Exchanging information post adoption Views of adoptive parents and birth parents

Janette Logan reports on the findings of a research study which examined the experiences of adoptive parents and birth parents who were involved in an information exchange scheme. While both acknowledged the importance of exchanging information, different views were expressed as to how the exchange should happen and people’s experiences were considerably influenced by their pattern and process of exchange. This study provides empirical evidence to suggest that the exchange of information is by no means straightforward and easy to accomplish in a way that satisfies the needs – in particular the long-term needs – of those involved in the adoption triangle.

Introduction

The move towards a more open approach to adoption has developed considerably since the 1976 Adoption Act which gave adopted people in England and Wales the right, upon reaching adulthood, to have access to information about their birth parents. Open adoption has indeed become a popular term in contemporary adoption practice, though very often without clarity of definition (McRoy, 1991). Pannor and Baran (1984) summed it up as follows:

*"Open adoption is a process in which the birth parents and the adoptive parents meet and exchange identifying information. The birth parents relinquish legal and basic child rearing rights to the adoptive parents. Both sets of parents retain the right to continuing contact and access to knowledge on behalf of the child." (p 246)*

Within this definition there is scope for wide variations in practice; McWhinnie (1994) has suggested that we should distinguish between openness and ongoing contact, which may involve indirect contact via the exchange of letters and photographs, and direct face-to-face contact.

Openness in adoption is no longer a contentious issue. The damaging effects of secrecy and lack of information about family of origin on the self-identity of some adoptees, and evidence that the success of adoption is related to the child’s knowledge and understanding of why she or he was adopted, are now acknowledged (McWhinnie, 1967; Triseliotis, 1973). However, adoption with ongoing contact, be it direct or indirect, is more contentious.

While there is a growing body of research into the various forms of open arrangements, most of this comes from the USA and New Zealand (Iwanek, 1987; Dominick, 1988; McRoy, Grotevant and White, 1988; Field, 1991; McRoy, 1991; Etter, 1993; Ryburn, 1994) and there is currently an ongoing debate concerning its validity and applicability to the UK (Berry, 1993; Quinton et al, 1997; Ryburn, 1998). Despite this, however, arrangements for continuing contact are increasingly being made by adoption agencies, a practice enthusiasm which McWhinnie (1994) claims stems from ‘a series of assertions based upon ill-reasoned analysis or persuasive rhetoric’ (p 7).

Fratter’s (1991) small-scale study in Britain led her to conclude that ‘adoption with some sort of continuing contact with birth parents could work well’ (p 92). Her study nevertheless revealed a wide variation in people’s experiences of contact (both indirect and direct) and while most adopted children and young people wanted information or contact to continue, some did not. Consequently there remains within professional opinion a lack of consensus about the advisability of different forms of contact arrangements and how the best interests of the child can best be promoted and protected.

Although it is unquestionably good
practice for children to have information about their past (Triseliotis, 1973, 1991), practice varies considerably, with formalised exchanges of information through an agency being far from the norm. While this degree of openness is considered less controversial than direct face-to-face contact, there have been concerns expressed about some elements of these so-called ‘postbox’ arrangements. Many agencies are striving to develop such services and with commendable outcomes (Rajan and Lister, 1998), but developments remain constrained by insufficient resources and lack of guidance as to how best to provide the service.

The research upon which this paper is based elicits the views of both adoptive and birth parents who are involved in a formalised information exchange scheme, and suggests that, while less controversial than other forms of direct contact, it is nonetheless far from straightforward, and in particular, the process of exchange can have a considerable impact on those involved.

This study is limited to baby adoptions. Because older children have established relationships with their birth families, exchanging information may be considered more straightforward, at least in theory.

The research study
The focus of the study was to evaluate an information exchange scheme in operation at a voluntary adoption agency. Prior to 1992 there were no specific requirements within the agency regarding the exchanging and depositing of information, although some adoptive parents were doing so as a matter of good practice. In 1992 the agency formalised the information exchange scheme, making it an expectation that adoptive parents would agree to send information to the agency who would act as intermediaries, read the information and store it on file, to be passed on to the birth parents if they so requested. Ideally, the adoptive parents would make an agreement with the birth parents regarding the frequency and nature of the information exchange. The birth parents would therefore also be encouraged to send information for the adoptive families. However, given that not all birth parents and adoptive parents had met, the minimum requirement would be that adoptive parents signed an agreement of their intention to participate.

The three primary aims of the study were to investigate the extent and nature of the usage of the information exchange scheme; the usefulness or otherwise of the scheme for both adoptive parents and their children, and birth parents; and the role of the information exchange scheme within the spectrum of post-adoption contact arrangements from the perspectives of adoptive parents and birth parents.

Sample and methodology
The information exchange scheme was being utilised by a wide range of families in respect of children of all ages. However, the agency was particularly keen to evaluate the service in relation to the expectations placed on adopters of babies, and had targeted to do so four years after implementing the formal requirements. The research therefore defined as its core sample all children placed for adoption as babies (under 12 months of age at time of placement) within a two-year period (January 1992–end September 1994). This timescale was chosen in order to produce a sample of families who had experienced exchanging information over a similar length of time. (To have extended the timescale would have increased the sample size but would have included families with very little experience of being involved in the scheme.) This produced a sample of 34 babies placed in 34 adoptive families. For each of these cases an anonymous record survey was undertaken in order to collate factual data and assess patterns of usage from both adoptive parents and birth parents, and a postal questionnaire was administered where possible. Two sub-samples were randomly selected from returned questionnaires and were interviewed by the researcher: 15 adoptive couples (interviewed separately n = 30) and 11 birth parents (nine birth mothers and two birth fathers). It had
been the original intention to include a sub-sample of birth parents who were not using the information exchange scheme, but this was not possible as they either did not return the questionnaires or, when they did, refused to be interviewed.

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data on a number of areas. These included what kinds of information were being exchanged, how it was being exchanged, satisfaction or otherwise about how the service was operating, benefits or otherwise of exchanging information and expectations about its continuation or progression to other forms of direct contact. The interviews took place in the adoptive parents’ and birth parents’ homes, lasted between one and two hours and were audiotaped and transcribed.

Findings
Despite encouraging a two-way exchange of information between adoptive parents and birth parents, in the majority of cases this was not happening and different patterns of exchange were identified. More common was a one-way exchange from adoptive parents to birth parents (via the agency). In some instances information was being passed on to birth parents while in others it was not (as it was not being requested) and was therefore kept on file at the agency. Table 1 illustrates the pattern of usage of the scheme.

A two-way exchange was occurring in only a minority of cases and, of those adoptive parents involved in a one-way exchange, the information was passed on in less than half the cases. A significant number of adopters were therefore sending information which was being stored on file. Furthermore, a substantial majority of birth parents were neither requesting information or sending information about themselves to the adoptive families, despite the opportunity to do so.

In addition some birth parents were intermittent users: of the sample of 34, although 25 had originally been involved in the scheme in one way or another, at the time of the study only 15 were actively involved. Nine (26 per cent) birth parents had therefore never used the scheme and 19 (56 per cent) were not using it at the time of the study.

Given that previous studies have identified the desire for information as a significant issue for birth parents (Hughes and Logan, 1993), this low take-up of information is perhaps surprising. However, the difference in experiences and circumstances of women in this and previous studies make it difficult to make comparisons. The latter parted ten to 30 years ago at a time when closed adoptions, characterised by secrecy, denial of information and lack of involvement in the process, was the norm, and their search for information came many years after relinquishment.

Unfortunately it was not possible to interview any women falling into the category of ‘non-requesters’. One can only speculate that for these women, either it may have been too close to the time of parting, their experiences being too ‘raw’ for them to want to receive information, or they wanted a clean break. However, the existence of information on file does mean that it is available should they request it at some point in the future – an area which warrants further research.

Of those birth parents using the scheme, the majority were birth mothers. Only two birth fathers were receiving or sending information, both of whom were living with the birth mother. Given that

Table 1

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<th>Pattern of usage</th>
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<td>Information one way only</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP → BP collected</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP → BP not collected</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP → BP collected in past, info on file</td>
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| Information both ways                  |        |
| AP → BP and BP → AP                    | 8      |

| No exchange of information             | 8      |
| (Info. previously exchanged, now stopped) | 3      |
| **Total**                             | **34** |

Key: AP = adoptive parent; BP = birth parent

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most of the relationships between the birth parents did not continue after the birth of the child, and in some cases the birth father had not even been told of the pregnancy, the preponderance of birth mothers is perhaps not surprising. In one instance, information was also being passed onto maternal grandparents. In most cases, information was exchanged or deposited annually, usually around the child’s birthday, though a small number were exchanging two or three times a year.

It is perhaps not surprising that adoptive parents and birth parents would report different experiences of exchanging information. There were, however, striking differences within each group, depending both on their pattern and process of exchange.

**Exchanging information: adoptive parents’ perspective**

The majority of adoptive parents were adhering to the procedure described earlier, i.e., sending information to the agency as a matter of course, around their child’s birthday. However, there were a few variations in practice: one couple gave their letters direct to their social worker, who had become a good friend and visited regularly, and were unsure as to whether they would be happy sending them through the post; another sent in letters only when requested by their social worker (on behalf of the birth mother) as opposed to sending them in automatically.

How the adopters viewed the process of exchanging information and their subsequent levels of satisfaction was greatly influenced by their different patterns of exchange. While all of those involved in a two-way exchange were satisfied both in terms of process and outcome, the responses of those involved in a one-way exchange were more complex, and their experiences varied according to whether information was being passed on to birth parents or not.

**Information passed on**

Given the high levels of satisfaction reported by adopters who were both sending and receiving information, it may have been anticipated that all adopters would have preferred to be involved in a two-way exchange. But this was not the case.

Adoptive parents who were engaged in a one-way exchange and whose information was being passed on to birth parents expressed different views as to whether they would like to receive information in return. Those who would were approaching the issue from a child-centred perspective, concerned that not receiving information might have a detrimental effect on their child:

*I think if you’re going down the route of formalising a contact of some sort, it’s got to be both ways. This system that’s coming in with letters and things has got to be a two-way thing. If it isn’t it might have a detrimental effect on Amy. I formally have to write a letter and send a picture, but Amy’s mum doesn’t have to do anything. Now that’s working against Amy; she could turn round one day and say ‘Well, my mum never bothered.’*

Others were happy not to be receiving information and did not wish to do so, their reasons reflecting concerns for themselves and the birth mother rather than the child:

*I think it’s because it would be a constant reminder to me that Jane isn’t my genetic daughter, when to me she is my daughter . . . But I’ve no objection to her sending stuff to the information bank for Jane when she’s older. But I wouldn’t really want to be getting letters here from the agency from her. If they want to keep them on file, then that’s fine.*

Whatever their reasons for not wishing to receive information, these adopters could acknowledge the relevance of their child having access to details about their birth families but expressed different views on the process of acquiring the information, many preferring it to be kept on file at the agency:

*Jean [wife] has taken part because we were asked to. I do not agree with it. I don’t see why they can’t send the information to the adoption society about*
what they are doing – that is if they want to. Then, when the children are older, we can say to them ‘Write to the adoption society and they will give you all the information of your natural parents.’ Why we have to write every 12 months and send pictures I do not understand. It is like Big Brother watching you. The children know they are adopted and they know where they can find out about their natural parents. It seems more sensible to me than us writing every 12 months.

Information not passed on
Different views were expressed by adopters who were sending information which was not being passed on. While some had never thought about it and were not concerned about information piling up on the file, others had stronger views, again concerned with the possible negative consequences for their child:

No. She [birth mother] isn’t picking it up and I think that’s crap. Because the poor little mite’s going to know, now you’ve put this into place, he’s going to know his mum never bothered her arse to even pick the papers up . . . it could be a negative . . . I mean, we’re all different, and I think Tom . . . his character as I see it at the moment, I don’t think it will affect him, but it’s not as positive as his mum picking it up.

In contrast, one adoptive father who did not agree with the scheme commented:

It does not bother me if it’s not being collected . . . I presume that they [birth parents] are losing interest. I would be happier if that was the case.

Experience of writing the letters varied enormously, some enjoying the process and others finding it an arduous task. For some, it got easier over time, particularly if they were involved in a two-way exchange or if they knew the information was being passed on. Others found it became more difficult, especially when nothing was being passed on. A small minority, all of whom expressed a wish to be informed, did not know whether their letters were being collected or not. Not knowing compounded their difficulties in writing the letters:

It’s a bit like chucking bottles in the sea really, if you’re not careful.

It’s a bit like sending a letter to Santa Claus. I don’t believe he’s up there and I don’t believe she’s wanting them so I can’t see the point.

The adoptive parents in this study were clearly expressing different experiences of exchanging information, influenced, in the main, by their own individual pattern of usage. However, despite their idiosyncrasies the majority were satisfied with their current level of contact.

With the exception of those who would prefer to receive information from birth parents, none wanted to exchange or deposit information more regularly and none wanted any form of direct contact. They all considered direct face-to-face contact inappropriate for their situation, though could acknowledge that it might be useful for older children. For many, direct contact did not sit easily with their understanding of adoption or what they wanted from it. The majority saw it as providing them with children of their own, with the role of birth parents ending at the point of adoption. They did, however, acknowledge the importance of giving their children a sense of identity and history – a role which they considered to be adequately fulfilled by the provision of and access to information.

While most adoptive parents indicated that they intended to exchange information in the long term, the responses from some one-way users were ambivalent, particularly if their letters were not being passed on. Some would want the option of changing the agreement through a process of review, while others were content to carry on sending information in case birth parents requested it in the future.

Exchanging information: birth parents’ perspective
All the birth parents who were interviewed were receiving information and the majority were involved in a two-
way exchange. While, as already noted, it was not possible to elicit the views of those not requesting information, a small minority of women interviewed were not sending information to the adoptive parents. As with the adopters, their experiences varied according to the process of exchange.

Receiving information
A number of birth parents were contacting the agency and requesting the information in line with agency policy, but others were experiencing a more pro-active approach. Some were contacted by their social worker either by telephone or letter and told when a letter had arrived. Others received their letters automatically from the agency without having been forewarned. An emerging theme from the data was the importance of preparation and consistency. Some birth mothers preferred to be informed by the agency before receiving any information as this gave them time to prepare themselves. Others were happy to receive information automatically so long as this was their expectation from the start:

They did say to me that the letters are sent to them and then, when you send a letter in and request it, they send any mail on to you. But last year one landed on my doorstep, probably about two days before Karen’s birthday, and it was like ‘Oh God’, and I hadn’t requested it. Every other year I had . . . probably four months after her birthday . . . because I found it very tough to do around her birthday. Then last year they just sent one along. I haven’t even responded to that I must admit. I just keep trying and trying. It’s very difficult. If I hadn’t received anything I would have certainly written because I do want to know.

All the birth parents described experiencing a number of emotions at the point of receiving information but an emerging theme was that receiving information was something of a mixed blessing; on the one hand it was something to look forward to, yet on the other, it was very upsetting:

It’s very upsetting but at the same time without it would be worse because I’d be sitting here thinking ‘What does he look like?’ I know I get upset but at least I know what he looks like.

Oh it’s upsetting but I don’t know how people did without it. It’s that photograph. It’s just seeing him that’s so important.

As previously stated, this study has not been able to explore issues for birth parents who do not use the information exchange scheme. While information is on file at the agency should they ever request it, previous studies have identified the difficulties experienced by birth parents in contacting the agency many years after relinquishment (Hughes and Logan, 1993). The question of whether the agency is expecting too much of birth parents to ring in and request information a number of years after parting therefore remains unanswered. The majority of birth parents in this study indicated a preference for some sort of preparation prior to receiving information, highlighting the importance of addressing these issues clearly from the start.

Sending information
Only eight birth parents were sending information, all via the agency, usually in response to receiving information from the adopters. Their experience of sending information varied and was influenced by a number of factors, including the type of letters they received from the adopters, their reasons for parting with their child and the support and quality of relationship they had with their social worker. Whatever their individual circumstances, the process of writing the letters was always difficult.

One birth mother had a good relationship with her social worker who helped her write the letters:

I find it very difficult to write a letter. I want to say a lot of things and I never know whether I can or what I’m supposed to be saying to them . . . I haven’t written a letter yet where I haven’t phoned my social worker. She’s brilliant; every time I
write a letter she comes to the house because I just can’t do it.

In contrast, another who does not have ongoing contact with a social worker described how she struggled alone. Becoming pregnant as a result of rape, she concealed her pregnancy and has subsequently kept it secret:

I find it very tough to respond . . . because I don’t know what role to take on. I don’t want to come across as her mum. I think it’s very difficult . . . and I also feel quite bad and I didn’t ever see her [at birth]. It was a case of – ‘Oh take her away’ – it was quite callous really.

An emerging theme from the data was that sending information provided birth parents with the opportunity to explain themselves, which they hoped would serve to minimise any sense of rejection the child might have in the future. Many also considered that it helped them to let go and move on:

I would hate her to think that someone got rid of her and didn’t want her. It wasn’t like that at all. I hope it helps her in that way, as she’s growing up, she can say ‘Yes, I have a mum’ and ‘I know about my mum’, rather than say ‘I was adopted’ and ‘I wasn’t loved’, because I can imagine that would be quite hard on a kid.

In some ways I think it’s a good thing to do it all because I have let go and I’m not constantly thinking about her. On the other hand, I’m thinking, as Rebecca gets older, it’s probably good for her to know that I’ve not just forgotten her. It’s not that I rejected the child. It wasn’t rejection. I didn’t want her to feel that.

Data was only available in respect of four birth mothers who did not send information to the adopters. It was not possible therefore to generalise from their responses, all of which were highly idiosyncratic, reflecting significantly different experiences of the information exchange scheme. For example, one birth mother parted with her daughter four years ago, as she did not feel able to care for a child whose father had physically assaulted her other small child. She was clear about her decision to part early on in pregnancy and considers herself to have come through the experience unscathed. While she received information she could not see the purpose of sending information to the adoptive family:

I didn’t think there was anything to say. Nothing has significantly changed and you don’t really know what to put in letters. I suppose if you’re planning to move to the other end of the country . . . but I think, ‘Well, they are not really going to want to know about me.’ I am nothing to them anymore and unless it was something significant that they wanted to tell her. Other than that I can’t see what purpose it serves.

Another woman parted with her daughter, born with Down’s Syndrome, as she felt she could not cope with her special needs. She received information annually about her daughter but had never considered sending information about herself and her husband in return:

We prepared a book for her and I know that she has seen the book and that it’s in her bedroom and that’s very comforting to know. But I never thought about it going back the other way. I don’t even remember us being asked to do it. I don’t even remember it coming up. I’ve always been of the mind that that sort of thing, to a certain extent, I would want to come from them [adoptive parents]. I want Jo to see whatever they think she should see, so I suppose I think if they said, ‘Look Jenny, can you give us an update because she is asking?’; then I would do it straightaway.

The majority of birth parents were satisfied with their current level of contact. Two would prefer to receive more photographs more regularly and only two would have liked to have direct face-to-face contact.

While most birth parents indicated an intention to use the scheme in the long term, some were qualified. For example,
one birth mother only wanted to send information when she had something significant to say. Another had never thought about the long-term implications:

*When you put it like that, doing it for 18 years. I can’t get my head round it.*

The majority of participants had been using the scheme for a relatively short period of time and qualitative data from the interviews suggested that neither birth parents nor adoptive parents had sufficiently considered the implications or expectations of using the scheme in the long term. This is a significant issue which will need to be addressed in order to ensure that the needs of all involved are adequately met over time.

**The agency operating as intermediary**

The use of intermediaries in the exchange of information is intended to provide an element of protection for all involved, both in maintaining a degree of anonymity and distance and by providing a means of censoring inappropriate or sensitive information.

In an endeavour to provide this, the agency operates a policy whereby information is sent in unsealed envelopes and read by agency staff prior to being sent to adoptive parents or birth parents. In the event of there being any concern about the content of the letters, a decision would be made as to whether it would be more appropriate for a social worker to visit with the information rather than it being received ‘cold’. However, concern has been expressed about such practices, particularly in relation to issues of confidentiality.

The majority of adoptive parents valued the agency operating as an intermediary because of the protection and distance it provided. Many referred to their fear of birth parents turning up unexpectedly:

*No. I wouldn’t like that. Keep them as far away as possible. I think the information going to the agency is the right thing. I don’t think I could handle the information coming directly here. It’s a threat. It’s just another threat from the outside world. It’s private. They are our family now.*

I’m happy that she doesn’t know our address because I wouldn’t want her turning up on my doorstep. I don’t believe [C] would do that but even though I don’t believe she’d do that now, I’d be unsure whether she’d do that another time in her life.

These comments were representative of the majority, including those who had met the birth parents and who were in a regular two-way exchange. Given the preparation they received prior to placement and the fact that they had, in many cases, met the birth parents, this need for an intermediary could be considered somewhat surprising. However, it may also indicate that preparation for the placement and meeting birth parents – part of the process of placement – is very different to the realities involved in the process of parenting.

Similarly, most birth parents considered the use of an intermediary as important:

*Yes, I think it would be nice to do that [send them direct], but, like I say, I would hate to put anything in that upset them and I suppose it distances me. Going direct in any case, then you know the address and they know your address, whereas with this you’re a wee bit anonymous and that obviously works both ways. So it distances you and probably puts you in your place and it keeps it safely away from you.*

*Well it’s important not to keep it too close. As soon as you start doing those kind of things where you are getting closer, you have to keep your distance for the sake of not turning the kid into a suicide note, you know what I mean. It’s hard to explain this; they are good to have there because they are keeping it all kind of, they are keeping it perfect you know; they are keeping it legit.*

While birth parents were therefore acknowledging that it would not be in their child’s best interest for them to turn
up, many could admit that they might feel tempted. There was therefore a dissonance between the way birth parents behaved and how they felt. Although there is no evidence to suggest that birth parents would ever give into temptation, the agency operating as an intermediary provides a safeguard, reassuring all parties that boundaries are in place.

Discussion
Much of the current debate about open adoption has focused on the controversies surrounding direct face-to-face contact, and there is a danger that in creating this monopoly of attention other forms of open arrangements are neglected and policies established in the absence of empirical evidence as to how best achieve them. This study has provided empirical evidence to suggest that the exchange of information is by no means straightforward and easy to accomplish in a way which satisfies the needs, in particular the long-term needs, of those involved in the adoption triangle. Far from being simple, as indeed implied by the terms ‘postbox’ or ‘letterbox’, it is a complex process which can have a significant impact on those involved.

Without exception, all adoptive parents and birth parents who took part in the study acknowledged the importance of exchanging information, particularly from the child’s perspective. However, different views were expressed as to how often information should be exchanged or made available and how they should gain access to the information. The findings therefore suggest that the nature and extent of communication should not be prescribed by the agency but should be flexible and tailored to meet the needs of the individuals involved. In particular, consideration should be given to the process of exchanging information which should reflect individual need. Individual packages therefore need to be negotiated and adhered to consistently. This was particularly important for the birth parents who, because of the difficulties they experienced in exchanging information, felt the need to be adequately prepared. In addition, opportunities for evaluation and review will need to be established in an endeavour to recognise people’s changing needs over time and will be especially significant in those instances whereby exchange is only one way.

These minimum requirements, while seeming obvious, are by no means easy to achieve, assuming as they do that all parties are available and willing to negotiate, when, as this study has highlighted, a two-way exchange is far from the norm.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of facilitating the exchange of information is how to do so in the light of these changing needs and when the needs of the three parties in the triangle are not in synchrony with one another. Contact in whatever form, once established, may seem irrelevant for years and then assume greater importance to any of the three parties at certain points in their lives.

The process of assessment can be a stressful time for prospective adopters and, at this stage, many commented they would agree to anything for fear of jeopardising their chances of approval. However, the realities of parenting and the security of adoption can serve to change their focus. This study suggests this is more likely to happen when the exchange of information is not reciprocal and concurs with previous findings that initial enthusiasm for contact can subside (Rushton et al., 1988; Hall, 1991).

Contemporary adoptions are a long way removed from the traditional, closed adoptions in which adoptive parents were replacing birth parents and bringing up children as though they had been born to them. Adoptive parents, in the light of a more open approach, are now required to have a very different attitude, although some of the comments by adoptive parents in this study do suggest an exclusive and possessive view of adoption. This raises issues in terms of the assessment and preparation of prospective adopters. All of the adopters cited here were introduced to the idea of openness and contact in their various forms at the start of their process of approval, and children’s need for knowledge of their past and the significance of birth family members was addressed in
preparation groups. Whatever the changing nature of adoption, it must not be forgotten that many adopters’ motives are still rooted in their own childlessness, with adoption as a means of providing them with a family of their own. These issues are inevitably more poignant when considering baby adoptions; for people adopting older children with memories and attachments to their birth family, a different attitude may be more easily achieved.

The low incidence of exchanging information by birth parents highlights their difficulties, even with this level of contact. While many birth parents want information at some point in their lives (Hughes and Logan, 1993), this study suggests that immediately after relinquishment may be too soon and negotiation may not be possible. In addition, previous research has highlighted that, even when birth parents want information many years after relinquishment, they still find it difficult to approach agencies for help (Hughes and Logan, 1993).

It must not be forgotten that adoption is based on loss and birth parents need time to grieve; for many women, the opportunity to mourn their lost child is not available and can result in their feelings intensifying over the years (Pannor et al, 1978; Deykin et al, 1984; Winkler and Van Keppel, 1984; Logan, 1996).

Most importantly, consideration must be given as to how to involve the children. Their needs and understanding will change and there will be periods during childhood and adolescence when the need for information will be particularly significant. Given that the children in this study were all very young, the exchange of information was taking place between adults. While all commented on the continuation of exchange being dependent on their child’s wishes, issues such as how and at what stage to involve the children and who owns the information had not been consistently addressed.

In conclusion, by eliciting the views of users of an information exchange scheme this study has highlighted the complexities – in particular the human element – involved. It is not an easy option which can be established at minimal cost. Contrary to these findings, there is a danger that some agencies may regard exchanging information as a formality, requiring systems and procedures to ensure its smooth administration. However, the views of both adoptive parents and birth parents expressed here provide further evidence of the difficulties of achieving openness, even at the level of information exchange, without the existence of relationships. Procedures and systems do not in themselves facilitate relationships; the human element must not be ignored.

Establishing a scheme which empowers birth parents to take part in a meaningful and pro-active way and one which does not lose sight of the best interests of the child has enormous resource implications and is yet another indication of the need for comprehensive post-adoption services within the child care framework.

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