Lifelong Identity

Briefing for CVAA members

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the fundamental role of identity formation in good mental health and positive outcomes for adopted people. While this often takes the form of life story books and later life letters, the concept of 'lifelong identity' should and does encompass a much broader range of the work that VAAs do. This includes (but is not limited to) helping adopted adults access their records; providing tracing and intermediary services; a wide variety of therapeutic interventions, including therapeutic life story work; and support services for birth family members.

Throughout this briefing we therefore refer to the concept of 'lifelong identity' rather than 'life story work'. Whereas life story work is in many cases a discrete and time-bound project or set of projects, lifelong identity describes a continuous sense of oneself over time. Ideally, a person should have confidence in this sense of self, be able to make decisions and commitments, and experience a sense of psychosocial and physical wellbeing and comfort[1].

Although transracial adoption has long been a subject of debate, this briefing does not explore the nuances of ethnic and racial identity formation where children and adopters are of different backgrounds. The topic is a complex one and deserves closer consideration in its own briefing. However, this briefing does include a short list of suggested reading on the topic of identity formation in transracial and international adoptions.

This briefing sets out the legislative context in the United Kingdom for work in the area of lifelong identity and the evidence base around this work. It then describes some of the current projects that are underway in the voluntary sector and explores the possibilities for future innovation.

[1] Hoopes, J. (1990). 'Adoption and Identity Formation.' In: Brodzinsky, D., and Schechter, M., eds., *The Psychology of Adoption*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 144-166.

2. The lay of the land: legislation, policy and practice

Understanding of the lifelong journey of adoption and adopted people's needs in this regard has grown significantly in recent years; however, legislation and regulations still primarily define and respond to these needs with life story books, later life letters, and life story work.

The Children Act 1989

The foundational legislation that underpins adoption today is the Children Act 1989, which applies in full to England and in part to Wales, with parallel legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The Children Act 1989 describes the general framework for supporting children in need and planning for their future if they enter the care system. It also sets out some specific requirements with regards to lifelong identity. For example, case records for looked-after children which are kept under the 1989 Act will form the first documents in the adoption case record, which is to be set up as soon as the decision has been made to seek a placement order. Upon turning 18 (16 in Scotland), adopted people have a right to request access to the information in their adoption case records. Practitioners should therefore always have an eye to the future when preparing children's documents.

Following the Children Act 1989 there have been a number of developments in legislation and regulations regarding adoption across the UK. The relevance of these developments to life story work and lifelong identity is summarised below.

England

In England, the following legislation, regulations and statutory guidance relate to lifelong identity work:

i. Adoption and Children Act 2002
ii. The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005
iii. Children and Families Act 2014
iv. Statutory Guidance on Adoption (2013)
v. Adoption: national minimum standards (2014)

The legal framework addresses questions of identity in many ways and at numerous points in the lifelong journey of adoption.

At the point of matching, statutory guidance states that 'all families should help children placed with them to understand and appreciate their background and culture' (p84). This is because 'maintaining continuity of the heritage of their birth family is important to most children; it is a means of retaining knowledge of their identity.' The guidance acknowledges that identity formation is a lifelong process, noting that '[knowledge of their identity] will be of particular significance as [adopted people] reach adulthood' (p84).

At the point of applying for an adoption order, agencies must include in their report to the court 'information about the ways in which the prospective adopter is making use of resources within the wider family and/or community to assist in meeting the child's identity needs' (p156). This is emphasised for cases where children have been placed with prospective adopters of a different ethnic, cultural, and/or religious background.

The regulations also set out the requirements for life story books and later life letters. Statutory guidance states that life story books should 'be written in a simple and age-appropriate style and that the language and terms used are agreed with the prospective adopter before the book is

handed over' (p107). The guidance acknowledges that 'every child has a right to full information in their life story book, and this will include identifying information about a range of people in their life prior to their adoption' (p214). Additionally, a social worker who knows the child must prepare a letter on the circumstances of the child's early life and adoption, which will be given to the child by their adoptive parents when they reach adolescence or adulthood. Both the life story book and the later life letter should be given to the adoptive family within 10 days of the child's adoption ceremony.

The national minimum standards go further in setting out the support that adopted children should receive. The standards are framed by a set of values, including that 'A sense of identity is important to a child's well-being' (p4). For Standard 2, 'Promoting a positive identity, potential and valuing diversity', the desired outcome is that 'children have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background' (p13). To achieve this, agencies are expected to gather information about the child's life prior to adoption and to continue to work with birth relatives following the adoption to enable them to provide updates on significant family information to the adoptive family.

Furthermore, agencies should prepare and support adopters 'to promote the child's social and emotional development, and to enable the child to develop emotional resilience and positive self-esteem' (p13). Adopters should receive training in the importance of the child's identity and 'the need for openness to help the child to reflect on and understand their history' (p31).

Wales

In Wales, social services functions are devolved, and the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 sets out an alternative to Part 111 of the Children Act 1989. Parts 3, 4 and 6 of the SSWB(W)A provide a different framework for supporting children in need of care and support and children who are looked after.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002, with some minor Welsh amendments, applies to lifelong identity work in Wales, the most notable being that s1(5) continues to apply in Wales:

> *'In placing the child for adoption, the adoption agency must give due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background.'*

The following legislation, regulations and statutory guidance also apply in Wales:

i. The Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005, as amended
ii. The Access to Information (Post-Commencement Adoptions) (Wales) Regulations 2005
iii. The Adoption Information and Intermediary Services (Pre-Commencement Adoptions) (Wales) Regulations 2005
iv. The Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (Wales) Regulations 2005
v. The Adoption Support Services (Wales) Regulations 2019 (which applies to VAAs)
vi. The Regulated Adoption Services (Service Providers and Responsible Individuals) (Wales) Regulations 2019 and accompanying statutory guidance

Statutory Guidance: Adoption Services (2019) requires agencies to provide support that meets an individual's needs, including:

i. Physical, mental and emotional wellbeing;
ii. Cultural, religious, social or spiritual preferences; and
iii. Family and personal relationships (p25-6).

The Guidance specifies that an example of the above includes: 'Children have appropriate, carefully assessed, supported contact (direct and/or indirect) with their birth relatives, including their brothers and sisters, and other people who are important to them, such as previous carers, where this is in their best interests' (p26).

Furthermore, the Code of Practice on looked-after children issued under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) states that 'most children will have some degree of relationship with their birth family, even if they do not return home. This should be managed, and therefore life story and contact work are crucial to helping children and young people to make sense of their identity' (p8). This highlights the importance of considering the implications for a child's lifelong identity as early as possible in their journey through care.

The National Adoption Service in Wales (NAS) provides a toolkit for what it terms 'Life Journey Work'[2], including resources for adopters, birth relatives, children and young people, and professionals. The NAS is also publishing four good practice guides covering transitions and early support, post-adoption contact, working with birth parents, and adoption support, assessment and review. The fundamental principle running through all guides is that a child's secure identity is central to their present and future well-being.

Scotland

In Scotland, the following legislation, regulations, and statutory guidance apply:

i. Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007
ii. The Adoption Agencies (Scotland) Regulations 2009
iii. Guidance on Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007
iv. Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014
v. Health and Social Care Standards (2017)

Statutory guidance acknowledges that 'children may need additional help to maintain their ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic identity, particularly if it has not been possible to achieve this fully within the placement' (p31). Throughout the guidance there is also clear recognition of the lifelong impact of adoption on identity formation, positive self-esteem, and emotional resilience:

> *'An infant or very young child may make a transition to a very different family culture with relative ease. As they grow up, over time they will need to integrate their adoption and identity in relation to both their birth and adoptive families. This is one of the life-long issues of adoption. Adopted people will vary considerably in the extent to which this is a concern for them but the responsibility for the agency is, wherever possible, to have regard for the level of discontinuity between the birth and adoptive family, to try and find placements that keep this to a minimum and where this is not possible, to ensure that the adopters are sensitive to the concerns and equipped to meet the child's needs in this respect'* (p158).

Furthermore, the guidance specifies that, although regulations only refer to contact with birth parents, agencies and adoption panels should consider all possibilities for direct and/or indirect contact with other birth relatives as well as significant carers. It requires 'all contact in adoption [to be] seen in the context of the expectation that the child will be aware of their adoption and that it will be the responsibility of the adopters to support their child in understanding their origins' (p159).

[2] https://www.adoptcymru.com/life-journey

This section acknowledges that a child's needs with regards to contact may change over time, and that the need to more broadly support a child's identity formation and understanding of their adoption journey should inform every aspect of adopters' preparation and assessment. For example, agencies are expected to provide prospective adopters with information (in writing) about adopted people's rights to obtain certain information from the Registrar General for Scotland.

Statutory guidance notes that, although later life letters and life story books are a good starting point, they may not meet all of a child's lifelong identity needs. It is suggested that other tools, for example Life Appreciation Days and illustrated timelines, might be helpful in supporting a child to understand and integrate their past.

In discussing disruptions (which are not addressed in regulations), statutory guidance requires agencies to have procedures in place which are based on research and evidence regarding 'the concept of adoption at all stages for all parties in the adoption triangle – the adopted child, the adopters and the birth parents' (p207). It is noted that:

> *'Legal adoption is regarded as a key step in consolidating the adoptive family but if it subsequently disrupts, attention may shift back to unresolved feelings about the birth family. This does not mean that the child's legal membership of their adoptive family ends and an ongoing task for many adopted people is making sense of their place in two families. This is likely to alter over time. One of the risks of failure to continue to recognise actively all the important relationships in the child's life both within their birth and adoptive network is that they may end up with little or no place in any family network'* (p208).

The Health and Social Care Standards, published in 2017 and implemented from April 2018, set out five headline outcomes that everyone should expect when accessing care and support, underpinned by five principles. Standard 1.29 specifies, 'I am supported to be emotionally resilient, have a strong sense of my own identity and wellbeing, and address any experiences of trauma or neglect' (p7).

Northern Ireland

The legislative framework in Northern Ireland differs from the other nations of the UK, in that adoption legislation has not changed since the 1980s. In 2017, the NI Department of Health consulted on a draft Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill[3], but the dissolution of the Northern Ireland Assembly in January 2017 saw the draft bill stalled. The Northern Ireland Assembly reconvened in January 2020, and the draft Adoption and Children Bill is again on the agenda.

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 is the main statute concerning the care, upbringing and protection of children, and deals with both public and private law matters.

The Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 was enacted before the Children Order and has not been updated since. According to a research paper prepared by Dr Lesley-Ann Black for the Northern Ireland Assembly,

> *'Given society's modern values and needs, new forms of practice, and the unnecessary delays associated with the current process…the Adoption (NI) Order has become out-dated and in need of reform. It also lags behind recent legislative changes in adoption law in other UK jurisdictions…Furthermore, there is an increasing need to align adoption law with the Children's [sic] Order, particularly regarding the voice of the child, and a number of other human rights statutes'* (p5).

[3] https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/doh-fcpd-directorate/adoption-and-children-bill/

In 2019, the Health and Social Care (HSC) Board (a statutory organisation that commissions health and social care services in Northern Ireland) updated its 2017 statutory guidance, 'Adoption: Regional Policy & Procedures'. In it, the HSC Board acknowledges that 'permanence is essential as it provides children with a foundation from which to develop their identity, values and relationships, not only throughout childhood, but on into their adult lives' (p28). Throughout the guidance there is reference to the lifelong implications of adoption and the need for responsiveness and flexibility on the part of both adoptive parents and adoption support providers.

Practice: Supporting lifelong identity

Legislation throughout the UK is clear that adoption is an ongoing journey with lifelong implications for the adopted person's identity.

In practice, this understanding is addressed by a range of support services, many of which have evolved over the past 30 years despite a lack of statutory support or resource. The evidence base for these interventions is discussed in the next section.

Life story books

The predominant way that legislation addresses issues of lifelong identity is through providing for life story books. Life story books should be produced by a child's social worker while the child is still in care and include contributions and/or information from significant people in the child's life, e.g. foster carers, teachers, and birth relatives. They are intended tell the story of the child's life before care in an age-appropriate way in order to help the child make sense of memories, people, and events, and to fill in the gaps where the child does not have their own memories. A good life story book is meant to be the basis for ongoing conversations as the child grows.

There are numerous considerations when preparing a life story book, including:

- **Format**. The books may be scrapbooks, printed photo books, or binders with clear plastic inserts. Consideration should be given to the possibility for updating the book as the child grows, as they may ask different questions and their ability to integrate difficult information may evolve. New information may also become available, and adopters/children may wish to add this to the book.
- **Tone**. Although life story books should be age-appropriate at the time that they are given to the child, consideration should be given to the ways in which the child will return to the book as they grow and their need for understanding changes.

In many cases, it ends up being the adopters who prepare a child's life story book, despite the statutory duty for this (in England and Wales) resting with the child's social worker.

In a VOYPIC survey of 333 children in care in Northern Ireland from 2011 to 2013, only 1 in 3 children reported having a sufficient life story book.

Later life letters

The later life letter should be written by the child's social worker and given to the adoptive parents, to be presented to the child at a time that the parents deem appropriate. In some cases, social workers will ask birth family members to contribute to the later life letter and/or to write their own letter to the child.

These letters are meant to explain more fully the circumstances that led to the child being taken into care and placed for adoption. They might include both positive and negative details, and should take

an age-appropriate tone for an older teenager/young adult. Upon turning 18 (16 in Scotland), adopted people have a right to obtain certain information and records about their adoption and life before entering care. The later life letter can provide important supplementary and narrative information for what can turn out to be cold or sparse documentation.

Life Appreciation Days

Life Appreciation Days (sometimes called Child Appreciation Days) are carefully planned events that take place once a link or match has been made. They give a child's prospective adoptive parents the chance to meet key people in the child's life and to understand the child's experiences. Life Appreciation Days are intended to ensure that prospective adopters have the information they need about the child before proceeding with a placement.

Teachers, nursery workers, foster carers, and other significant people – including, in some cases, birth parents or relatives – might attend an Appreciation Day for some or all of the event, and prospective adopters should be able to ask them questions and gather information about the child's life before being adopted. This should include both factual information as well as stories and memories of the child, to help prospective adopters gain a full and clear picture of the child's personality, experiences, feelings, understanding, coping strategies, etc. The chair or facilitator of the day might wish to guide the discussions in chronological order, and to add information about the child's life to a flow chart or other visual aid.

Agencies may provide a child-friendly report of the day or letter, to be included with the child's life story book and later life letter. Adopters and other participants may be happy for the day to be photographed or for video/audio recordings to be taken. Ultimately, the child should know that all of these people came together to express their love and support and to wish the child well in their new family.[4]

Life story work

Life story work extends beyond the bounds of the life story book, to work that helps a child to explore their life story and express their thoughts and feelings. This could include arts and crafts and other hands-on activities, and work on a life story book may take place as part of this. It could also include therapeutic work to help children identify and regulate their emotions, build emotional resilience, create a coherent narrative about their life, and integrate their life story into their identity and the story they tell about themselves.

Access to records (pre- and post-commencement)

Upon turning 18 (16 in Scotland), adopted people have a right to apply for and receive certain information from the courts and the agency that arranged their adoption, including information that will help them to obtain their original birth certificate from the Registrar General.

People adopted before 30 December 2005 have a right to counselling during this process, to help them work through emotions that may arise and integrate any new information into their life story and sense of identity.

Adopted young people may anticipate turning 18 (or 16 in Scotland) as a time when they can finally learn everything about their past. This can be problematic in many respects. It may signal that the young person has not had sufficient support to understand and make sense of their past

[4] Rees, J. (2018). *Life Work with children who are fostered and adopted: using diverse techniques in a coordinated approach.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

experiences, or that they feel there are unacceptable gaps in their knowledge and understanding of their own life. Unfortunately, it is also the case that many adopted young people, upon finally gaining access to their court and adoption records (which can be a lengthy and emotionally taxing process), are unhappy with what they find. Records may be sparse and may not contain the kind of information that the person was hoping to find – for example, the type of cake that their aunt baked for their first birthday, or their birth mother's maiden name. Other documents, such as the Child Permanence Report, may have been written without considering that the adopted person would one day read them, and may therefore include/exclude details or take a tone that the adopted person finds upsetting.

Tracing and intermediary services

People adopted before 30 December 2005 have a right to request a regulated intermediary service, which can be offered by adoption agencies and adoption support agencies. Birth relatives can also approach agencies to ask that an adopted adult be told that they want to make contact. Agencies will then act as a go-between to establish whether both parties would like to make contact with one another, and to facilitate this contact if it is desired.

This can be a fraught area of work, with emotions and expectations running very high.

Counselling

Therapeutic interventions may be appropriate for adopted people at any point in their lives. Counselling and other interventions can support adopted children, young people, and adults to, amongst other things, identify, express, and regulate their emotions; develop their ability to empathise, for example with birth parents; process thoughts and feelings that arise at turning points, for example upon making contact with a birth family member; and develop their confidence and self-esteem.

Birth family support and counselling

Providing support services, which may include counselling, to birth parents and other family members is critical to an adopted child's ability to develop a positive and coherent lifelong identity.

Birth parents and other family members have a wealth of information about not only the child's pre-natal and early life, but also about the family's history, including information and stories about previous generations. Children who grow up in their birth families have regular, unlimited access to this type of information, whereas adopted children will not be privy to it unless their birth relatives shared it with social workers or the adoptive parents. Birth relatives often require support to share this information.

Adopted children can find it difficult to settle into their new families whilst experiencing feelings of disloyalty, confusion, and displacement regarding their birth family. They may worry about birth family members whilst feeling unable to ask about their wellbeing. Support to birth family members, especially parents, can create opportunities for the birth family to reassure the adopted child on this front. Letters and/or videos where birth family members reassure the child and describe their desire for the child to be happy, safe and loved can provide the child with permission to form an attachment with their adoptive family.

Contact: direct and indirect

For the most part, adopted children in England, Wales and Scotland who are in contact with their birth families communicate via letterbox. This is where an adoption agency acts as a go-between for adoptive and birth families to exchange letters.

In Northern Ireland, Adoption UK's *Adoption Barometer* survey found that adoptive families are four times as likely to have direct contact with birth parents (60% as opposed to 14%). Irish adopters are also more likely to say both that their child participates willingly in contact with birth family members, and that direct contact creates difficulties for their child.

The evidence base suggests that contact arrangements should be case-by-case and based on the child's needs, and should be flexible as the child grows and their needs evolve.

Adopter training

Legislation and guidance across the UK clearly emphasise the critical role of adoptive parents in supporting their child's lifelong adoption journey. This can take many forms, from life story work to open conversations about adoption to supporting the adopted young person to access their records. Most adopters will require some level of training to ensure that they can provide this support. This should be provided both during assessment, and on an ongoing basis as the child grows and their needs evolve. Adoptive parents have especially expressed a wish for further training around lifelong identity issues at the point when children are transitioning to adolescence.

3. Current evidence

Erikson on identity

Erik Erikson is the preeminent identity theorist of the 20th century. He wrote extensively about identity, focussing mainly on adolescence, and 'was one of the first to propose a life-span model of human development'[5] (p2). His model described eight stages of development, with each stage marked by a 'crisis' or existential turning point that a person must grapple with and resolve in order to progress. Importantly, there are both good and bad outcomes to this process of resolution; for example, following a given experience one could decide either that people are generally trustworthy or that it is important not to trust anyone.

Erikson recognised the relational and cultural world in which every individual forms their identity, and said that 'individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically related in continual change' (p140). This interrelation begins very early in life, when small children recognise themselves as unique from their parents and begin to take on characteristics and behaviours of the people around them. According to Erikson, identity development beings when this mimicking becomes less useful and the child begins to feel a need to shape the world in their own ways.

Erikson theorised that identity development is primary goal of adolescence. Cognitive abilities, physical skills, autonomous interactions with others, and impending adult responsibilities all begin to inform a person's understanding of who they are and where they fit into the wider world. Developing a solid sense of identity, Erikson wrote, gives a person a sense of purpose and belonging even as their role changes, their ideas and feelings evolve, and the world around them shifts.

> 'I shall present human growth from the point of view of the conflicts, inner and outer, which the vital personality weathers, re-emerging from each crisis with an increased sense of inner utility, with an increase of good judgment, and an increase in the capacity 'to do well' according to his own standards and to the standards of those who are significant to him' (Erikson, 1968, pp91-2).

The opposite of identity development is role confusion, which is defined by extreme doubt in one's personality and characteristics, and confusion about how one fits in with others. This can result in a deep lack of purpose and a sense of loss, which need to be resolved if a person is to continue to grow.

Whilst identity development is the central question of adolescence, it continues to be relevant throughout adult life. Participation in society through relationships, politics, religion, and career is critical to ongoing identity development, as is the process of setting and achieving goals. Adults will encounter 'crises', such as career changes, the deaths of loved ones, and changes in close relationships, which cause them to (re)evaluate their choices, values, and direction.

Contact after adoption: A follow up in late adolescence (2013)

[5] Sokol, J. (2009). 'Identity Development Throughout the Lifetime: An Examination of Eriksonian Theory', *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology,* 1(2). Available at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=gjcp

This study[6] by Beth Neil, Mary Beek, and Emma Ward reports on the third stage of a longitudinal research project that began in 1996. This stage followed up with 87 young people (aged 18, on average) who had been adopted in the mid-1990s to understand the impact of different contact arrangements.

Adoption stories, contact, and identity development

In a cohort of 32 adopted adolescents, the researchers found that 16 (50%) had developed what could be termed a 'cohesive' identity, with the other 50% exhibiting either 'unexplored', 'fragmented', or 'developing' identities.

Those who demonstrated a cohesive identity were able to tell their adoption stories clearly and concisely in interviews and demonstrated an ability to reflect upon and manage their emotions. They all felt a strong sense of belonging to their adoptive families, and for the most part understood why they had not been able to remain with their birth families. They had all consciously explored their relationships with their adoptive families and their feelings towards their birth families, with one young person stating,

> *'I just think being adopted means to me that I have birth parents and I have relationships, which are my mum and my dad… I don't find it strange. The only people who find it strange is probably because they feel like they don't know who they are so by finding out who their family is they're going to help find out who they are. But I already know who I am'* (p168).

Amongst the young people with 'unexplored' identities, there was a sense of taking many elements of their life and sense of self for granted, including belonging to the adoptive family and the inability of the birth family to care for them. These young people also told clear and concise stories about their adoptions, but this seemed more due to the fact that they had not explored their stories in any further detail. Where there was contact with birth family members, the young people simply felt an additional layer of love and belonging.

The young people with 'fragmented' adoption identities proved to be the most ill at ease with their adoption stories. They might have pursued further information, but on the whole felt confused and dissatisfied, and their adoptive identities seemed to trouble them greatly. This group had experienced a range of contact arrangements, but even where these were positive the young people did not seem to be able to use or integrate their experiences in a positive manner.

The researchers also found that young people with cohesive and unexplored identities were most likely to experience high levels of wellbeing, whereas none of the young people with fragmented identities were thriving. This led them to conclude that, although issues around identity may affect adopted people's wellbeing, it is potentially more likely that poor wellbeing affects the ability to process and resolve identity issues.

There was also a notable difference in experiences of contact amongst these groups: over 75% of the cohesive identity cohort had been in contact with a birth family member in the past 12 months, whereas none of the other young people had had any contact with birth family members in that same period.

Adoptive family openness

[6] Neil, E., Beek, M., and Ward, E. (2013). 'Contact after adoption: A follow up in late adolescence'. Available at: https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/50763/1/Neil_et_al_2013_contact_after_adoption_full_report.pdf

In a survey in stage 2 of this research programme, adoptive parents and social workers alike reported that supporting an adopted child's identity was a key factor in their consideration or pursuit of contact with birth family members. Therefore, in the stage 3 study the researchers explored the relationship between parental communicative openness and adopted young people's identity development.

They found that more than 2/3 of the young people with cohesive or developing identities had parents who were highly communicatively open. This could indicate either that communication from parents was supporting these young people in developing their identities, or that the young people's self-exploration was prompting more openness from their parents.

However, the young people with either fragmented or unexplored identities had parents whose openness ranged from low to high, suggesting that the young people's own ability to process and reflect plays a significant role in their identity development no matter how communicative their parents are.

> 'In order to achieve a coherent sense of adoptive identity, young people need to actively process their thoughts and feelings about their adoption. The ability to do this is affected by their contact with birth relatives, by their communication with their adoptive parents, and by their own characteristics and each of these three broad factors interrelate' (Neil et al., 2017, p187).

The provision and experience of adoption support services in Wales: Perspectives from adoption agencies and adoptive parents (2014)

In 2014, The Welsh government commissioned a report[7] from researchers at Cardiff University to map 'how the post-adoption support needs of adoptive families are assessed across the country, what provision is made to meet these needs, and how adoptive families experience this process' (p6). This mapping exercise identified a number of issues that required addressing, including:

i. The ability to access information about the child's past, which is often held by the placing authority;
ii. The lack of resources to provide lifelong adoption support; and
iii. Considerable gaps in the provision of life story work.

The National Adoption Service was launched less than a year after the publication of this report, with a stated goal of improving adoption support services across Wales. The NAS's 2017/18 annual report[8] particularly notes two achievements in the area of lifelong identity: the co-production of a Life Journey Work Framework with children, young people, and adopters, and the fact that almost 2 in 3 (62%) of children have received their life story work materials by their 2nd adoption review.

Adopters' views on their children's life story books (2015)

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[7] Ottaway, H., Holland, S., and Maxwell, N. (2014). 'The provision and experience of adoption support services in Wales: Perspectives from adoption agencies and adoptive parents.' CASCADE Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. Available at: https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-06/provision-and-experience-of-adoption-support-services-in-wales.pdf

[8] National Adoption Service (2018). *Annual Report 2017-18*. Available at: https://www.adoptcymru.com/home.php?_dds=true&fileID=131&inline=true

In 2015, Coram and the University of Bristol collaborated to survey forty adoptive parents in England and Wales about their children's life story books[9]. At least 9 of the parents in the cohort had made their own life story books for their children, in most cases because the child's social worker had not provided one. Whilst all of the participants welcomed the idea of a life story book, there were many ways in which the books (where they existed) did not meets either expectations or, more importantly, needs.

i. Some adopters had **not been afforded the opportunity to feed into the process** of creating their children's life story books. They were dissatisfied with the resulting books, with some commenting that they would never be able to show them to their children.
ii. The **fixed nature of the books** was described by many adopters as a problem; for example, the inability to remove or insert pages into a scrapbook. This was especially difficult where the books included age-inappropriate or very difficult information.
iii. Where photographs were included, they were often cited as the most important elements of the books. However, **poorly chosen photographs could be extremely detrimental** to the child's wellbeing; for example, a photo of a birth mother with all of the siblings except for the adopted child.
iv. Seven adopters noted that the life story book **included their child's birth family surname**, which they worried could be used to find the family on social media or discover unwanted information on the internet about birth family members.
v. **The quality of the books varied widely**, and adopters felt it was obvious when a student or a social worker with little experience had compiled the book. Many described their children's books as rushed and flimsy, and in some cases the social worker who made the book had never even met the child.
vi. Many adopters felt that the books **focussed too heavily on birth family members, foster carers, and social workers,** rather than putting the child's story at the centre.
vii. Out of 29 adopters who commented on the age-appropriateness of their child's book, only 3 felt that social workers had got it right; **more than half felt that their child's book was pitched at an older child** and was therefore not useful.

Many of the adopters did not feel appropriately supported to use the life story books to help their children make sense of their past. Comments included not knowing at what age to use the book; struggling to answer difficult questions; and worrying about how to reveal more information as the child grew. The researchers observed that some adopters simply did not want to focus on the child's past, and that 'the emotional challenges to adopters in using life storybooks with their adopted children cannot be underestimated.'

Achieving emotional wellbeing for looked after children: a whole system approach (2015)

Researchers from NSPCC worked with four LAs investigate how to redesign the care system to improve support for the emotional wellbeing of looked-after children[10]. They found that, although care planning and NICE guidance emphasise the importance of enabling looked-after children to

[9] Watson, D., Latter, S., and Bellew, R. (2015). 'Adopters' views on their children's life story books', *Adoption & Fostering*, 39(2), pp. 119-134. Available at: https://www.coram.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource_files/Adopters%20Life%20Storybooks%20Research_0.pdf

[10] Bazalgette, L., Rahilly, T., and Trevelyan, G. (2015). 'Achieving emotional wellbeing for looked after children: a whole system approach'. NSPCC. Available at: https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2015/achieving-emotional-wellbeing-looked-after-children-whole-system-approach/

build a sense of their identity, practice on the ground varies considerably. This suggests that life story work may only become a priority once a child has a plan for adoption.

Key findings from the research include:

- 'Senior social work managers explain that life story work is not always prioritised because "there are no drivers within the system" to ensure it is completed' (p35).
- According to the young people and carers interviewed, all four LAs involved in the project did not sufficiently support children in care to make sense of their life stories and identities.
- CAMHS may require life story work to have taken place before accepting a referral for a looked-after child, which strongly disadvantages already-fragile placements.

Adopted children and young people's views on their life storybooks: the role of narrative in the formation of identities (2015)

Despite widespread agreement that life story books are a useful tool in supporting identity development in adopted children, there is little research to understand those same children's own perspectives and experiences on their life story books. The University of Bristol therefore collaborated with Coram to undertake interviews with 20 children and young people adopted from care in England. The study[11] explored the young people's opinions of their life story books as well as the role of the life story books in helping them to form their own narratives and develop their identities.

> 'Having a coherent narrative of adverse experiences has been associated with recovery from trauma and PTSD (Adshead, 2012) and, conversely, not having a coherent account is associated with being less able to respond sensitively to one's own children later in life (Kaniuk, Steele, & Hodges, 2004) as well as later mental health problems' (p4).

To start, the researchers emphasise that 'it is important to appreciate that life storybooks are…intended to provide the start of the conversation about the child's life, signalling to the child that they are entitled to know about their life story; rather than expecting the book to provide the coherent and only account of the child's life' (p7). Life story books provide one narrative of the child's history, but they are incapable of providing the ongoing narration to which conversations with carers, social workers, and potentially birth family members can contribute.

Findings included:

- Most children did not look at their life story books frequently. When they did, this was often triggered by an occasion, such as Christmas or a birthday, or by other people asking a question. Children also used their life story books to check on details that they had forgotten.

[11] Watson, D., Latter, S., and Bellew, R. (2015). 'Adopted children and young people's views on their life storybooks: the role of narrative in the formation of identities', Children and Youth Services Review, 58, pp. 90-98. Available at: https://www.coram.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource_files/Adopted%20children%20and%20young%20people%E2%80%99s%20views%20on%20their%20life%20storybooks.pdf

- Some children looked at their life story books less frequently as they got older, whereas others found that it took on more significance as they got older.
- Many of the young people felt that their books did not actually provide a 'story' but rather a collection of information. Seven out of the 20 children described their books as containing many photographs, but little writing.
- 19 out of 20 children reported that their book was in chronological order, and that this made sense to them.
- It was clear that the children in the study asked questions about the relationship between their own sense of self and the children portrayed in their life story books. Several did not recognise the children in the books as having anything to do with themselves or felt confused about how they got from then to now.
- Many of the children described photographs as being very important, although some described them as being very emotionally difficult to view.
- Most of the children emphasised the importance of being able to discuss their life story and life story books with their adoptive parents. However, most of them also found it difficult or uncomfortable to read the books with their parents.
- A handful of the children noted the importance of honesty; for example, one child had memories of neglect that were glossed over in his life story book, and another described her appreciation for a social worker who apologised for not being able to obtain a photograph of the child's birth parents.
- Many of the young people seemed to be using their life story books and other material objects, such as photographs and teddies, to facilitate reflection on their identity, even if this could not be clearly articulated at the time of the interview.

Helping birth parents in adoption (2017)

As Beth Neil notes in this literature review[12], the wellbeing of birth parents, whilst important in its own right, can also powerfully impact the wellbeing of adopted people. Neil notes that 'adopted individuals can experience a sense of loss of their birth family, culture, or social status,' not to mention the actual loss of relationships with birth family members (p8). If left unresolved, and in cases where adoptive parents may be less willing to talk about adoption and associated issues around identity, this sense of loss can undermine an adopted person's ability to form a coherent and positive sense of themselves. Contact with birth family members, either direct or indirect, can support adopted people to understand the losses they have experienced and integrate these into their life stories.

However, birth family members often need support for their own wellbeing to engage in contact that benefits adopted people. Neil cites a study from the United States[13] which found that adopted young people's satisfaction with contact (as opposed to the type of contact, or its mere existence) most closely predicted behaviours associated with good adjustment. The authors found that 'how parents and their adopted children make meaning of their contact appears to be more important for

[12] Neil, E. (2017). 'Helping birth parents in adoption. A literature review of birth parent support services, including supporting post adoption contact'. German Research Centre on Adoption (EFZA), German Youth Institute (Munich). Available at: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d89d/e180202bf0f0e11395ba73efb90fd3ba9731.pdf

[13] Grotevant, H., McRoy, R., Wrobel, G., and Ayers-Lopez, S. (2013). 'Contact Between Adoptive and Birth Families: Perspectives from the Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project', *Child Development Perspectives,* 7(3), pp. 193–198. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3743089/

adjustment than simply having contact'. The meaningfulness of contact is greatly improved when adoptive and birth parents are able to work together to support the adopted person.

Adoptive Identity and Adjustment from Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood: A Person-Centered Approach (2017)

This longitudinal study from the United States[14] explores the relationship between identity formation and adjustment amongst 145 teens and young adults who were adopted as infants.

> 'Erikson's primary writings about identity…focused on domains about which individuals have some degree of choice (e.g., occupation, religion, political views). However, increasing attention is being paid to aspects of identity about which individuals have little or no choice, but must still make meaning of that domain in their lives' (Grotevant et al., 2017).

In an earlier study, the adolescents were interviewed and classed into four categories of adoptive identity: Unexamined, Limited, Unsettled, and Integrated. These categories broadly describe the levels of exploration that the adopted young people had undertaken; the relevance of their adoptive identity to their own sense of self; and their feelings about this identity.

Researchers then followed up with a sample of the young people from each of these categories when they were in their mid-20s. They found that young people whose adoptive identity had been Unsettled in adolescence showed a much higher rate of **internalising** behaviour problems in young adulthood – that is, they struggled to manage their emotions, and reacted strongly to stressors and other uncontrollable external factors. This can manifest in anxiety, depression, ADHD, or a number of other diagnoses.

However, they also found that adoptive identity during adolescence did *not* predict higher levels of **externalising** behaviour problems (e.g. aggressive or antisocial behaviour) in young adulthood.

Other findings include:

- The biggest difference between adolescents in the Unsettled and Integrated categories was their level of negative emotions about adoption. Both groups of young people felt that adoption was highly relevant to their identities, and both groups had explored this to a great extent. This finding is consistent with other studies of non-adopted people, which have found that ruminating on one's identity is linked to depression and other internalising behaviour problems
- Adoptive identity development varies greatly from one person to the next, but in all cases is best supported with open and honest communication.

Connecting of Disconnecting? Adoptive Parents' Experiences of Post Adoption Contact and their Support Needs (2017)

[14] Grotevant, H., Lo, A., Fiorenzo, L., and Dunbar, N. (2017). 'Adoptive Identity and Adjustment from Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood: A Person-Centered Approach', *Child Development Perspectives,* 53(11), pp. 2195–2204. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5679095/

The Health and Social Care Board commissioned this study[15] in 2017 to understand adopters' views of their children's contact with birth family members, as they acknowledged that ongoing and/or direct contact can be a surprise for prospective adopters with a more traditional understanding of adoption. Parental attitudes are relevant to children's experiences of contact because, as discussed in various studies above, the ability for children to have open and honest conversations about adoption with their parents is a key factor in developing a positive sense of identity.

This is particularly important in Northern Ireland, where direct contact with adopted children's birth families has evolved to be much more common than in the other three nations. According to Adoption UK's 2018 Adoption Barometer[16], Northern Irish families were four times more likely to have direct contact with birth parents than the UK average.

Amongst a cohort of 93 adopters who responded to their survey, there were widely ranging opinions on contact. While more than half of the cohort commented on the benefits of contact for their child, around 1 in 3 found contact to be unsatisfactory. Many responses explained the complexities of contact and the effect on children, from birth parents breaking off contact arrangements to worries about the confusion and upset that contact may cause for the child. Almost 40% of respondents felt that contact caused their child to worry more about their birth family, and more than half said that it did not comfort their child to meet with birth family members.

The study concluded that, ultimately, 'contact should be demonstratively beneficial for the child and focused on their needs.' This echoes other research in supporting a case-by-case approach to contact. The authors note that 'the security of the placement should be safeguarded as a priority'. However, they do not argue that contact should be cut off if it is having a negative effect on the child, but rather that 'consideration [should be] given to alternative arrangements for maintaining identity and links with the birth family.'

Adopted children's co-production and use of "trove" (a digitally enhanced memory box) to better understand their care histories through precious objects (2018)

Whilst life story books are commonly used in supporting adopted children to explore, understand, and discuss their narratives, recent innovation in the UK has produced other tools to support identity development. Drawing on the evidence base around object attachment, memory, and childhood trauma, academic and creative industry collaborators worked with a number of children and young people with design and/or care experience in 2015/16 to co-produce a digital memory box called trove. trove is a slightly glittery diamond-shaped box with surfaces that can be customised, and contains a small single board computer that allows children to record stories about items that are important to them.

To test the trove prototype, researchers ran a four-week trial with a cohort of ten adopted children aged 5 to 15. They found that using trove seemed to spark questions and conversations in which some of the children had never previously expressed an interest. Some of the children seemed to use trove to tell and retell stories to themselves and their adoptive families, whilst others seemed to use it to store memories for safekeeping. Some children used trove to specifically store items and

[15] MacDonald, M. (2017). 'Connecting of Disconnecting? Adoptive Parents' Experiences of Post Adoption Contact and their Support Needs'. Health and Social Care Board (N.I.). Available at: https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/132848187/AUK_Report_Connecting_or_Disconnecting_MMacD_17.pdf

record stories from their lives before adoption, whereas others used it to also record day-to-day happenings and stories from their present-day lives.

Though small, this trial indicated the importance and interconnectedness of objects and stories in adopted children's narratives. Researchers found that trove prompted some children to ask more questions or record more stories about themselves, and that it enabled adoptive parents to have conversations with their children about their birth families, care experiences, and life stories.

4. VAA innovation

Every VAA offers life story work for the children that they place. Many VAAs also offer support with accessing birth and adoption records and finding and contacting birth family relatives. A preliminary list of these can be found at the end of this section, but contacting VAAs directly will always be the best way to find out about the services that they offer.

Beyond this, some agencies have developed other services to support adopted children, adoptive parents, birth parents, and children in care with lifelong identity development and associated issues. The below is not an exhaustive list, but rather an exploration of some recent innovations in the voluntary adoption sector.

ARCBOX (ARC Adoption NE)

Since 2017, ARC Adoption NE has been developing digital life story tool ARCBOX[17]. ARCBOX is a subscription-based service which is structured similarly to a social media platform, but is fully secure and only accessible to children and significant people in their lives. Contributors can include, for example, foster carers, adoptive and birth relatives, social workers, and teachers.

Using ARCBOX, children, family members, and other authorised users can upload pictures, audio, videos, and blog posts to the platform, and these are displayed in a chronological timeline. Only the child and their life story editor can see the full timeline, while contributors who are not the child can see their own uploads. The life story editor can be the child's social worker, another professional, or the child's adoptive parent, and they must approve all posts before the child can see them.

ARCBOX allows children to narrate their memories as well as their day-to-day experiences and emotions, and to associate audio recordings, videos, and photographs with the stories that they tell. It gives them an opportunity to hear and see the stories and memories of people who are important to them, and to integrate all of this into their understanding of their life stories. It can (and perhaps should) be introduced early in a child's care journey, to ensure that memories and moments are captured for the child to consider and build upon later.

Furthermore, ARCBOX provides a platform through which children can interact with important people in their lives, including social workers and birth family members, at times when direct contact may not be possible. Although originally developed for adopted children, it can be used creatively to support any care-experienced child, including those still in care, to explore and narrate their life story.

Sharing Stories (CCS Adoption)

Sharing Stories[18] is a life story work and life story book service developed by CCS beginning in 2016. The service grew out of the dearth of life story work that was being conducted whilst children were going through adoption proceedings, as LA social workers often do not have the time or specialised understanding to devote to gathering life story data while children are still in care.

The central function of the service is to gather information from important people in the child's life before adoption, including stories, photographs, and objects, and create a life story book in collaboration with the child's adopters, long-term foster carers, or special guardians. To do this, the Sharing Stories project workers may meet with birth family members or visit them in their homes.

[17] https://www.arcadoptionne.org.uk/life-story

[18] https://ccsadoption.org/sharing-stories/

They may record conversations, take photographs, and write down important details and memories. Every family is different, and the approach to life story work for each child and family will therefore be unique.

The Sharing Stories service is not only focussed on producing life story books. Depending on the circumstances, the team have also mediated calls between adopters and birth family members; advocated for an adoptive family to receive their child's life story book from the placing local authority; advocated for birth family members to receive support for writing letters or arranging contact; and supported a maternal grandmother to write a letter to her grandchild's adopters and contribute to a training video for adoption professionals.

In one case, the Sharing Stories team was able to collect 269 photos of the birth family, along with 33 video clips of the child's only meetings with the birth family, including the final contact with their birth mother. In their project evaluation report, the team write, 'It is hard to emphasize enough what a precious resource these videos and photos will be for the child as they grapple with their identity and their story as they grow up.'

Other products/resources gathered by the Sharing Stories team have included:

- Baby books
- Later life letters
- A funeral eulogy for a birth father, written by a birth sibling
- Photo albums
- Videos and DVDs
- Gifts
- Family trees
- Genograms
- Handprints of a deceased birth mother

Sharing Stories gives children access to information about and objects from their families and their pasts that they may otherwise never have had. It supports adopters, special guardians, and long-term foster carers to communicate honestly and effectively with children about their life stories, and helps birth family members to find meaning and healing in helping their children develop their identities and letting them know they were and are loved.

Life Story Project (Family Care Adoption)

Family Care in Belfast were funded by the Lottery Community Fund between 2014-2019 to develop a Life Story Project[19] for young people aged 11 to 22 who ~~are~~ were in care, had left care, or were adopted, and received further five year funding in 2019 for a second Project. Through the Project, Family Care works with young people to fill the gaps in their own histories and understand their own life stories.

The Project workers conduct one-to-one sessions with young people to give them information about their histories, help them to make sense of their early experiences both positive and negative, support them to build self-esteem and confidence, and develop their identities in positive and resilient ways. Sessions are based around relationship building, games, arts and crafts activities and visits to places that were or are significant to the young person.

[19] https://familycareadoption.com/life-story-project/

Alongside working with the young people, the Project engages birth family members and other people who were significant to the young person in the past. Workers gather information and work with the young person and their carers or adoptive parents to produce a unique LSB. They also support adoptive parents and carers to better understand and engage with the young people in their care, thus enhancing the young person's support system and their ability to develop a positive identity and sense of self.

Like Sharing Stories, the Life Story Project is a holistic life story service that recognises the unique needs of each young person and the fundamental importance of both information and communication in the identity development of care-experienced young people.

Birth Connections (St Francis' Children's Society)

Birth parent support is not traditionally considered to be life story work, but it is certainly critical to broader lifelong identity work for adopted children. As Neil et al. found[20], actively reflecting upon feelings about adoption is critical for adopted children to develop a positive sense of identity, and the reflective process is affected by a child's relationship or contact with their birth family. If birth family members are not able to engage constructively in direct or indirect contact, it can exacerbate the sense of loss that adopted people experience; conversely, high-quality contact with birth relatives can greatly support adoptive people in resolving or accepting feelings of grief and loss[21].

St Francis' Children's Society has therefore developed the Birth Connections[22] services to support birth parents at every step of their journey. The service provides:

- Advice and support with communication as birth relatives navigate their relationships with local authorities and other professionals
- Practical and emotional support for the final contact with a child who is going to be adopted
- One-to-one counselling sessions to help birth relatives process grief and loss
- Support groups for birth mothers, which can be attended alongside or following one-to-one sessions
- Support to meet the child's adoptive parents, which can help birth parents find comfort and also support adoptive parents during life story conversations with the child
- Drop-in help and emotional support for birth parents to write letters for indirect contact, provided in collaboration with the relevant local authority

Birth parents will always be a critical relationship in adopted children's lives, even if they do not have any contact at all with their children. Losing a child to adoption is often described as 'disenfranchised grief,' meaning grief that 'cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned'[23]. Providing emotional and therapeutic support, advice and information, and sometimes simply a listening and non-judgmental ear can go a long way towards helping birth relatives to resolve their grief and constructively engage with their adopted child, even if only from a distance.

[20] Neil, E., Beek, M., and Ward, E. (2013). 'Contact after adoption: A follow up in late adolescence'. Available at: https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/50763/1/Neil_et_al_2013_contact_after_adoption_full_report.pdf
[21] Grotevant, H., McRoy, R., Wrobel, G., and Ayers-Lopez, S. (2013). 'Contact Between Adoptive and Birth Families: Perspectives from the Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project', *Child Development Perspectives,* 7(3), pp. 193–198. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3743089/
[22] https://www.sfcs.org.uk/birth-connections/
[23] Thompson, N., and Doka, K. (2017). 'Disenfranchised Grief.' In: Thompson, N., and Cox, G., eds., *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief, and Bereavement*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Birth relative counselling (Adoptionplus)

Adoptionplus has provided counselling to birth relatives, including parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, since 2004[24]. The service is based on flexibility and compassion, which are evident in its design. In recognition of the mistreatment that many birth relatives feel they have experienced at the hands of professionals and the difficulties they encounter in the adoption system, people who are referred to the service can take it up at any point later on, and are offered a call-back if they do not feel ready to access counselling at the time they are referred. Those who do receive counselling can dip in and out without losing their access to the service and are offered proactive support to encourage attendance. There is also an option to access longer-term counselling and to contact the service at any time, even years after the initial referral.

Broadly, the goal of the service is to enable birth relatives to live in the present by accepting the past. This involves helping people to manage pain, anger, and grief, and giving them the necessary time and space to work out how to live with 'the hole that has been left within each birth mum or dad (with its enormity and complexity).' In a 2019 evaluation of Adoptionplus's birth relative counselling service[25], academics at Hertfordshire University found that the trauma-informed and relationship-based approach provided 'a rare and powerful experience' for many of the almost 1,000 birth relatives who have benefited from the service thus far.

Adopter Hub (PACT)

Although not specifically focussed on identity and life story work, PACT's Adopter Hub provides a wealth of digitally accessible resources for adopters, special guardians, educators, and other professionals, including webinars, videos, and eLearning modules that can be followed at one's own pace. For example, a webinar on identity in transracial adoptions, presented by an adopted adult with lived experience, aims to help adopters consider the specific needs of their adopted children of a different race, and how those needs might change as the child grows.

Therapeutic life story work

- Family Futures
- Adoptionplus
- Adoption Focus

Access to records, intermediary work, and/or support for birth relatives

- St Francis' Children's Society
- Nugent Care
- Together for Children
- Birmingham Children's Trust
- Caritas Care
- Adoption Matters – for adopted adults and birth relatives
- Barnardo's – for adopted adults and birth relatives in Kent, and for former Barnardo's children
- Intercountry Adoption Centre (IAC) – for adopted adults and birth relatives

[24] http://adoptionplus.co.uk/relative-counselling
[25] Alper, J. ed, (2019). *Supporting Birth Parents Whose Children Have Been Adopted*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Faith in Families
- Families for Children – for adopted adults and birth relatives
- PAC-UK – for adopted adults and birth parents
- St Margaret's
- Scottish Adoption – for adopted adults and birth relatives

5. Implications for VAAs

Society has come a very long way from the time when adoption was thought of as a 'blank slate' for a child. There is now clear recognition that **every adopted person has a right to understand their past and a need to integrate their history as their identity develops over time**. There is also a powerful and growing evidence base to demonstrate just how crucial positive identity development is to adopted people's wellbeing. VAAs have been key innovators in this space over the past few decades, advocating for the importance of positive identity development and championing life story work in all of its forms.

Despite the evidence and the commitment of the voluntary sector, this is an area of work that is woefully underfunded across the UK, resulting in a dearth of services to support lifelong identity development. In many cases (especially when it comes to life story books) VAAs end up providing support that should rightly be undertaken by children's LAs or RAAs. They do this because they have the expertise and the commitment to children and families, and they often are not paid for it. The voluntary sector is therefore subsidising a significant proportion of a statutory duty.

Birth relative counselling

One area that should be of particular concern is independent counselling for birth relatives. According to the National Minimum Standards (which apply to England), a guiding value in the adoption system is that 'adoption is an evolving life-long process for all those involved - adopted adults, and birth and adoptive relatives.' Furthermore, standard 12.6 states the expectation that 'birth parents are helped to work through their concerns through the counselling they receive.' However, **we know that many birth parents (and other birth relatives) do not have access to high-quality, independent counselling**. Along with, or perhaps even more than, adopted children and adults, birth relatives often receive less than the statutory bare minimum of support.

Many VAAs do not provide these specialist services because there is simply no funding for them. This is an unfortunate underutilisation of the voluntary sector's skills and a real disservice to birth relatives, who will have experienced one of the most draconian interventions that the state can undertake. Until both local and national governments acknowledge and appropriately resource their duty to support birth relatives, the lack of voluntary sector work in this area will persist.

Adopted adults

Similarly, **the needs and rights of adopted adults are often neglected despite a statutory obligation to provide services.** Many VAAs provide support and access to records for people who were adopted through their agency, but most of these do not have the capacity to provide this service for adults with no connection to the agency. Furthermore, VAAs and adoption support agencies who provide access to records have been known to experience delays of 12 months or more in receiving a response from the agency where the child was in care. Despite the seemingly straightforward right of adopted adults to receive their adoption records and apply for information that will help them find their birth family, in actuality adopted adults are often faced with a bureaucratic process that can at times feel adversarial.

Across the board, **lifelong identity work would benefit greatly from improved collaborative working and clear commissioning relationships**. LAs and RAAs should be clear on whether they have the resources and expertise to provide statutory services such as life story books and independent

birth parent counselling; if not, they should commission these on a full cost recovery basis from a VAA or adoption support agency (ASA). Additionally, VAAs should take opportunities to be proactive in raising with senior managers the importance of life story books and information before children are placed. Ensuring visibility of these issues for every child placed may support longer-term practice change and a renewed emphasis on the importance of life story work.

Beyond statutory services, there is some **clear evidence on what works in supporting adopted children to develop positive and coherent identities**. Agencies may want to consider the following:

- Open and honest communication from adoptive parents lets children know that there is a safe space for them to bring up their questions and concerns. Adopters may need further support and/or training, starting with preparation groups, to empower them to have open and constructive conversations about the past with their children, and to understand that their children will be developing and exploring their adoptive identities throughout their lives.

- Much can change for adopted children and young people as they grow, including their level in interest in exploring the past and reflecting upon their sense of self. Adopters should have access to post-adoption training and peer support at different stages of their children's development to address issues of lifelong identity and build their confidence in supporting their children in this area.

- Some families will only need a bit of extra support or information. Easily accessible resources, such as videos, online workbooks, and podcasts, can both provide parents with ideas for conversations and activities, and help children work through questions or concerns.

- Adolescence has been shown to be a particularly complex stage of identity development, and adopted teenagers may value support in this area from both peers (e.g. in teen groups or therapeutic camps) and professionals.

- Creating child-led opportunities to treasure and revisit objects and stories (such as through trove or ARCBOX) can encourage children to reflect upon and integrate their pasts into their understanding of themselves.

- Rather than focussing on whether contact does or does not take place, agencies should work to ensure that contact is informed by the needs of the child. Where contact is having a negative effect on the child, the complexities of the relationship between adopted children and their birth families must be acknowledged and alternatives for nurturing this relationship without contact should be considered.

- Good wellbeing may influence adopted people's ability to reflect upon their histories and develop a positive sense of self, and poor wellbeing may inhibit this process.

- Services that go well beyond the statutory minimum, such as Adoptionplus's birth relative counselling or many agencies' 'access to records' services, demonstrate that it is possible to provide trauma-informed, life-changing support to birth relatives and adopted adults.

- Whilst a quick online search turns up many one-off training opportunities on life story work for social work practitioners, there is a lack of universal education in both this area and in issues of lifelong identity more broadly. On numerous occasions, the research cited in this briefing noted that life story work (especially life story books) had not been done because children's social workers did not have the requisite skills or experience. The voluntary adoption sector and CVAA should consider what more can be done to improve universal basic skills and training in issues of lifelong identity.

- There is currently a dearth of data regarding the extent to which siblings are adopted together, and minimal research into the outcomes for siblings who are placed either with or apart from one another. There is also little information on the scale of sibling contact (i.e. when siblings are living in different settings) and its effect on children's identities and outcomes. The ASGLB data, for example, does not link siblings, but merely records whether an individual child will be or has been placed as part of a sibling group.

Despite the rich and growing evidence base on identity development in adopted people, there are few drivers in the adoption system to holistically support this on a lifelong basis. VAAs have always taken a creative and child-centred approach to service development, and may wish to consult the research and case studies discussed in this briefing as they consider what more can be done to improve lifelong outcomes and identity development for adopted people in an environment of constrained resources.

6. Suggested reading – identity and transracial/international adoption

This briefing has not touched upon the many nuanced issues of identity development for children who are adopted by parents of a different race or nationality. Whilst much of the evidence discussed above is relevant in transracial and international adoptions, there are particular issues of visibility, heritage, and culture that play into children's identity development where their parents look different to them or come from a different cultural background. These issues should rightly be explored in a separate briefing, rather than being compressed into one section here.

For now, the suggested reading below provides a starting point for those wishing to further explore questions of identity in transracial and/or international adoptions.

- *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir* by Nicole Chung (2018)
- *In Their Voices: Black Americans on Transracial Adoption* by Rhonda M. Roorda (2015)
- *In search of belonging: Reflections by transracially adopted people* edited by Perlita Harris (2006)
- *Red Dust Road* by Jackie Kay (2017)
- *See No Color* by Shannon Gibney (2020)

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