking they would not be accepted as an adopter. The specific reasons for this were often quite varied and the participants suggested that little could be done to remove these anxieties as it was something that they all experienced in their own ways.

## Developing the Website

- All of the participants suggested that an informative, targeted and interactive website would be beneficial to potential adopters.
- However, none felt that a series of filtering questions that directed potential adopters to a specific area of the website would be helpful.
- Areas on the website for referees, existing family and in particular children were seen as potentially useful. In relation to children, it was suggested that interactive or game-based features might be helpful.
- Many of the research participants highlighted that a *realistic* timeline on the website that set out the adoption process would be helpful.
- Post-adoption advice and support was also highlighted as an important feature that a website could offer.
- Other information a website could offer included an edited (short) reading list.
- The research participants suggested that there were a lot of misconceptions around adoption, and generally it was felt that a clear and easy to use FAQ, Q&A, or 'myth busting' section on the website would be very helpful.
- All participants thought that anonymized realistic stories or case studies of those who had previously adopted would be useful on the website.
- Overall, it was felt that information presented on a website should be honest and realistic; however, it should generally be positive, as negative or sensitive issues are best addressed in a face-to-face setting and could put many potential adopters off.

## 2. The Project

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Caritas Care (a North West-based voluntary adoption agency) has received funding from the DfE to develop and deliver a digital marketing strategy with the aim of supporting and encouraging adopters to come forward by reducing the barriers and addressing the misperceptions that prevent some people offering themselves as adopters. As part of this successful funding bid University of Salford researchers were enrolled to undertake collaborative research, which involves feeding into, and evaluating the development of this digital marketing strategy.

The objectives of the wider digital marketing strategy are to:

- Reached new potential adopters using a range of innovative technologies
- Affect the perceptions of people to view adoption as a positive choice for them
- Built an 'online community' for adopters to share knowledge, experiences and ideas
- Created a Virtual Learning Environment with and for adopters

The aim of the research aspect of the project is therefore to provide empirical evidence on participants' experiences and perceptions of the adoption system and process, which can then be fed into the developing new digital marketing strategy.

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### 3. The Context

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The role and function of adoption remains of significant importance in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. A global comparison undertaken and presented to the United Nations (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009) showed that the United Kingdom had the fifth highest number of children adopted. In addition, the Department of Education (DfE, 2014) figures reflect that the number of children adopted has increased by 15% in recent years. However, the number of children who have not been adopted because of a lack of suitable adoptive parents has quadrupled. Research into adoption reflects changing societal values and historically these were dominated by understanding how adults who experience infertility may consider adoption as an alternative route to parenthood. In the last decade adoption research has focussed largely upon adopters who are in same-sex relationships. Although some research has been undertaken in the UK, it is scant when compared with America and Canada.

For over a decade the necessity of a research focus on recruitment of prospective British adopters has been highlighted as important (Rushton, 2003). Several studies suggest that prospective adopters would still prefer to adopt a baby, although 45% indicate they would consider an older child (Rushton, 2003; Wallis, 2006; Ward, 2011). Ward and Wallis surveyed respondents to the UK's National Adoption Week (NAW) campaigns but these received fairly low response rates which limit our understanding of the views of those who do not proceed after making an initial enquiry. In 2013 government funded market research explored attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption. Scott and Duncan (2013) suggest motivations include the benefits to the adopters, the child and society. However, they found that concern about the process of approval and the impact of adoption on their lives prevented people from putting themselves forward. In 2013, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) commissioned a YouGov study of the views of people in Wales. They found many thought that age, smoking, obesity and low income would prevent someone becoming an adoptive parent.

The majority of people who adopt are white, middle class, married, heterosexual couples (DfE, 2014). However, in the last decade, it has become permissible for

unmarried and same-sex couples to become adoptive parents. More recently the Children and Families Act 2014 repealed the duty for adoption agencies to give due consideration to ethnicity. These changes in legislation across the UK increase the potential to create diverse adoptive families. Against this ever-changing landscape it is important to understand how people transition towards becoming an adoptive parent. At the stage of initial enquiry it is fundamental that adoption agencies are able to give appropriate responses to people exploring their eligibility. Only 10% of people whose initial enquiries make them doubt their success will proceed with an application for approval (Simmonds, 2000; Wallis, 2006).

Those who decide to proceed with adoption have to make multiple decisions particularly about the age and needs of their potential adoptive child. Thus, the guidance of the adoption worker is crucial to the experience of prospective adopters throughout the adoption process (Wind, Brooks, & Barth, 2005, 2007). Research demonstrates that better matches occur between adopters and children when adoption agencies engage early in the matching process (Farmer & Dance, 2015). Importantly, this provides opportunities for prospective adopters to consider the nature of the adoptive family they can create, including the potential for, or constraints of, birth family contact (Logan, 2010). Furthermore our understanding of the necessity of good post-adoption support to reduce adoption disruption highlights the importance of the relationship between the adopter and the adoption agency (Selwyn, Wijedasa, & Meakings, 2013). Despite this little is known about the experiences of British prospective adopters during the process of becoming an adoptive parent — hence the need for this, and future, research.



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## 4. The Research (Stage 1)

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Building upon existing research in the area the project employed a flexible mixed-method approach in researching a primary sample group of existing and potential adopters. In stage one of the research this primarily consisted of three focus group interviews with participants.

Focus groups are extremely useful as they are more flexible than questionnaires and are more time and cost efficient in gathering detailed qualitative information than one-to-one interviews (Morgan 1997). They are also beneficial as, to some degree, they mimic social interactions that occur outside of the interview setting. Of course, focus groups are not without their shortcomings, such as the risk of certain individuals dominating discussions, but this and other pitfalls can (to some degree) be countered by a skilled facilitator (Morgan 1997).

The focus group participants were all selected from a database held by Caritas Care. Caritas Care holds a database of over 1000 exiting and 'potential' adopters (such as those who have enquired about adoption but not progressed to full adoption). All of those on the database have given consent to be contacted by Caritas Care and already frequently receive information, newsletters and communication from the organization. Hence communication and initial invitations to take part in the research came directly from Caritas Care.

The participants for were selected (choosing every  $n^{\text{th}}$  entry) from this database and then approached by Caritas Care (via a letter which also included a project information sheet) and asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group relating to their attitudes towards adoption and opinions on a new digital marketing strategy. To encourage participation in the focus groups each participant received a cash incentive of £20 per participant per focus group.

The focus groups participants were all at various stages of the adoption process, ranging from those still waiting for approval; those approved and waiting for a match; recent adopters; and those who had adopted their children several years ago. There was a total of 17 participants aged between 35 and 50 across the three focus groups. Of these 3 were male and 14 female. This gender imbalance is not surprising given that the focus groups were all held in the day-time during



the week when still it is the case that men are more likely to be full-time in paid work and also given the subject matter and the continued propensity for women to be seen as primary childcarers.

This research is not an 'end-point' evaluation but rather an iterative R&D process where research findings will be fed into the development of the new digital marketing programme. In light of this the first focus groups were undertaken early in the research process to identify the needs, desires and expectations of these target audience groups. It is then envisaged that a second set of focus groups (most probably using a different cohort to avoid 'research fatigue') will then be carried out during the development stage of the new digital marketing programme.

Focus groups were recorded (with the permission of the participants) using audio-equipment, then transcribed, thematically coded and analysed by the researchers and fed back into the project. This research has been subject to an internal University ethical approval process. All data has been stored securely, the participants were fully briefed on the aims of the project and their role within it and they have been informed that they can withdraw from the research process at any point. All research participants have been given pseudonyms in this report.

## 5. Finding an Adoption Agency

Many of the research participants came to Caritas Care after having what they felt were negative encounters with other adoption agencies. Most participants expressed largely negative attitudes towards some other adoption agencies and in particular **local authority adoption agencies**, either based upon personal experience or upon what they had been told by others. Such as the opinions expressed by **Rita**:

We had some friends who had been through the process with a local authority a few years back, and they absolutely terrified us...some authority said 'we'll get you children quicker'. And I thought, my god that is awful, this is children'. So we just got really scared.

Similarly this can also be seen in the experiences of **Sarah**:

*For Caritas Care it was a vocation... [they] were just really open*

We started this [the process of adoption] three and a half years ago with [a local authority]. I have [a long-term chronic illness], which can affect my health. My husband had a job that meant he would occasionally be away. And we had a birth son. We had lodgers living with us at the time. And [the local authority] managed to

put up every barrier they could. They wanted us to do work on the house, and they wanted me to prove I could project manage the work. So we jumped through all their hoops, waited a year, and then they said 'no'. So we had all that heartbreak.

**Diane** highlighted for her it was a difference in attitude between the initial people she spoke to at different agencies:

You had someone for who it was a vocation [the representative from Caritas Care] and for the other [the representative of another North West-based adoption agency] it was [just] a job. For Caritas Care it was a vocation...[they] were just really open.

Most blamed their poor encounters with local authority adoption agencies on the bureaucracy of these agencies, or simply their heavy workload and poor funding.

As **Rita** stated:

We'd heard stories like that about local authorities. In their defence they have huge workloads, but still, at the same time, that is a problem that needs solving.

An overload of existing workloads for local authority adoption agencies was given as the reason that **Cathy** also turned to Caritas Care.

We tried through a local authority first...went to an introduction day...and [then] where they come to the house, and they told us we needed to wait another six months because they didn't have a social worker available to deal with us. We'd already waited a long time, and you do a lot of soul searching before you pick up that phone initially [to call an adoption agency]...so to be told you had to wait again [was too much to ask]...and [also] they told us they had too many children to deal with at the moment, so had no social workers free to take on new adopters.

Hence for many it was their encounters and opinions of local authority adoption agencies that led them to seek out voluntary adoption agencies such as Caritas Care. However, it is important to note that this sample is not necessarily representative of all adopters and their experiences. In particular one would expect a sample of those who have used a voluntary adoption agency to over-represent those who hold negative attitudes local authority adoption agencies. It is therefore important to be extremely cautious about any generalisations drawn from this sample in relation to wider experiences and opinions of adoption agencies.

**Sarah** recounted her experiences and reasons for going to Caritas Care:

So [after being rejected by her local authority adoption agencies] I went to the British Association [for Adoption and Fostering] and literally went down the list with 'right this is our situation'.

Similarly, **Tony** stated:

[Caritas Care were] literally the first name that came up on the [web] search engine.

For **Cathy** it was the **recommendation of a friend**, which initially led her to Caritas Care:

It was friend who mentioned Caritas [Care]... we'd not heard of them. And we were at the point where we might of got put off by the whole thing.

Other key factors that led potential adopters to a voluntary adoption agency, and in particular Caritas Care, was **locality**. Such as **June's** story:

I just saw the Caritas {building} in [the town where she lives]. My husband and I had talked about it for a while, and then I was just walking past one day and I thought 'you know what, I'm going to go and have a look in'. So I

saw one of them, and they gave me a pack, and said ‘if you’re interested we’ll come round and talk to you’.

This was a point also made by **Brian**:

The fact that they [Caritas Care] were local was really important...[as] you could just drop in for a chat.

Also for some Caritas Care’s **Catholic heritage** was seen as a positive factor, as it was for both **Rita** and **Martha**:

**Rita**: I do practice a faith. And I didn’t want that held against me. I was sacred they’d judge me [a local authority].

**Martha**: We [also] practice a faith...and a friend who had started the adoption process in another part of the country said that the local authority was worried that they might indoctrinate the child...so we were a bit worried too.

However for some others this was not a factor at all and some (even those who had been through the entire adoption process with Caritas Care) did not know of the organisation’s Catholic roots. As **Tony** stated:

To be honest this is the first I’d heard about it [*laughs*]...but it wouldn’t have bothered me.

Others suggested that the organisation’s historic association might be seen as problematic for some. As **Cathy** and **Kath** suggested:

**Cathy**: A friend of mine who was thinking about adoption, who is a Muslim...when I said about Caritas [Care] ...and I was saying they were really good and you should give them a ring. She’d looked it up and seen [it was once a Catholic adoption agency] and was put off...and just felt it wouldn’t be open to her.

**Kath**: Yeah, similar with us. We have neighbours who are gay, and they are married, and interested in adoption. And when I said who we’d adopted through, they said ‘they’d not want us’.

*Caritas [Care] were the first to come back to us and say ‘it might be awkward, but let’s take a look at this’*

After the initial contact had been made with Caritas Care, the main reasons why the focus group participants initially went with (and remained with) Caritas Care was given as the **friendly and supportive** attitude of staff and social workers. Such as **Sarah’s** comments above relating to how Caritas Care were the first

agency willing to consider her complex situation, and **June's** first encounter with a social worker sent by Caritas Care:

So yeah...[a social worker] came round and she sat with us, talked to us, and she was just really lovely and really warm and explained everything in loads of detail.

## 6. The Adoption Process

A priority for many adoption agencies is finding permanent homes for **harder to place children**, such as sibling groups, older children, and those with health or developmental difficulties (Scott & Duncan, 2013). However from the focus groups there did not emerge any specific or overt strategies an adoption agency could, or even possibly should, be implementing to encourage potential adopters to widen their initial search. Many of the participants in the focus groups all wished to highlight their personal and individual journey which brought them to where they were today and, in cases of those who had already adopted, their children. A very small number of research participants appeared to have come in with a clear idea of the kind of child they wanted to adopt, and this did not change throughout the adoption process for them, such as **Tony**:

I just wanted a boy...and I had major battles with my social worker, because they were like 'what if I found you a perfect girl?'. But she knew really...and we got what we wanted.

But for most of the focus group participants it appears that their initial preconceptions/criteria changed over a period of time, most commonly through numerous discussions with social workers (Selwyn, Wijedasa, & Meakings, 2013). Such as the story that **Martha** recounted:

We were approved for two, up to the age of five. We wanted a sibling group, and we were approved for a sibling group...but our social worker suggested that...at that time I was 31 I think...and she [the social worker] was right...she said there would be enough time to adopt *a* child...then have a gap and adopt another child...which wasn't what we initially thought... and because our children are lovely, and I'd not, not want them...but we started this process thinking 'this is what we wanted', but what our social worker was saying at the time, we kind of, went along with what she said...and now, years on...it's fine and it's brilliant.

And as **June** added:

As I said, we've got two boys already...The social worker came round...they didn't ask us what we wanted and we didn't really mind...but they said they'd put a girl in with the boys, because...if you put a boy in, they are more likely to compete with one another...if you put a little girl in, they'll kind of nurture her, and try and protect her. And that is exactly what they [her sons] have done, they just ruin her [*laughs*].

For most this was a slow process and not one that in most cases necessarily involved a singular or specific event or intervention. Most participants wanted to highlight how their initial preconceptions/criteria changed over time and for some this narrative was linked with the *journey* towards how they ‘found’ the child(ren) they adopted. As **Steven** recounted:

Initially we were after just one...but then we saw these [their (to be) three adopted children] and just fell in love.

A similar story is recounted by **Carol**:

*I wouldn't say  
that your mind  
gets changed...but  
it gets opened up*

was...she just felt right.

We wanted a little girl between three and seven and ended up with a girl of two. It was just...I'm not sure what pulled me to her...she was on Be My Parent [British Association for Adoption and Fostering website]...I wasn't even reading profiles of younger children...but there was just something that pulled me towards her...I don't know what it

However this was not necessarily the case with all the participants and some recounted their worries and confusion over the idea that they should ‘just know’ or instantly fall in love with a child from their profile. For example, as **Anne** recounted:

I love her [their adopted daughter] to bits now...but I was quite bewildered by this idea that you'd fall in love with a picture of a child ...[and] I didn't get that at all. And when I first saw the picture and didn't get that at all I felt very confused by this...that I didn't have any feelings for this profile...but that might be to do with my personality.

And as **Sarah** stated, in relation to changing her mind about taking on a child with specific health issues:

It is a slow process. When you get the profiles of the children that are out there, you start to think ‘yes I could take on a child with hearing loss’...because *you could*.

However the research participants suggested caution about adoption agencies and social workers being too up-front or forceful about a potential adopter needing to widen their

*Initially we were  
after just one...but  
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and just fell in love*



search beyond their initial ideas of the kind of child they wanted to adopt, certainly early on in the processes, as this might scare some potential adopters away. Most suggested that this has to be a slow process of finding the child for you, which may not necessarily match who you initially thought they would be. Several participants suggested that it was important that this was not (as **Rita** put it) 'overly pushed'. As she continued:

Some people I think could only handle a young child. If you suddenly start saying 'you can only have two older and one of them has to be disabled', which *is* how it comes across a wee bit [*laughs...agreement in the room*]... We'd just spend 12 months honing what we felt we could deal with...and you work on this...and then you get a 'think again'. If you only felt you could handle one...and a young baby, that is the kind of thing that will break your heart and put you off. So there is a fine line between 'yes, there are all these children who have different needs'...but you do start to think unless one is in a wheelchair, you're not going to get a child.

And as **Cathy** warned:

You don't want to bombard people with too much...if your pushing 'don't just go for babies'...then I think you can put people off. But through the process, I wouldn't say that your mind gets changed...but it gets opened up.

How children got categorised as having 'special educational needs', was seen as problematic. As **Rita** stated:

It sounds terrifying! But when you actually isolate children, they have asthma down as a medical condition...I know it is a medical condition, but I could handle that! They do scare you. But, one profile we saw was of a child with cerebral palsy but there are so many different levels....and when we read about what needs this particular child had...of course we could deal with that.

The participants suggested that there were some advantages to adopting older children, such as **Rita** suggested 'it would be easier to communicate and reason with an older child' and that a sibling group would have 'a shared past', which means they would get on better with each other and hopefully settle easier. As **Faye** recounted:

I think initially at the very beginning we'd thought about a young child...but after talking it through with a social worker we saw the positives and benefits of having older children. In terms of you get to find out more about them, and they can communicate more than a baby could, and we'd know more about their developmental needs. But straight from the on-set we knew we wanted siblings...it was always going to be two [children].

Though much more instrumental, but still a significant point, was that all in Focus Group 1 agreed that a key incentive in adopting more than one child at once would be to not have to go through the adoption process, vetting, and paperwork again, and as **Sarah** put it 'all the emotional upheaval'. And as she continued:

My husband was like 'we are having a sibling group! I am *NOT* going through this process again!' [*laughs*].

The adoption process was highlighted by many of the research participants as a particularly **difficult process** both in terms of the administration involved, such as calculating predicted budgets, and also the emotional pressures that this placed upon the potential adopters. For example **Sarah** also highlighted how references are taken up early in the adoption process, meaning that potential adopters often had to tell people around them that they were embarking on this process, possibly before they were ready to. Also in relation to the adoption process **Kath** stated:

We felt like the whole process was designed to put us off. Like it's survival of the fittest. If you get through to the actual approval day, then you are like an Olympian... you have made it!

**Kath** continued:

In this kind of forum I feel I can say it. But if someone from Caritas [Care] was he'd I'd be 'you were great!', but the truth is, we were put through the ringer...we found it really emotionally draining.

And **Tony** added:

I think everyone was. You were ripped, and I think that's what they [social workers] did. They wanted to pull you apart, to see how strong you were together.

**Jenny** in Focus Group 3 suggested that one of her concerns through the adoption process was the prospect of having to allow birth parents access to the child after it had been adopted:

In the training you hear about issues of direct access, and I was thinking 'I am never going to go for a child who has to have access to their birth parents', because it just terrified me. But you know what...the foster carer for our children was their paternal grandmother, who wanted to continue to have access ...and you know what, it's just the best thing in the world,

and I think that is going to help our children. She [the parental grandmother] is now part of our family.

However, **Tony** highlighted that for him it was more training and preparation for dealing with the **foster carers** that he wanted, as he had a difficult relationship with them which he found to be particularly stressful.

**Faye** highlighted that even when the adopted children are placed with their new family the pressures of the adoption process continue:

What we found really intense was once they [the children] are placed with us, was the social workers visit you every other day, and then every week, and you are watched and given feedback on everything you do. I really think people need to know about that, and just how intense it is.

This was a point picked up by **Kath** who suggested that more information and support was needed about the latter parts of the adoption process:

It is like, what do you do once you get them [your adopted children] home? A little bit more detail on these sorts of things [would be helpful]. You get a lot of training about what the child will be like, but you don't get a lot on what to do once you meet them and what that first week will be like, and when you bring them home, it's like a bomb's gone off...and about how your family reacts. There seems to be a lot at the front end of the adoption process, but not a lot of training on what to expect in the second half.

All of the research participants highlighted that they had various concerns and worries throughout the adoption process, and mostly these were quite specific to them. As **Cathy** commented:

A lot of people have gone through a lot of stuff before they even start the adoption [process].

***It was really intense... But it is only after you've been approved that things start to click into place***

But most commonly the research participants highlighted that throughout the process most worried about not getting approved. As **Kath** commented:

I always thought we wouldn't get approved. We felt uneasy throughout. After you've been through so much disappointment already, you think 'do I want to believe?'

And **Brian** discussed how it was not until their children were placed with them that they were able to believe it was going to happen:

You're convinced it is all going to fall to pieces, the whole process. You go through it hoping for a positive result, but throughout you are trying to protect yourself...because the emotional process is a bit of a rollercoaster.

And **Jenny** added:

For me, I don't think you stop worrying until the final adoption papers comes through.

Others highlighted the need for other post-adoption support and facilities such as the need for specialist playgroups, as highlighted by **Julie**:

I think once you've got adopted children to go to a standard playgroup is quite hard, particularly once they've first been placed...but if you go to playgroup for adopted children...people understand [your particular situation] better.

**Debbie** added about the pressures of going to a general playgroup which was not specifically organised for adopted children:

Yeah...Mums wanna talk about giving birth! Even if I'd done it normally I wouldn't want to talk about giving birth! And you feel like you are on the spot.

And **Carol** suggested that it was important that support was long-term:

For us, it will be about when she is older...and starts asking those difficult questions...we've told her that she is special because we adopted her, but it's when she starts to understand what that means...It is how you deal with that? That's what I'm worried about, and that's when we'll need support.

Also, some highlighted that they had found these focus groups helpful, such as **Kath**:

I think post-adoption they should do this more often...get everyone in a room. This is lovely isn't it [*laughs*]. You can just talk openly!

## 7. Developing the Website

All research participants suggested that a more informative, targeted and interactive website would be beneficial to **potential adopters**. For example, as highlighted by **Rita**:

There is nothing on the [Caritas Care] website apart from 'call us! Children need adopting! Happy faces!' But there is nothing about the process. There is nothing that says 'look, this is the process'...something friendly that says 'forget what you have heard from other people, this is the process'.

*Everyone going on that website is after the same thing, they are all after a family*

She continued:

I'm a real scaredy with calling up...and the local authority websites aren't friendly at all...they are just awful...it's like 'council tax, parking fines and children' [*laughs*]...so some initial... some more, information on a website would be useful, before you have to make that call.

When asked if they would like to be 'directed' to relevant areas on a website, on the basis of their answers to a series of filtering questions, such as their age, ethnicity, and so forth, none of the participants felt that this was a good idea. As **Sarah** stated:

No, no. That gives the sense that they think [they] know what is best for you. Rather they should have something that says 'it doesn't matter who you are...you know what? We can work with you'. Not something that gives the impression that people are already being filtered out.

As **Steven** quite succinctly put it:

Everyone going on that website is after the same thing, they are all after a family. So they should all end up in the same place.

Many thought that information on the website for **referees** and also **existing family** members would be very useful. For example as **June** recalled:

Before they came out to interview the boys [her birth children] they gave us a DVD, and it just wasn't appropriate...it was just like, really dull and boring and a bit over their heads. It needed to be more fun, so if you could do something like that on the website, for children... for people who have already got children.

And as **Martha** and **Rita** commented:

**Martha:** I think having a nice area [on the website]...not just for kids [but primarily]... where they can go and have a read...that would be nice.

**Rita:** yeah, actually, if there was a fun section for children [on the website]...I have this godson...who is really into games and apps...so if I took him onto the Caritas [Care] website and there was a fun section for children and a bit if a game, that would be great...of only Minecraft did adoption! [*everyone laughs*].

Many of the research participants suggested that a **timeline** on the website that set out the adoption process would be useful, but that this should be a *realistic* and *honest* timeline, clearly highlighting that delays often occur in the adoption process.

**Kath** gave a typical response when she highlighted that a website that sets out the adoption process would be really useful, and also that it would be helpful to have some guidance on the kind of information social workers would seek from you during the adoption process.

You are on your own a lot through the process, and you often think ‘are they [the social workers] just doing this to us?’. Something about what is normal, in the process...though ‘normal’ is a weird word in adoption, as what is ‘normal’ [*laughs*].

**Faye** suggested that a website might also be able to offer some degree of emotional support:

I don’t know, but it’s a real rollercoaster of an experience, and I don’t know if there is some way of offering advice [on a website] on how to manage those feelings?

Some participants in the focus groups thought that the website should make clear the **advice and support** that the adoption agency, in this case Caritas Care, will offer through the entire adoption process and beyond — for the long-term. The idea of the *offer* of support is key here as, while some participants in the groups highlighted the importance of long-term support, it is evident that others wanted to (after the adoption had been completed) be left alone as much as possible so that they could be a ‘normal family’. So again any information given (such as on a website) about long-term support needs to be carefully balanced as some potential adopters may be put off by what they may fear will be a

continuous process of external interference which they were not necessarily anticipating.

The research participants suggested that there were a lot of **misconceptions** around adoption. Some of these were based upon old stereotypes, such as that all adopted children will be in some way ‘damaged’ and are going to be troublesome, or more contemporary worries, such as that ‘these days’ you have to allow the birth parents complete access to the children for the rest of their lives. In particular, several of the focus group participants highlighted friends or family’s comments about the continued and long-term ‘interference’ they would encounter from social workers and/or birth families. Hence, as **Rita** added:

A website that dispels some of these myths would be *really* helpful.

And **Kath** also added:

I like the idea of [the website] debunking myths. Because we’ve got two dogs, and people were like ‘they’ll never let you adopt with two dogs’ [*laughs*]...So something like that, a ‘can I adopt if...?’.

**Kath** continued:

People have all these misconceptions, like that some poor Catholic girl has had to give up her child for me. But it’s not always like that. The best thing [a social worker from] Caritas [Care] ever said to me was ‘they are just kids’. And I think that is something that should come through on the website. They are just children who need parents.

***They are just kids...They are just children who need parents***

One piece of information that participants in Focus Group 1 thought might be useful to put on a website was that ‘looked after’ children were *commonly* given preferences in their **high school choices**. Participants felt this might alleviate some worries, as potential adopters would therefore know that their adopted child stood a strong chance of getting into the school

that they wanted, such as one where their existing children already attend.

Other information the website could offer is an edited (short) **reading list**. The participants in Focus Group 1 indicted that they were given a rather long reading list but did not find all of the books listed particularly helpful. Therefore a



shorter, more focused reading list on the website might be helpful. As **Rita** stated:

If you bought all the books on the list that was about three hundred quid. And I went through all the reviews on Amazon[.co.uk] and one of them [books on the list] was absolutely slated! So I thought 'I'm not buying that one then'. So I picked up the courage and asked 'which is the best...or which are the best few?', and I got recommended a few...and a couple of them were really brilliant. Having those ones the website would be really useful.

*...what is really nice is hearing from a real, loving Mum and Dad, talking about their little one*

All participants thought that the (anonymized) **stories** or **case studies** of those who had previously adopted would be very useful on the website, and not just those where all had gone very smoothly. Focus group participants felt that 'realistic' stories would be most useful. In particular **Rita** continued that that she had read a book which contained short real life stories of the experiences of people who had adopted and she found this very useful. However, as **Faye** added:

There is too much negativity through the entire adoption process. They [the children] will have delayed learning, they have this, that and the other...but our children haven't got any of that, and I know of other children who have been adopted who are relatively *normal*...whatever normal is? So there needs to be a balance, of yes, they can come from difficult backgrounds, yes, there are some children who might have difficulties in some aspects of their lives, but the other side is that they can be healthy happy children.

This was a point also made by **Kath** who suggested that hearing from existing adopters balanced the negative stories she read on some websites, and that possibly **positive videos** from those who have been through the process might be useful on a website:

During the adoption process I kept going on Adoption UK [website] and those discussion boards scared the hell out of me, and I think I'd want a more balanced approach...what we found really useful about the adoption process was meeting real people. You are confronted with all this information, but what is really nice is hearing from a real, loving Mum and Dad, talking about their little one. It makes you think 'yeah, we could do

that'. It brings it to life a bit. I think that would be valuable [on a website] if people were willing to do little video clips, or something similar...

**Kath** continued:

I think when you get to the point that you are going on the training, that's the point where you can handle some of the darker stuff, you are in an environment where you can take it, but if you are just going on your computer by yourself, you might think 'you know what I don't think I can do this', and you might not take the step to go to an evening if it is too much darkness.

This was a point also made in Focus Group 3 by **Julie**:

I think there could be stages to the website...areas. As you don't want to put people off at the start with too much scary information. You do need to know information...about the pitfalls...but also the funny stuff too.

Additionally **Kath** picked up her earlier point about how she would find it helpful to receive more information about **the latter stages of the adoption process**, and also post-adoption, which she suggested could be (at least partially) provided on a website.

It is like all the legal stuff...that you don't think to ask about at the time. It would be useful to have somewhere [such as a website] where you could find out all this information...such as parental responsibility...so there might be a bit [on the website] for pre-adopters, but there should also be an area for us...those of us who have been through it and are still going through it and are still getting surprises.

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## 9. Appendix A: The Research Participants\*

### Focus Group 1: 20/01/15

**Rita**, 45, female, 'in the process' of adopting (been approved 2 months ago), waiting to be matched.

**Martha**, 36, female, has two adopted children (both through Caritas Care)

**Sarah**, 37, female, in final stages of waiting for approval.

**June**, 35, female, adopted a 10 month old girl 5 months ago (and also has two birth children).

### Focus Group 2: 20/01/15

**Cathy**, 38, female, adopted 3 children (a sibling group), 4 years ago.

**Steven**, 40, male, partner of Cathy.

**Tony**, 38, male, adopted a young boy, two years ago.

**Kath**, 39, female, adopted a one year old boy, one year ago.

**Faye**, 38, female, adopted siblings (a girl and a boy), almost two years ago.

### Focus Group 3: 27/01/15

**Debbie**, 50, female, adopted two children (siblings, two boys).

**Brian**, 51, male, partner of Debbie.

**Diane**, 43, female, has three birth children, and has adopted one child.

**Jenny**, 43, female, adopted two children (siblings, a boy & a girl) about 18 months ago.

**Carol**, 46, female, adopted a daughter about 18 months ago.

**Anne**, 42, female, adopted a daughter about 7 months ago.

**Julie**, 42, female, has had a little boy placed with them, about 4 months ago.

**Leanne**, 50, female, have had two little boys (ages 4 and 5) placed with them for about 6 months.

\*All names used are pseudonyms

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