

My People

The vision for a new network and hub to support children's lifelong relationships.

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About Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs)

VAAs are independent, not-for-profit organisations delivering adoption services. They offer a specialised and personalised service to adopters from all backgrounds.

VAAs work in partnership with local authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) across the whole of the UK to find families for children in care who are on legal adoption plans and unable to stay with their birth relatives.

About CVAA

The voluntary adoption sector came together to form CVAA in 1992, in order to strengthen agencies' collective voice and to define an arrangement for the interagency fee. For 30 years we have supported member agencies, advocated on their behalf and provided a forum for networking, practice-sharing and collaboration.

Our vision is for adopted children, young people and adults to lead happy fulfilling lives in loving families supported by a strong voluntary adoption sector.

1. Executive Summary

“Contact is like searching for an identity. I just feel like that’s a big thing”
Tegan, adopted young person

In this paper, the CVAA and its members present their vision for ‘My People’, a new network and hub, that would generate cross-sector collaboration, to consolidate, expand and sustain work being done in adoption services to strengthen the experiences of children after they are adopted. Specifically, My People is dedicated to preserving children’s lifelong connections with their birth families and other key people in their lives. The network would comprise of existing organisations but provide direction, co-ordination and, crucially, sustained impact on the lives of adopted children. The hub would collate all the current resources, making them more accessible to all who need them, as well as innovate and develop new ones.

The evidence for children maintaining positive and meaningful, lasting relationships with the birth families they have been separated from, as well as other significant people in their early lives, has grown and strengthened. This is true across the spectrum, for children in care as much as those who have been adopted, as evidenced in the recently published good practice guide by CVAA member Family Futures. The latest studies also show that high-quality contact (we still use this term as it is currently widely understood and used in regulations) is closely linked with children’s ability to make sense of their own personal stories and the whole of their emerging identities, and to develop a sense of understanding about who they are and what they have experienced. Yet, across the entire care system, practice is lagging far behind what the latest evidence is saying, despite the will from many families and practitioners to modernise and improve how children remain connected with their families of origin. This is detrimental to children’s overall mental health. To support the required change, we propose not only more active collaboration across the sector but the development of a new model for how services are delivered. Experience has shown that without strategy and resources, services that are delivered locally are often not sustainable, so contact plans fail.

CVAA therefore propose the creation of this ‘new’ network, with a dedicated web-hosted hub, and a clear vision for change to help ensure that every child adopted in England has the opportunity to maintain significant relationships. The cross-sector network would bring to life the recommendations made by multiple studies and independent reviews into children’s social care, which have repeatedly called for more attention to promoting children’s lifelong relationships, as well as active partnerships with children and families to design the structures of support around them. The hub, providing better resources and coordinated support will enable many more children and young people to live fulfilling and contented lives, rooted in understanding of themselves and their cultural identities, and defined by stability.

This paper makes the case for this new approach, initially focused on supporting the connections of children placed for adoption in England, with the aspiration that it could be expanded to all care-experienced children across the UK.

The My People proposal has four core goals:

1. **Hosting** an online resource for making practical information on supporting children's lifelong relationships easily available for children, their carers, and families – realising the rights and aspirations of care experienced people and creating efficiencies for local authorities and adoption agencies which would no longer have to duplicate these resources. The hub would be backed up by an experienced practitioner acting as co-ordinator to manage, assess and signpost enquiries.
2. **Developing** knowledge and expertise among professionals, through the network being maintained as an up-to-date central source of guidance, research and best practice relating to preserving and promoting children's connections at each stage of their development.
3. **Evolving** cultures and entrenched ways of thinking about contact and connections by working closely with practitioners across the sector to pool resources, reassess ideas and explore barriers which may be obstructing progress. Additionally, by drawing upon the newly created support network of 'connection champions' the network would spark new thinking and expertise among leaders in workforces to take back and embed into their local organisations and services.
4. **Co-ordinating** delivery at local level with VAAs and RAAs and gathering data to understand the structure of support services today, to inform an insight-driven strategy for funding support services tomorrow. Mapping where support for families is most needed, and in what form, to ensure that all children and families are treated with equity wherever they live and have equal access to flexible support.

VAAs have often worked with children where contact plans did not work due to lack of support and monitoring. Whilst there is now extensive focus being put on contact by Adoption England and RAA leaders, there remains a question about how new services will be delivered, and by whom. My People would bring collaboration and clarity to the complex work surrounding contact to assist organisations in bringing together relationship work, therapy and life story information into a coherent support framework. By having the right people from across the sector involved, My People will inform the strategy for what relationship support should look like across the country and develop national standards. Potentially though, investment in high quality services is the most fundamental change of all. We know what adopted children need to be able to maintain relationships and develop positive, whole identities, as well as good mental health.

Now is the time to act. The evidence base is there. Momentum is building in policy and practice, and adoptive parents have also increasingly developed an understanding that supporting connections is an integral part of their role. Crucially, 'adoptee voices' are repeatedly telling us that the experiences of children and young people separated from parents, brothers and sisters, as well as others significant to them, continues to have a detrimental effect on their lives as adults. This can deprive them of the ability to thrive and achieve their potential as adults, which is the exact opposite of the reasons why the care system intervenes in the lives of vulnerable children in the first place. Our investment in children's lives, and our aspirations for them are still falling short of what is possible and what is needed.

Improvements will require increased funding to be committed to this specialised and important work, so we therefore collectively now call on the government to support the sector to move from pockets of brilliant work into a cohesive strategy and structure for contact and to create a dedicated fund to support this which delivers for every child, regardless of where they live. Only by threading together all the elements of supporting people through this journey can we truly make maintaining meaningful lifelong relationships the norm for all care-experienced children.

My People Cheat Sheet

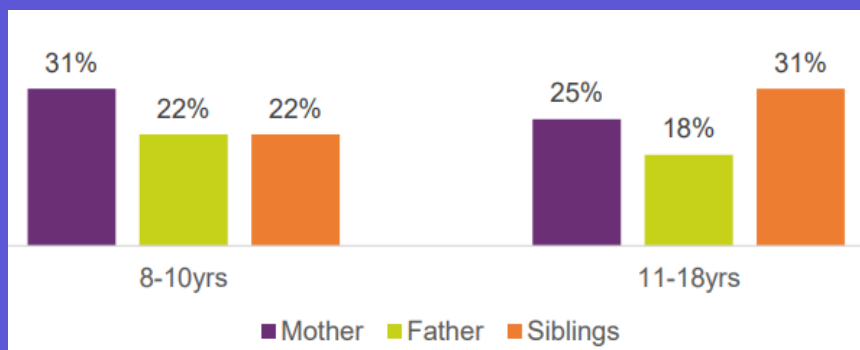
What is My People?	My People is the working name for a new network and hub solely dedicated to maintaining and supporting the relationships of adopted children, with their birth families and other significant people in their lives. We hope that children and young people will decide the final name for the initiative.
What will it do?	<p>My People will develop and offer four things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A website hub and helpline offering advice, guidance, resources and support for adopted children and families. • A new network for all professionals involved in this aspect of children's lives, bringing together expertise and delivery capacity across the sector. • A space for cultural changes and shifts to better meet the needs of adoptees through education about contact and its value. • A data and insight function, to map out regional variation in support services, to guide future investment.
Who will it support?	The network and hub will initially be for all adopted children, adoptees, adopters and professionals. Dependent upon funding the network would be run by a social work trained coordinator who would assess and evaluate referrals for support and work with local VAAs, RAAs and other professionals for the delivery of services. Phase 1 would be for children being adopted from the go live date of the service. Phase 2 would be for children already adopted but three years or more post adoption order. Phase 3 would be for any adult adoptees aged 18 and over not receiving support.
How will it help local authorities and other care providers, agencies and services?	My People will support local services with resources to empower practitioners in their decision-making and be a place families can be signposted to for information. By working collaboratively, the capacity to deliver services via RAAs/VAAs or LAs will be significantly improved. It will promote the sharing of new ideas and ways of working across regions, to move away from 'stuck' thinking and promote creativity. Importantly, it will lay the groundwork and build the case for future funding, recognising the benefits of multi-disciplinary assessments pre and post adoption order and flexible evolving and funded therapeutic input.
Will it deliver contact or life story services?	It will not directly deliver any services to children and families beyond the advice and guidance offered but it will work with local delivery partners, and it will map out where investment in local services is most needed, and of what type, particularly for therapeutic support. This mapping would be shared with governments to inform funding decisions.
Who will run it?	My People will be most successful if it is run by an existing structure or organisation/s within the sphere of children's social care, i.e., Adoption England, CVAA, with experience of delivering strategies and access to workforce capacity across the country. We envisage a cross-sector collaboration.
What area will it cover?	My People would launch in England with the flexibility for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to develop the model and customise it, depending on which elements devolved governments decide would best fit with their systems.
How will it be funded?	We would hope that the initial costs of establishing the service could be funded by the government with additional elements of funding from external grants. Depending on the final model, subsequent running costs could be shared across RAAs/LAs, with match funding, via a funding formula which takes into consideration the number of children LAs have in their care and adopted.

2. Maintaining relationships - where are we now?

The expectation of contact for children in care is grounded in the Children Act 1989 which outlines the duties on local authorities to promote contact, unless this is not safe or good for the child. Yet in practice, there is a very mixed picture when it comes to the frequency and nature of contact arrangements. The most recent study on contact found that many children and young people are unhappy with how often they see their families – for example, nearly a third of children (8-10yrs) and a quarter of young people (11-18yrs) felt they were not seeing their birth mothers enough (Coram Voice and the Rees Centre, 2022). The graph below shows that significant proportions of children felt similarly about their time with birth fathers, brothers and sisters too. At the same time, there were also some children (2-3%) who wanted to spend less time with their birth families. The research concluded that children's *satisfaction* with how often they saw their families was the central factor affecting their wellbeing, rather than the frequency or amount of contact itself.

Later legislation has built on this such as the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and the 2014 Children and Families Act which inserted new sections into the Adoption and Children Act.

Graph 1: The proportion of children and young people who felt that they had too little contact with birth parents and siblings



Source: 'Staying Connected: The views of looked after children and young people on their contact arrangements', Coram Voice and the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford, 2022, page 15: figure 6.

The research exposed that differences in children's circumstances such as the local authority responsible for them, the number of placements they had had, and whether they were in residential care as opposed to foster/kinship care, were associated with different levels of satisfaction with the contact arrangements. Some children identified the distance they were living from their family as a barrier to quality contact. It also showed that children were affected by the format of the visit – factors such as the location, venue, timing, level of supervision, and range of available activities. Some young people for example did not like contact centres and wanted to be in more interesting larger spaces with more privacy. Once children are placed for adoption our preparation and support should empower adopters to understand and support the need for contact. My People would provide additional guidance and support as required post adoption order. As part of the development of My People it is essential that the views and input of children and young people are embedded throughout each stage utilising a range of methods including interviews, feedback, focus groups and evaluation.

The widespread dissatisfaction with contact arrangements among adopted children and young people is concerning. Right now, there is not enough evidence on which professionals can base their decisions about contact, leading to arbitrary contact plans, and the under-resourcing of contact means that too little work is going into exploring what is right for each child and making it happen. This includes supporting children to make sense of the contact they have, to avoid them feeling confusion about why a person or people who hurt them or scared them can continue to see them regularly. If contact is not right for a child and left unaddressed, it can leave children in limbo, not settling or able to form secure attachments. Longer term it can affect their identity formation, and we know that Black and other minoritized children can be disproportionately affected, particularly when placed transracially and separated from their communities.

Adoption, contact and the research

Since the early 1990s adoption has developed a more open approach to children and adults having access to information about their origins, both through the exchange of information during childhood and when they reach adulthood. Much of this has been prompted by a growing understanding of the negative impacts of closed adoptions on adopted children and birth families. In England, Wales and Scotland, this has typically taken the form of 'letterbox contact', involving children and birth families having the opportunity to exchange letters, usually once or twice a year, through the adoption agency acting as an intermediary.

In 2000, research found that more than 1 in 10 adopted children (11%) had no contact whatsoever with their birth families (Neil & Thoburn, 2000). The majority (81%) relied on letterbox contact to connect with family members, most commonly with birth mothers and/or maternal grandparents. Direct contact was only happening for a minority of children, and this was usually with brothers and sisters. Fewer than 1 in 10 children (9%) had a plan for direct contact with a birth parent.

Fast-forwarding to the present day, letterbox contact remains the status quo for many adopted children. Adoption UK's 2023 Adoption Barometer found that 98% of adoptive parents surveyed had at least one agreement in place for indirect contact with their child or children's birth family members, and this was more common in England and Wales than in Scotland. The overwhelming majority (97%) of new adopters were willing to meet their child/children's birth family members although many noted that there were barriers to this in practice including social workers advising against direct contact or birth relatives being against it. As a result, the Barometer shows only around a third of adoptive families had met their child/children's birth mother and just 15% had met their birth father.

The 2019 Wales Adoption Cohort Study found that four years post placement, half of children adopted were not in any contact with birth siblings (Meakings et al., 2019). Direct contact has also been slow to advance over the last 20 years – in 2021, the Barometer found that just over a fifth (22%) of adopters had participated in direct contact with a family member during 2020.

However, in the last few years the Barometer has seen a significant increase and almost half of adoptive families had at least one agreement in place for direct contact in the latest survey.

The Barometer has, however, consistently shown that high numbers of birth family members (and a significant proportion of adoptive families) stop participating in planned arrangements over time, and indirect arrangements are more likely to lapse as children grow older. We believe the lack of support and easily accessible resources is partly responsible for this.

Meanwhile research from Pause (2021) found that nearly three quarters of adoptive families and women working with the charity had never had their letterbox contact reviewed. It is also common for older children to take matters into their own hands by seeking out direct contact themselves when they become a teenager. Around a quarter 13-18-year-olds had direct contact with a birth family member outside of any formal agreement in 2020, and half the time this contact was initiated without adoptive parents' involvement. These are not indicators of a system which is working well. Ad hoc and letterbox arrangements are not suitable in today's digital world where any young person can make their own unsupported and potentially risky connections.

Making sense of relationships

Along with seeing and communicating with birth families, life story work is widely viewed as a crucial part of helping children make sense of their relationships, for all children in care. This work involves a range of activities to help a child explore their history and heritage, often based on life storybooks compiled by social workers, which are meant to restore a sense of children's past and the roles of others within this.

There is no available data outlining how many children receive support which fits this description, however there are indications that access to support varies across the country. In a small survey conducted by Coram and The Hadley Centre at Bristol University in 2015 (Watson et al.), a third of adopters rated their children's life storybooks as 'terrible' and the latest Adoption Barometer (2023) found only 52% of respondents had received their child's life story book (or equivalent) by the end of the year in which they obtained the adoption order. The quality and variability of these books, combined with their limitations when dealing with children who are profoundly traumatised, casts doubt on the current life story book process and underscores the importance of therapeutic work which explores the complexity of a child's history appropriate to their developmental stage. Family Futures [research](#) (2019) on therapeutic life story work and holistic therapeutic support found that there were demonstrable benefits on relationships for adopted children who received this support when compared with those who did not.

Furthermore, 2018 research from Coram Voice and the University of Bristol discovered that nearly half of 4-7 year-olds, and a third of 8-11 year-olds do not fully understand why they are in care. It found that a significant proportion of older children (18%) had poor well-being and as part of this lacked positive relationships with trusted adults in their lives.

The fact that so many children do not know why this major life event took place – one with huge implications for them – illustrates a shocking void in children's development and the help that is given to them to understand their histories. It suggests that there will be many more unanswered questions children hold onto, with the potential to build into deeper confusion and self-doubt as years progress.



3. Connection and children's identity development

A growing body of evidence tells us about the importance of children having sustained relationships with birth families and other key people when they live away from their home of origin, so that children can gain a sense of continuity and connectedness between the past and present and develop a fuller sense of identity.

A number of studies have confirmed this link between connection and identity in adoption, notably Neil et al. in 2013 whose influential research found that that over three quarters of adopted young people with 'cohesive identities' – defined by those at ease with their adoption stories – had been in touch with someone in their birth family in the previous year, whereas the majority of those in other identity groups (unexplored, fragmented and developing) had had no connection with any birth relatives.

The study also revealed the significance of adopter 'communicative openness', defined as a willingness to explore adoption related issues within the context of family life, and acknowledge and support children's dual connection to two families. It found that most young people with cohesive and developing identities were being cared for by highly communicatively open adopters, therefore had space and a degree of support with exploring this aspect of their lives and identities. Neil's 2007 research also tells us that adoptive parents involved in face-to-face contact arrangements were found to be more communicatively open than parents involved in letterbox contact, which could suggest that communicative openness is promoted by more open contact arrangements (Neil, 2009).

Furthermore, beyond the benefits of reaching understanding about one's identity, children have much to gain from simply having relationships and enjoying time with people that matter to them and avoiding the unnecessary loss of these people from their lives.

Risk

While the literature promotes the pursuit of these long-term advantages through contact, it also notes that sometimes it is not possible or good for children, such as in cases where this would destabilise relationships rather than strengthen them or retraumatise a child. For some children, contact could be too dangerous or bring too great a risk of further harm. Where relatives have abused a child, particular support is needed to manage arrangements if contact is determined to be in children's best interests.

Contact can risk further harm: Molly was living with a foster family and continuing to have face-to-face contact with her father. During meet-ups with her father, he would repeatedly drum his fingers on the table. Molly was being closely supported by her therapist and social workers at that time, and later disclosed that her father used to do this before abusing her, therefore was giving her a message during the contact without the professionals being aware. Examples like this demonstrate why maintaining relationships with abusive relatives needs to be carefully assessed, planned and monitored to avoid additional harm being caused – and why children need a strong network of support around them. It also supports the case for professional involvement and need for regular reviews, as in this case.

Research also warns that efforts should not necessarily be abandoned when children exhibit a negative emotional response – contact can be upsetting however this does not necessarily mean it is bad for them (Barnett-Jones & Manning, 2021). Clearly the level of risk and emotional responses for each child will vary and some cases, like the example above, may mean that contact needs to cease. These are extremely complex judgments to make when assessing what is best for children overall and children themselves need to be supported with making and managing these decisions. After all, it is their lives we are focussed on.

For children in care, adoption and special guardianship placements, the principal message from research is that the process of forging these connections must be managed well to be successful and beneficial for children, and this is true regardless of the care arrangement. Iyer's review which took into consideration 49 studies concluded that:

*“The key question is not whether or how much contact has a positive impact on children and young people’s well-being, but how best to facilitate positive experiences and the meaningful involvement of the people who matter to the child ... the evidence shows that well-facilitated contact is associated with positive well-being outcomes for children and young people in both the short and long term. Conversely, poorly managed contact is associated with risks to children and young people’s well-being. **Support for everyone involved in contact—children, carers, adoptive parents and birth relatives—is key, and depends on the investment of time and resources.**” (Iyer et al., 2020).*

What is important is that efforts are funnelled towards best ascertaining what type and level of connection is best for each individual child, based on listening to what children want if they are old enough to articulate this. Families then must be helped as far as possible to make this happen well, with room for adapting plans over time. Without this support, children can be retraumatised and prevented from feeling safe, risking a turbulent adolescence and mental health problems later down the line. For other children the absence of support will result in no contact, therefore no opportunity to develop valuable relationships and gain more understanding about who they are.

Why act now?

We can be encouraged by signs that thinking is already shifting. The latest Adoption Barometer found that over 70% of prospective adopters would be open to establishing direct contact as long as it is deemed to be safe, with only 1 in 10 prospective adopters saying that they would not consider future direct contact with a birth family member. The 2022 Barometer also found that 70% of prospective adopters believed that direct contact should be normal as long as it is deemed safe. Considering that in 2019, 35% of new adoptive parents said they were unlikely to consider any future direct contact, this is a gigantic percentage change within the space of 2 years, which may be reflecting the growing attention given to contact in adoption assessments and training, which is filtering down to prospective and new adopters.

Policy debate and discourse is also increasingly reflecting the growing importance of contact. The recent Independent Review of Children’s Social Care in England set out that the central purpose of care should be to support and strengthen lifelong relationships. This follows Scotland’s review and the development of The Promise which urged that children are better helped to understand their birth identity and maintain relationships that are important to them, and the development of good practice standards on contact in Wales. A report from the Public Law Working Group currently being consulted on also focuses heavily on strengthening contact plans, arrangement and delivery from the earliest stages of care planning. These evolutions in both the public and policy landscape make the timing right for an overarching service to spearhead transformation for the benefit of children and their families, underpinned by proper assessment and facilitation of these connections.



Connection Stories

Adopters as connection advocates:

Adopter Rachel was already helping her daughter Poppy to continue seeing her brother living elsewhere, when she learned of the death of Poppy's birth mother. Seeing how difficult this loss was for Poppy and how important the connection with her brother was for her, she decided to explore other relationships with Poppy's birth family members. She felt it would be positive for Poppy to have a stronger link with her younger sister and grandparents who are kinship carers for her, especially because Rachel has a small family herself. After discussions with Poppy's social worker and adoption agency, Poppy is now meeting with them regularly, as well as having communication over the phone. Rachel now views them as part of the family. Poppy has benefited enormously from being in touch with them and loves being able to talk about her grandparents at school, and sometimes have them collect her from school, like the other children in her year.

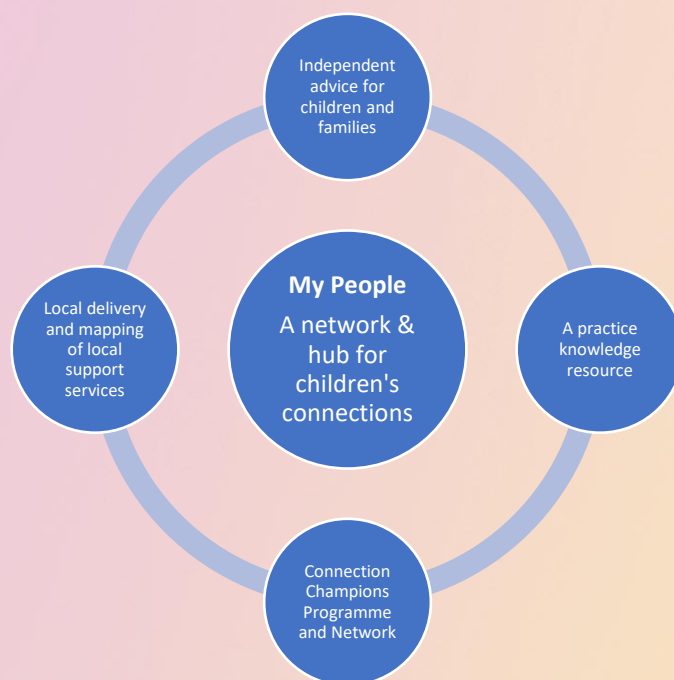
Steering clear of presumptions

Jake is the youngest of 5 siblings who were all adopted. He was adopted at such a young age that he had no memory of his birth family. For this reason, no plan was drawn up for Jake to stay in touch with his birth family. However, as Jake grew up, the practitioners supporting Jake and his family saw that Jake needed to build a relationship with his birth parents just as much – if not more so – than his siblings, because he had never had this opportunity to know them. This work was incredibly important for Jake to overcome his hurt and anger at the gap in his life story. This story shows the need to move away from blanket rules and assumptions around what relationships are important, and to make sure the needs and wishes of the child are central to decision making.

The power of video – and thinking ahead

Family Futures, CVAA member, and an adoption and fostering agency specialised in treatments for children who are traumatised or have attachment difficulties, does video interviews of people who were key to the child. This includes birth parents, former foster carers, and social workers. These interviews are done when a child is placed with an adoptive family, so that there is an archive of videos for later use in life story work. The agency finds that this is often a good step towards maintaining those relationships and facilitating contact in the future.

4. Core features of My People



4.1 Independent advice for children and families

“I wish that this had been around before, like when I needed it. I feel like it could help a lot of people.” – Ella, adopted young person

A primary function of My People would be to provide a central source of advice in the form of a dedicated website and helpline for children, adults and families. This plan recognises the complexity of contact and the different purposes it can serve for children in temporary care, such as assessment and facilitating reunification, as opposed to more permanent forms of care which families are largely left to manage themselves without the involvement of children’s services teams.

Currently good quality advice and support is variable for care-experienced people and their birth families, and even when it does exist (either online or offline) it can be hard to find and access. Adopted young people who CVAA consulted with said that they could not find any useful and relatable information about contact or identity when they had tried to find it at an earlier age. They described these as “big subjects no one ever speaks about”, which result in “Chinese whispers” and young people “going round in circles”. One summarised perfectly that without any information online for young people, there’s a danger of thinking “I don’t know who can help me with this, I’m just gonna do it myself”. A 2022 briefing by the University of East Anglia and PAC-UK on the views of adopted adults also noted that advice on making and managing contact, as well as peer advice, would be beneficial.

Some charities do fill this space by providing much-needed information and resources to the communities they serve, such as Become's advice service for children in care and Family Rights Group's advice service for parents. However, charity advice services naturally have to ensure that a broad range of topics are covered, rather than covering one single issue in much greater depth.

Dedicated websites for young people and their families will make it easier for families to find advice which has been designed specifically for them, making them more likely to use and engage with the content. This is something young people told us was important. Bespoke websites containing rich information also bring the advantage of taking a burden off public bodies to build and maintain their own resources. In addition to practical information, the sites for adults would share up to date research findings about the benefits of contact for all family members and carers. For example, in adoption, on-going connection has been known to mitigate the loss felt by birth parents to some extent, despite still being immensely difficult (Neil et al., 2013). It can also enable adoptive parents to find out more about their child's background to assist their child with this aspect of their identity and help them manage anxieties about birth parents re-entering children's lives via social media. Adopters may also find reassurance, for example, to learn that face-to-face contact, even on a frequent basis, has not been found to negatively impact the relationship between the adoptive parents and the child (Neil & Thoburn, 2000).

The benefits of independence

It is also the case that many vulnerable groups have complicated relationships with the LA services which are responsible for removing children from their families. Multiple studies (e.g. Featherstone et al., 2014) have reported on the poor quality of these relationships and the lack of compassion parents feel they have received, making it unlikely that statutory organisations would be their first port of call for help. There are great advantages therefore to consider the positioning of advice and support for families independently from statutory agencies to encourage greater take-up of support and a better grounding for successful working relationships which continue over time. Independence does not mean unsupported however, so the need for funding and resources remains paramount.

Co-design of the website with children and families will be essential to ensure that is truly user-led and widely accessible. Early discussions indicate support for the following elements:



Key features

<p>A website with three dedicated spaces for children & young people, birth family members and adopters</p> <p>Comprehensive, easy to access website packed with resources which has been specifically designed and curated for each audience</p>	<p>The space for adopted children & young people would explore themes such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advice for young people who have been contacted by birth families via social media, or who are considering making contact themselves, suggestions for young about how to initiate conversations about contact with adoptive parents if this is not happening, contributions from other young people relating to identity, in all forms - stories, poems, art etc. <p>The space for birth family members would include themes such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tips for preparing for direct contact or writing letters to children, such as resources developed by the Threads of Connection Initiative, an overview of the legal rights of birth families in relation to seeing their children <p>The space for adopter would explore themes such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tips for preparing for direct contact, such as the Fostering Network's Fostering Community Champions in Scotland's tips for foster carers, ideas for initiating conversations about identity and birth families with children and young people, advice about how to work with adoption agencies on changing contact arrangements as a child grows older.
<p>Real life stories and case studies</p>	<p>Websites would contain real life stories and case studies of children, young people, carers and birth families, highlighting positive and creative examples of contact and life story work. This would be an extension of work already happening locally, for example, of having established carers /adopters come in to speak to prospective carers/adopters about contact during information events or training sessions.</p>
<p>Phone and webchat helplines</p> <p>Phone and online helpline services for children, young people and families with questions or issues about maintaining relationships</p>	<p>Phone and webchat helplines would provide general advice, signposting to helpful resources, and connecting people with local support services. Helplines would liaise with statutory and independent organisations across the country to locate records on behalf of families, as well as signposting to services which support people with accessing records. We would also need to be sure the right medium was utilised for the right groups; i.e., Tik-Tok, Instagram; Snapchat and others may all have a place.</p> <p>These services would be most helpful for cases which are some time post adoption order and where there may be a lack of access to support and services when they are required.</p>
<p>Online peer support forums, including social media</p>	<p>Online peer support forums would be available for different groups, where those with similar experiences can connect and support each other (N.B. this would be surrounded by stringent safety and security features for safeguarding and confidentiality purposes).</p>
<p>Signposting</p>	<p>There would be information about local support available for children and families, such as peer groups and intermediary services, as well as details about eligibility criteria for different support funds available.</p>

4.2 A practice knowledge resource

My People would also be a central source of advice, guidance and research around family connections for professionals, as these essential resources are either missing at present or hard to find. Social workers across the system need evidence and practical tools at their fingertips to make robust decisions about contact plans, and to analyse and develop bespoke arrangements based on the individual circumstances of each child. This was a key recommendation from the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory in 2021, which said “it is critical for professionals involved with contact plans to be as informed as possible about research evidence on contact and children’s needs from a developmental perspective”. In the same way that the Family Hubs Network has been established to compile and spread the word about effective approaches to family support, so too would My People bring together all the vital information relating to children’s lifelong connections enabling professionals to build expertise and confidence.

The current knowledge gap

A consistent theme raised by practitioners is that there is limited guidance for social workers when it comes to matters of contact/connections. There is also little attention given to this subject in social work education and training programmes, and few tools and resources to assist social workers in their decision-making around contact planning, let alone those which have been properly evaluated. This has resulted in wide variation in knowledge and practice across the country, and inconsistent or ‘copy and paste’ plans for how children connect with their families. It is essential that this knowledge gap is filled, particularly for those involved in decision making and care planning.

These challenges are of course compounded by several factors. First, the huge demands on social workers’ time and capacity, which inhibits creative thinking around contact and the ability to invest time into planning as well as facilitating contact. Second, staff churn is high within the children’s social care workforce, resulting in expertise and relationships being lost when people move on. Additionally, in adoption specifically, expertise among care planning social workers in English LAs has diminished as a result of the government’s regionalisation strategy, which shifted expertise out of children’s social care teams and into regional adoption agencies (RAAs). However, these are the practitioners responsible for formulating contact plans and presenting these to court. We believe there is therefore a direct correlation between this lack of skills, knowledge, capacity and confidence and often poorly designed and executed contact plans.

The support available to practitioners needs to reflect the complexity of the research and therefore the skill required to make extremely sophisticated decisions. One good example here is around navigating the balance between direct and indirect contact. The available research does not suggest that one type of contact is necessarily easier or better than another (Neil et al., 2013). However, adoption studies have found that direct (face to face) contact arrangements tend to be more enduring than indirect arrangements (such as letterbox) and contribute to greater ‘adoption communication openness’ between adoptive parents and children (Neil, 2009).

Moreover, indirect arrangements are often more complex for families than direct ones – the challenges of letterbox contact have become increasingly well-publicised – despite families and professionals often being more worried about managing in-person meet-ups. Social workers need to be conversant of this context and the evidence base when making decisions and helping carers/adopters make decisions, especially if direct contact in adoption is to become the ‘default’ in England, as recommended by the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care. It has been a strong message from practitioners in Northern Ireland, where direct contact is much more common, that social workers need a better system of support around them to make this a success. Learning from other countries such as Australia is also relevant.

<p>A compendium of relevant research, legislation and guidance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining significant relationships, life story work, contact support, facilitation and supervision, identity development and transracial placements in care and adoption.
<p>Practice resources for social workers and other professionals involved in connection planning at all stage</p>	<p>The resource zone would bring together existing resources into one place, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The brilliant practice guide on contact from the National Adoption Service for Wales and AFA Cymru, contact planning tools developed by Elsbeth Neil at UEA published by Research in Practice and research by Queens University Belfast for Barnardo's on forming lasting relationships in foster care.
<p>Brand new tools and practice guidance for social workers developed in partnership with other experts such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)</p>	<p>These might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis tools and techniques for care planning social workers, to help with decisions about initial connection arrangements put forward in care plans. • Tools for working with families to ascertain what level or type of contact is best for them. Checklists for workers preparing to facilitate direct contact with families. • Techniques for assessing social workers to test and explore prospective carers' views around maintaining relationships. This should include guidance on assessing contact with brothers and sisters and how this should be approached. • Guidance on redacting care records in a way that ensures they retain their meaning, and how to support people through the sensitive experience of reading their files for the first time.
<p>Best practice examples from agencies leading change around modernising contact and life story work</p>	<p>This would include, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tips for engaging with care-experienced children and young people, drawn from best practice from Children in Care councils. • Life story services leading on therapeutic interventions to help children make sense of their pasts. • Guides on using video interviews and video exchange messages as part of therapeutic life story and facilitated contact work, as done by Family Futures. • Best practice on family group conferencing and contact. • Learning from international research and developments.
<p>Information for judges, IROs CAFCASS and other professionals within the courts</p>	<p>Such as case examples and research evidence relating to contact and the outcomes for children, to assist with decision-making around contact as well as dissemination of evidence and learning to senior judges.</p>
<p>Information about new and emerging digital technology solutions which families might benefit from</p>	<p>Such as ARCBOX, ARC Adoption NE's digital platform for life story work, which now includes a Communications App to manage a variety of contact arrangements including letterbox; the digital letterbox solution Letter Swap which is currently in pilot phase; and Nuffield's Digital Connections platform, a digital interface for creative interactions with birth families.</p>
<p>A calendar showing relevant events</p>	<p>Including training, conferences and networking events.</p>



4.3 Connection Champions programme and network

Along with improved guidance and more resources a profound culture shift is required across all organisations responsible for maintaining connections. To drive this forward, we see a key role for the network of Connection Champions who are currently being assembled by Adoption England and University of East Anglia.

The need to shift cultures

Boddy et al.'s 2013 study of contact across 4 countries found contact was 'insufficiently conceptualised or prioritised' in English social work practice, which was echoed by experts we consulted with, who advised that the unique purpose and intent behind maintaining a child's relationships is rarely examined outside of certain specialist services.

This is reinforced by the use of the word 'contact' to describe many different forms of facilitating connection between a child and their birth family, such as for the purpose of reuniting children in care with their families, and the purpose of helping adopted children gain an understanding of who they are. Using the same language to describe these very distinct objectives does nothing to help practitioners critically reflect on the support a child needs to extract meaning from a meeting or correspondence with family.

The language of contact also reinforces the view that keeping in touch with a family member is sufficient to meet children's needs; that the act of physically bringing two people together is enough to achieve a meaningful connection. The reality is that most children need much more than this. Presently, in many organisations, there are two different teams involved with facilitating family interactions and therapeutic relationship work, working separately. This is not by explicit design, and many regard this as counterintuitive since life story work is intrinsically relational. Conversely, we have heard powerful examples of what can be achieved when these two strands are brought together, and especially when children and families have been able to develop and agree a joint understanding of why they are no longer living together.

While there has been some change in attitudes within adoption in recent years, there still needs to be a fundamental shift in how professionals approach these connections for children and encourage carers to think about them too. We know that overly cautious approaches from practitioners can inadvertently be passed on to carers/adopters. In adoption, whilst attitudes have shifted significantly contact remains an uncomfortable idea for some adopters, and understandably so, given the many unknowns and valid fears it can raise - will it upset my child? Will it put them at risk? Will it disrupt our family life? There is much to learn from early permanence arrangements which have resulted in adopters appreciating the opportunity to get to know birth parents when children are fostered with them at an early age, prior to being adopted. Most adopters in a Coram study (Ponomarenko, et al., 2017/18) commented favourably on having this opportunity, showing that meeting birth families from the start of the process can illuminate the benefits for adopters.

The network

The Connections Champions programme will result in a network of professionals with shared expertise and ambitions across the country. Together with the My People team, professional network and care experienced people would be well-positioned to support new developments such as national standards around contact. Nothing of this nature exists at present yet clarity is sorely needed; it would be a sensible strand within the English care review's proposed National Children's Social Care Framework. The My People team could cascade this intelligence into other essential policies such as new statutory guidance around maintaining significant relationships, life story work, and writing multi-disciplinary assessments on matching which consider and make recommendations for contact arrangements; all areas which practitioners identified as priorities.

Lobbying for change

The hub, with the support of its professional network would also be in a good position to advise on and support changes in legislation, which could go further to support children's relationships. For example, Scotland is establishing new legal protections for siblings in care which include the right to time together, building on the existing presumption that brothers and sisters should live together unless there is good reason otherwise. This is learning that can be transferred across the UK. The Select Committee inquiry into the Children and Families Act 2014 also started an important conversation about this which will hopefully result in change. Finally, the Public Law Working Group interim recommendations also lean in the same direction of the My People proposals and offer.

Given the differences in legislation and practice across all nations of the UK – with Wales being further along in its journey to improve contact than other nations – a flexible approach and model will be key. Children are placed across borders so consistent good practice across all nations is necessary for equity and to avoid the creation of additional barriers for adopted people and their families.

CVAA's membership is across the UK and as partners to the statutory sector we are in a good position to make representations on behalf of adopted children and lobby for the changes required to regulations, practice and funding.

Stories from practice

In some RAAs, all prospective adopters are told that direct contact is the expectation, to be ruled out rather than ruled in. The message is patent: that on-going connection is part of the fabric of modern adoption and in the interests of everyone involved. It is understood that some adopters may need time to adjust to this reality, and have social workers to support them with this, but ultimately it is a vital part of the rounded care they will provide as a parent. At present though, the lack of consistency across the country, not only in messaging but also resources remains a concern. Support for contact plans is essential if they are to be delivered and continually evaluated. CVAA members are well placed to contribute to national standards around contact.

4.4 Mapping of local support services

The final piece of the My People puzzle is a data function with the ability to strategically map relevant services across the UK. This will be key to properly supporting vulnerable families who are looking to develop or deepen relationships with key people in their children's lives. We must stress though that in this mapping exercise it is essential that the wishes and views of children are also taken into account as to their experience of services before they are promoted as being suitable.

Existing support services

Research consistently holds that the quality and reliability of support is central to turning contact into a positive experience for children and families yet support services across the country are fragmented and insufficient. It is the sad reality that many of those working in the sector may already be on board with this journey and keen to drive forward evidenced based change, but do not have the resources to make it happen, especially for those children and families who require a high level of support from an experienced practitioner.

Some areas which need further attention are as follows:

- Preparation and contact facilitation support are crucial components for successful connection which remains underfunded. For contact to work well, there needs to be a shared understanding of the expectations and boundaries, which may need time and work to reach. This is especially true for Special Guardianship and Kinship Care where the boundaries with birth family members can be more blurred.
- Relationships cannot be successfully maintained without more investment in supporting birth families. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 confers duties on LAs to undertake assessments of need for adoption support services on behalf of adopted people, adoptive parents and birth parents, and provide assistance, including mediation services, where necessary yet there are very few LAs across the UK allocating sufficient resources to this work and legislation is interpreted very differently. Both the English and Scottish care reviews have noted this lack of support for parents, even when they have suffered the trauma of having multiple children taken from their care, leading the Scottish review to advocate for birth families having therapeutic support, advocacy and engagement in line with principles of intensive family support.
- Studies recommend that plans are tailored to each individual child and that children's wishes and views are taken into account (Iyer et al., 2000), yet this practice is not widespread. Too often, this means annual letterbox is the norm regardless of the needs of the child or children.
- They also stress the need for flexible plans which are reviewed on a regular basis, in response to challenges that arise and the changing circumstances and needs of those involved over time (see Nuffield 2020). Contact is part of a process and cannot be a 'one-off'. These plans also need to be adapted to the different developmental stages for a child. It is especially important that all parties are not left to deal alone with the aftermath of contact stopping (Neil, 2010).
- There is growing recognition that children's wider relatives such as grandparents and aunts/uncles, as well as non-related adults such as previous foster carers, teachers and childhood friends, need to be considered in all contact arrangements. In Neil et al.'s 2013 study, young people in cohesive and developing identity groups were often connecting with grandparents, aunts and uncles who posed no risk. The [Lifelong Links](#) programme from Family Rights Group has demonstrated that establishing these positive support networks for children improves their relational and emotional stability as well as placement stability. The mapping function must therefore build on and tie into the success of Lifelong Links, for example, by identifying areas which need the programme most and where it could join up with complementary services in the area.

- In adoption, sometimes disjointed approaches are undermining the potential value of work being done to support children's identities. For example, therapeutic interventions for children delivered via the Adoption Support Fund could be more effective if they brought in birth families to jointly agree an understanding of why the child was removed from them, which one specialist told us is the starting point of any relational repair work.
- As technological solutions take hold, the adoption of these technologies needs to be monitored to ensure that different platforms being used in different regions are as compatible with each other as possible. This could avoid problems for families if they have to grapple with and move between different technologies.
- The availability of contact support outside of normal working hours, such as on weekends, so that children can see families and those they care about at convenient times. The system needs to adjust to what children need, rather than children having to adjust to the system.

Mapping the current support landscape

The sector cannot reshape itself without far greater investment in support services. To inform this investment a full understanding of the current landscape is needed – what are the needs of children and families in different areas, what services are available, what services are being accessed and in what timescales, and what contact is taking place?

A map like this does not exist right now, especially not across all forms of care, yet it is vital to establishing an informed strategy around children's connections and also making links with data on children's outcomes. In adoption for example, the current model of adoption support is precarious, with the Adoption Support Fund receiving growing volumes of applications yet still not meeting the level of need.

Understanding regional variation across the UK should be the first step towards investing in the right places. A data function within My People would provide insight to inform both strategic resourcing decisions and measure the outcomes of the investment programme.

It would:

- Create a map of local support services relating to lifelong identity and birth family connection, showing the gaps in provision across the country and calculating the need in each area and therefore where investment is most needed. This mapping would inform subsequent funding decisions, enabling the government to identify key locations – similar to the Department for Education's 'Opportunity Areas' – for boosting support to children and families.
- Provide regional breakdowns on delays in accessing services.
- Develop a picture of children's contact/connections under different care arrangements, how regularly, who with, and how much support all family members involved are receiving to better understand the impact of this on children's placement stability, wellbeing and outcomes.
- Explore where therapeutic work is being linked with contact work and where investment is needed to join these up, particularly when considering multi-disciplinary assessments and access to the Adoption Support Fund.
- Measure the social and financial impact of investment in support services, to identify what works and gain an accurate picture of cost savings.
- Evaluate how effectively services have been co-produced with those affected the most: children, young people and adoptees who are now adults.

5. Investing for the future

At present there is no funding for this type of service and resource, but it will be a priority to cost the model and the estimated funding that would be required to set up the core functions of a website, online resource, advice line and data team, and to maintain and expand My People. Given its importance and the ambition, we would hope that the initial cost of establishing My People could be funded by central government, in order to develop and pilot the approach. Due to the work already being undertaken by Adoption England, we believe there is merit in further investment in their website and resources to co-host My People. Furthermore, we would expect all VAAs in England to participate in the pilot with key RAA partners identified across the country.

Longer term funding and sustainability would need to be further explored but we believe that a more detailed cost benefit analysis will identify savings for LAs in social work and administrative time. Following its resource mapping across the country, My People would be able to advise about what additional investment is most needed, and how it should be allocated, taking into consideration the number of children in care and adopted in each LA. It cannot be stressed enough: the success of My People rests on the availability of this funding for services and the ability for services to be monitored and evaluated.

Although there is currently no established causal link between contact and children's wellbeing, evaluations of programmes centred on strengthening children's lifelong relationships such as the evaluation of Lifelong Links have resulted in positive outcomes such as greater placement stability. The evaluation also noted that the primary outcome was an increase and improvement in sustainable and supportive relationships which are associated with better longer-term outcomes such as reduced isolation and loneliness. On the basis of this and many other recent reports highlighting the positives of having good relationships, we can be confident that greater investment in children's connections will bring wider benefits to children, and possibly also long-term savings, as leaving children's needs unmet only increases demand for support services later down the line as highlighted in CVAA's own report '[A Home for Me](#)'.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that the support for all care experienced children to maintain meaningful relationships with people who are important to them must be radically reformed. This is critical to supporting these children to develop a sense of self and make sense of the past as they grow up towards adulthood.

We believe that a new strategic network and hub should be the vital central pillar of that reform, accompanied by the requisite investment which has not existed until now. Yet a hub alone without investment is not enough to inspire social workers to think differently about contact planning; they must have the capacity to implement these ideas. Mapping local services gaps in support and taking steps to fill them will therefore be key to the hub's success, as will cross-sector collaboration and building on the work already being done.

We therefore recommend to government that:

- 1. Support be given to a full business case for My People to be jointly developed by CVAA and key partners with initial funding to test the model and enable My People to pool together expertise, resources, workforce capacity and delivery.**
- 2. Funding is provided for the development of National Standards around contact, with input from all those affected be developed cross-sector and agreed.**
- 3. A five-year national strategic plan is developed to overhaul contact planning and delivery. This should include multi-disciplinary assessments to determine contact plans pre and post adoption.**

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