Barriers to adoption? Variations in the use of adoption by local authorities

Political and media interest in adoption in the last few years in Britain coincided with a research project set up jointly by the North-West Group of Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Liverpool John Moores University. The origins of the research lie in the concerns of the voluntary adoption agencies about the use of their services by local authorities in the light of their own records, which indicated very variable patterns of use. The aim of the research was to investigate these apparent anomalies in the use of adoption services and explore the reasons for the differences. A large range of possible factors was involved – structural, political and organisational, as well as professional and personal issues.

In this paper Derek Clifford, with support from Beverley Burke, Norman Goodwin, Lindsay Amuzu and Simon Ward, reflects on barriers to the use of adoptive placements by local authorities, with particular but not exclusive reference to the north-west.

Introduction

Recent public debate in England and Wales on the adoption of children has resulted significantly from government intervention, stemming from its modernising agenda in the social services. The result has been numerous policy and practice changes which continue to develop with the introduction of new adoption standards (Department of Health, 2001a), support for the recruitment of adopters (Department of Health, 2001b), including the introduction of a national adoption register in the same year, and the passing of the Adoption and Children Act in November, 2002. The media and the Government were highly critical of local authorities (LAs) because of their alleged incompetence, thought to be demonstrated by unacceptable variations in adoption rates. These are made much of in the Prime Minister’s Review of Adoption, which specifically targets their performance as unacceptably low as well as variable (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000). This would appear to be anticipated by the statistics kept by the voluntary adoption agencies (VAs) in the north-west. This means not only that some LAs have generally been slow to place looked after children for adoption, but also that some LAs have been low in the adoption rates of these children compared with other LAs. The Government therefore immediately set a national target to increase the number of looked after children by 40 per cent by 2004/5 (Department of Health, 2000), and the measures mentioned above were instituted to assist in meeting that target. In this paper we examine these alleged shortcomings in the light of our research, with special reference to this review, which was prominent at the time the research was carried out, and which underpins these later developments.

The Prime Minister’s Foreword to the review of adoption stated that ‘Too many local authorities have performed poorly in helping children out of care and into adoption’ (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, p 3), and particularly identified the assessment of potential carers as confusing and time-consuming. The report itself sought ‘significant improvements’ in LA performance, setting targets and timescales, and highlighted poor and variable performance (p 6): ‘The proportion of looked after children adopted in 1998/9 varied by local authority between one per cent and 14 per cent, with an average of four per cent’ (p 19). The political focus is therefore clearly aimed at the variability and low level of LA performance, consistent with the popular perception of local authority social services fostered by the media. This is said to include faults of administration and management, as well as of social workers’ poor assessment and limited knowledge and skills (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, pp 31– 2). The review is presented as objective research,
but appears partly to reflect populist values on adoption (eg Morgan, 1999). A review by Gibb (2000) of such perspectives notes that to consider ‘local authorities and individual workers as ideologically opposed to adoption, and voluntary agencies as too few or working too closely with the statutory sector to make a difference to this antipathy’ appears to be the kind of ‘misunderstanding of adoption’ partly shared by the Home Office (Gibbs, 2000, p 73). The same author also comments that ‘Of course adoption services are imperfect and there are inexplicable variations between different social services departments’ (p 73). However, in exploring the variations between LAs in their use of VAA placements we have found that they are not totally inexplicable.

Methods
Our research began from the starting point of VAA statistics in the north-west, which showed the variable patterns of use of adoption placements noted in the Prime Minister’s review. What was particularly puzzling was the apparent inexplicability of the patterns, when similar authorities had different rates of adoption and different uses of VAA placement resources. Why was this evidence so anomalous, with some authorities increasing, some decreasing, some maintaining a high level of placements, and some remaining at a low level? We tackled this by interviewing nearly 100 LA social service employees in two stages. The first stage concentrated on senior managers and LA policy and strategy, completing telephone and face-to-face interviews from a wide selection of LAs in England and Wales, ensuring that we covered a variety of circumstances. They included new unitary authorities, metropolitan boroughs (large and small), county authorities and London boroughs. With the consent of the Association of Directors of Social Services, we contacted 75 of the 172 LAs in England and Wales in view of the fact that LAs from all over the country were sporadically using the services of the north-west group of voluntary adoption agencies. Seventeen of the 75 LAs either declined to participate or were impossible to arrange an interview with in the time available. Our sample therefore eventually numbered 58, approximately a third of all LAs in England and Wales. These were representative of the range of differing types of authority throughout the country. We wrote a report on the first stage that was presented to and discussed with the VAAAs, and we analysed the material for themes that were carried through to the second stage. These were identified as:

1. values, including commitment to adoption;
2. attitudes to VAAAs;
3. planning;
4. assessment;
5. structure and strategy, including the use of consortia, collaborative arrangements for providing adoptive services jointly by several LAs together, sometimes including VAAAs.

The second stage was more focused and limited mainly to the north-west, but consisted of 43 face-to-face interviews with social workers across five selected LAs – four in the north-west and one in the south – including adoption panel members and members of child protection teams and adoption teams. Our aim was to explore assessment, decision-making, values and attitudes in differing authorities and at different levels, with a focus on the north-west but within the wider national context, and against the background of continuing change in recent adoption history. The narrower focus of the second stage was part of the remit of the research, to examine especially local variations in the north-west. We were interested in social workers’ attitudes to adoption in general, and to VAAAs in particular, and selected workers in both specialist adoption and general childcare teams. Each LA was chosen to contrast with the other in terms of membership of an adoption consortium, demography, type and size. We agreed standardised questions for both stages of the research, and our final report attempted to summarise the varied views in relation to the key
themes emerging in both stages. This paper draws upon that report and its supporting evidence. The latter part of the research especially was a snapshot on a small scale, but the two stages together provide evidence to indicate some possible explanations for the variability between LAs and raise serious questions about allegations of blame.

Organisational context
In the 1990s criticisms were already being made of the (then current) decline in adoptions and the apparently unacceptable role of local authorities. Writing at the time, Triseliotis (1998/99) defended the LA record, asserting that ‘the statistical evidence available offers only partial support’ for the decline (p 48). However, Ivaldi’s study of national adoption statistics published in the same year (Ivaldi, 1998) shows a significant decline in LA adoption placement of looked after children in the 1990s, and the statistics of north-west VAAs also confirm this downward trend in many authorities – but not in all. The VAAs were finding a big drop in some LAs, but a small increase in others and little change elsewhere, in other words a variable pattern. Accepting that there had been some decline, Triseliotis (1998/99) maintained that there were still a substantial number of children being placed with adopters by LAs, and insofar as there was any decline in numbers he advanced some explanatory factors. In particular, he identified the complaining press and politicians as contributors to the reluctance of people to come forward as adopters, together with the increasingly difficult and older children in need of families. He also discussed the impact of the Children Act 1989 on LA social services, and the focus on working together with birth parents, leading to a decline in numbers of looked after children. The concentration of social services on effective child protection, in response to government legislation and political concern, tended to deflect attention from adoption services and permanence issues, as well as reduce the numbers of children needing placement. In our research an important conclusion was that the rates of placement for adoption of children being looked after vary greatly because of the large range of factors affecting LAs differentially for structural, geographical, demographic, social and historical reasons.

Central government interventions
The Prime Minister’s review makes much of the variations in LA performance while largely ignoring the central government’s contribution, apart from the admission that until recently, ‘there was very little emphasis from central government on adoption services’, and that given the failure of the draft adoption Bill of 1996, it was ‘not surprising that LAs have understood the priority to be child protection and working with birth families’ (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, p 16). However, central government interventions actively helped to undermine adoption services during this period, contributing to this variable and under-resourced pattern of provision. The causes of decline mentioned by Triseliotis above included the admitted failure to bring forward planned changes in adoption legislation in the 1990s (Ball, 2001) and also central government pressure on social services to ‘re-focus’ their efforts on prevention (Department of Health, 1995) rather than adoption. Our research suggests that the central government interventions in local government may not only have contributed to the general decline in adoption rates, but also contributed to their variability. The variations thus can be explained, but they have a number of differing causes.

Local government re-organisation
In addition to the impact of the Children Act 1989 and ‘re-focusing’, the dip in adoptions in the 1990s coincided with centrally planned local government re-organisation. We have heard numerous stories of how hard it has been for both unitary and other authorities to adjust to new working situations, setting up new arrangements for adoption services in brand new authorities, and re-organising services in the old authorities. This was particularly difficult where the new authorities found that they could not possibly organise an effective adoption
service within their own boundaries because of their small scale. As a result there has been a patchwork of ‘solutions’ to particular combinations of demography and size, with local authority workers left to sort out the problems created by central government, leading to inevitable variations in rates of adoption.

County authorities
In county authorities that lost one or more urban areas in the 1990s to newly created unitary authorities, there was a general downward trend in applications to VAAs for placement because many of the children needing adoption were in the more urban areas of the new authorities, whereas a large number of adoptive parents often came from the more affluent county areas. The counties were thus in the position of having a relatively better ratio of adopters to children, so less need for VAA placements. The Children Act 1989 and the re-focusing drive also led to fewer children needing placement. Furthermore, county authorities tend to be large overall and have more resources than the unitaries that left them. A typical senior manager’s comment was:

X is not a member of a consortium. This is out of choice, because it is a very big organisation and therefore doesn’t have any problem placing children a reasonable distance away from the birth parents. It also has no difficulties recruiting adopters.

The extent of the population and the geographical spread were thus both helpful in that adopted children could readily be placed within the authority.

Unitary authorities
The smaller unitary authorities’ reactions to their corresponding relative lack of adopters has been much more varied, depending on geography, history and other factors. Their common problem has been lack of resources, in contrast to the shire counties: ‘X became a unitary authority two years ago. This has created difficulties re the recruitment of carers’. Some unitary authorities admitted that it had taken them a long time to re-organise. Reaching a satisfactory solution had not been easy: ‘X [has] been struggling as a unitary with few resources and a very limited geographical area’. One explained that they had tried to continue previous practice:

... the new unitary tried to use the county adoption services but found they were paying a lot of money and getting little back, but did not have enough resources to run an adoption team themselves.

Some unitaries had maintained good relations with nearby VAAs. One or two had franchised out their adoption services entirely to a VAA, but others had none nearby. Several unitaries in need of adopters for white children were seeking contacts with VAAs nationwide, and looking forward to the proposed national register. Most authorities (of all types but especially unitaries) were more regionally oriented, sometimes for reasons of good practice: ‘X is not a fertile area for recruiting adopters. It is quite a small area and this raises issues around confidentiality when placing children’.

Solutions to permanence (and therefore adoption rates) thus vary with the possibilities for relatively local placements. Sometimes unitaries are identified as LAs with high adoption rates, but they may vary considerably from year to year. Many unitary authorities see themselves as ‘statistical freaks’, regarding the figures as unreliable since, owing to their size, very small changes in the number of children adopted make a disproportionate difference to the annual rate of adoption.

Large metropolitan boroughs
Large metropolitan boroughs containing the major urban areas in the country have been different again for obvious reasons. They contain many deprived families needing childcare interventions and adoptive placements. They often have high turnover rates for staff and low adoption rates, partly because of overwhelming demands on child protection services. Usually they have many minority ethnic and other very vulnerable children, who have not been easy to
They often value long-term or ‘permanent’ fostering, both to support contact with family members and to support carers with difficult older children and low incomes:

They have found that there are low numbers of adoptions in X because they tend to make use of permanent fostering. They believe this is a cultural thing, and because carers lose their income when they adopt.

They have tended to concentrate on child protection as a priority when resources were stretched, and they have sometimes been excluded from consortium arrangements because of their large size, as they were thought likely to make great demands for placements:

. . . because X score highly on deprivation and they have always had a high looked-after population, [other LAs believed] they would be a net drawer rather than a contributor.

Their circumstances have thus inevitably tended to result in low rates of adoption.

Small and medium metropolitan boroughs
Small and medium boroughs were sometimes characterised by relative stability over the years, and may or may not have developed a culture sympathetic to adoption. They therefore may have relatively high rates of adoption if they have had a pro-adoption policy and a good supply of adopters: ‘It is part of X’s culture within the department to place for adoption, and therefore they have very high success’, and money is not a problem. If not, they may well have responded to recent government initiatives:

Y is aware that its adoption services did not have a sufficiently high profile, and therefore they asked BAAF to come and do an audit. They were not sure whether it was due to structures or culture, but their rate of adoption is relatively low.

The adoption rates of these LAs will vary with their particular history and circumstances, including their (frequent) involvement in adoption consortia. The general factors affecting the dip in adoption in the 1990s will have impacted upon them all, but they will either have maintained a reasonably stable level, or may have started to pick up from low rates in the light of recent initiatives.

The variations which exist between authorities are hardly surprising in view of the very different circumstances in which they work, at which they have arrived through historical changes, often beyond their control. The presumed ‘barriers to adoption’ therefore need to take account of these very varied and changing circumstances, and the policy, organisational and financial pressures from central government on LAs in the 1990s before the new government’s current policies. Ivaldi’s verdict at that time was that ‘there is no straightforward way to evaluate agencies’ discrepancies in the use of adoption’ (Ivaldi, 1998, p 46). More recent research continues to imply a sceptical view of government and media interpretation of the significance of variations in adoption rates: ‘we do not share the view that it is appropriate to regard adoption figures as necessarily indicating good, bad or indifferent practice’ (Lowe et al, 2002, p 140). Most authorities have been responding to recent government initiatives, but from very different bases and with continuing differences in circumstances. It is likely that these variations will be reflected in the differential take-up of placements from the recently established adoption register. At the time of the research some LAs were looking forward to its inception, but others were sceptical.

Financial factors
The financial factor also emerges as a key issue, leading to variable and changing arrangements, which were still happening when we did our research. Financial circumstances are again significantly controlled centrally, and the parsimonious government restrictions of the 1990s inevitably meant that LAs were rightly protective of their resources, and tried to find ways of making arrangements with other LAs and VAAs which maximised their tight budgets. The Prime Minister’s
report acknowledges, grudgingly and in passing, that LAs have to manage the interagency fees for adoption within ‘limited resources’ (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, p 36). It denies that the interagency fee is in itself a barrier to adoption and fails to consider seriously the impact of limited finances on placement for adoption. Central government has a vested interest in avoiding the conclusion that it needs to support LA social services with more money: the fact that LAs continued to place children with the VAAs is used as a reason for disregarding the issue. However, the problem of shortages of adopters (but often not so in the shire counties) meant that some LAs had to use VAAs, while others did so often as a last resort, thus delaying placement. Ivaldi’s review of VAA placements concludes that the evidence ‘indicates the importance of resources being allocated, either centrally or locally, to allow local authorities to purchase voluntary sector placements’ (Ivaldi, 2000, p 47). This conclusion agrees with the views of many senior managers collected in this research that it is only when central government Quality Protects money became available that LAs were more able to take up VAA placements. Even then the financial cost of placements was easily the issue most raised by senior managers in their interviews with us. Although a few managers felt they had adequate financial support (particularly in shire counties or in boroughs where the culture had favoured adoption), well over 50 per cent of all those interviewed expressed concerns about inadequate financial arrangements – even after Quality Protects money became available. It is also reflected in this research, not only at managerial level but also in the awareness of social work practitioners, who observed that ‘because it can be expensive there is pressure not to use interagency placements too often’. This was particularly the case for using ‘expensive’ VAA placements.

Typically, we found that authorities (especially the shire counties) sought to protect their own adopters, and find placements for their looked after children at the most reasonable cost they could. This was often the obvious motivation behind the uneven development of ‘consortia’ arrangements between LAs (sometimes involving VAAs), in which agencies co-operated in various ways to maximise their resources. A typical response was along the lines of ‘X will initially look to free resources, then voluntaries [in the consortium], other LAs [in the consortium], or voluntaries outside of the consortium’.

This also led to delays in adoption while social workers went through the bureaucratic process in the right order. It is noticeable that many of the interviewees spoke of consortia being in place from the early 1990s. The consortia arrangements reported to us were very variable and changing, but had often begun with ‘nil-for-nil’ arrangements, where the LAs agreed to use each other’s placements at no cost, cutting out V AA placements as much as possible. However, these arrangements were patchy and resulted in differential supplies and demands on placements that led to further (and continued) changes in consortium financial agreements, usually involving a charge for placements but less than the VAA rate. Only occasionally did they lead to the stable contracts desired by VAAs. LAs have had to concentrate on ‘spot purchasing’ of placements from VAAs, partly in order to avoid unjustifiable financial commitment, and this has led to uncertainties for the VAAs, making it difficult for them to invest in development relevant to local needs. The Prime Minister’s Review of Adoption acknowledges that these collaborative consortia arrangements have had a ‘mixed response’ (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, p 37), but does little or nothing to illumine the variability which arose from the differing circumstances and difficult finances with which many LAs worked, partially but significantly attributable to central government itself.

Values and attitudes: long-term fostering
Unsurprisingly, a range of values and attitudes towards adoption itself were expressed in interviews given as part of this research. Senior managers valued
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adoption as an important option for children needing stable family care with little or no support or interference from agencies. They thought it combined legal and psychological parenting, and was relatively cheap. Nearly half of all managerial interviewees claimed (citing examples of recent policy and practice changes) that their authority was moving in line with recent government initiatives on adoption. Differences emerged in comparing it with other possible options, and a number of LAs objected to the need to be ‘politically correct’ in their attitude to adoption, particularly large urban LAs. They value long-term fostering as equally important, or at least as an option that needs to be balanced seriously against the claims of adoption. Over half of the authorities questioned the appropriateness of adoption for children over eleven. Four main reasons for using long-term fostering were commonly suggested by these LAs:

1. lack of availability of suitable adoptive parents for older and difficult-to-place children;
2. a positive choice of long-term fostering, especially where carers had difficult older children (but under eleven), with substantial allowances attached, where the families were supported by social workers and the child’s needs for stability, care and control were met. The financial incentives to some foster carers in poor urban authorities would prevent them from moving to adoption, and they had become accustomed to that level of financial and social work support;
3. children’s wishes had to be taken very seriously, and some children simply did not wish to be adopted;
4. links with birth families needed to be maintained, and this was sometimes difficult to manage with adopters. In these cases, long-term fostering might be preferable.

Only two or three of the 58 LAs questioned the emphasis on adoption at the expense of prevention. In their view, keeping families together in their own communities should be the first priority, including expenditure of money on poor families to prevent children becoming looked after, as against increased adoption allowances. This raises broader issues about the policy and values of government in emphasising adoption as against other alternative ways of meeting children’s needs, and in particular prioritising North American values on adoption rather than Australasian values of prevention and empowerment through family group conferencing (see below). Ten per cent of LAs in our sample (ie only six) questioned the numbers of children in long-term fostering, seeing it as a negative indicator that more suitable alternatives were not being actively considered – either rehabilitation, adoption or residence orders. These LAs were more actively in favour of adoption, arguing that the culture of the department as a whole in relation to adoption was a key factor.

These differences in values in relation to the appropriateness of adoption and long-term fostering, as against prevention and rehabilitation, reflect some of the fundamentally different values which are held generally in society on childcare issues. They are discussed in relation to adoption in a chapter by Kelly (2000), which draws on Fox-Harding’s well-known typology of values in child care. Such value positions affect the variability of adoption rates because the circumstances of differing LAs lead them to differing conclusions in relation to long-term fostering, particularly where large urban LAs are concerned. This factor in LA rates of adoption generally, and in their differing requirements of VAA placements, is hardly surprising in view of the way social values are divided on these issues. Yet the Prime Minister’s review presents differing values only as a fault in LA policy, as one of the barriers to adoption. The review proposes adoption as the ‘true permanency’ solution to the needs of looked after children (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, p 46), failing to address the possibility of differing values or of differing interpretations of research evidence. It has been observed by others that while the evidence in favour of adoption is very strong, the benefits of long-term or perm-
anent fostering also have research evidence support, and that fostering helps to maintain links with family and community. Earlier research had already indicated some positives of long-term fostering in certain circumstances (Thoburn, 1990; Sellick and Thoburn, 1996; Thoburn and Norford, 2000). A summary of research evidence for practitioners (Gupta, 2002) points out some of the particular circumstances when long-term fostering might be useful, drawing on a recent research paper by Triseliotis (2002). The reasons given correspond closely to the arguments presented above by LAs in our research. Although the varying interpretations of research evidence about long-term fostering as against adoption by LAs may sometimes be a ‘barrier’ to traditional forms of adoption, they may not be an obstacle either to alternative forms of permanence or to other aspects of children’s welfare such as links to existing attachments and nurturing of their identity. This has to be judged and negotiated in each individual case in the context of their differing demographic and organisational circumstances, conscious of the need not to overreact towards (or against) the Government’s prioritising of adoption.

Values and attitudes: minority ethnic children

The LA responses to our questions about placing children evinced a measure of concern, particularly for issues of contact for minority ethnic and other children whose attachments and identity were already significantly developed. The evidence suggests that indeed older black children are less likely to be adopted (Ivaldi, 2000, p 44). It is also a significant feature of research evidence and writing on permanence and adoption that black children may benefit from contacts with family and community being kept open, as in long-term fostering (Dagoo, 1995; Kelly, 2000). However, the Prime Minister’s Review of Adoption does little to suggest that there is a matter of judgement and values involved here. It directs attention to US models for adoption policy and relegates to an appendix a brief discussion of other countries where traditional adoption is far less significant. In particular, Australia and New Zealand more often use a combination of family group conferencing and fostering specifically in recognition of the contribution and needs of the Aboriginal and Maori peoples in relation to child care. A recent review of a study of adoption in Australia suggests that because of these influences, there is ‘a climate unsupportive of adoption and an anti-adoption value position’ (Phillips, 2001, p 187). In England and Wales there is a much more positive attitude towards adoption on the part of LAs as noted above, but also a reluctance to be pushed into a ‘politically correct’ position on adoption in the light of some of the advantages of long-term fostering, and the other options in child care. This is consistent with views expressed by writers who note the ‘convergence’ of adoption and fostering in key respects (Kelly, 2000), and who emphasise the importance of making specific judgements flexibly tailored to individual children’s needs. Others have also stressed the importance of flexibility of provision: ‘the contemporary diverse complexity of family life requires a correspondingly flexible range of orders’ (Ball, 2001, p 11). A related point is the necessity of making considered
judgements according to needs, rather than being driven by adoption targets (Gupta, 2002, pp 42–3). The variable values of LAs, both at senior management and at social worker levels, may be seen as ‘barriers to adoption’, but it is equally possible to argue that these are a desirable feature in view of the differing demographic, ethnic and other factors affecting LA policy and practice. This paper is suggesting that some of the reasons for variability are not simply attributable to the inadequacies of LA social services, even though there will inevitably be some stronger and weaker performances. Rather they relate to the necessity that many urban LAs have had to consider community and family links for older white working class and minority ethnic populations. This does nothing to take away from the generally accepted view that there has indeed been too much of a dip in rates of adoption, especially in the 1990s.

It is of course not necessarily a positive decision not to place ‘black’ children for adoption. It is well known that there is a shortage of black adopters and that LA workers try to avoid placing ‘transracially’ if possible in order to be sensitive to cultural differences. This led to the popular suspicion that ‘black’ children and children of ‘mixed heritage’ may linger in care because of alleged ‘ideological’ values. In fact no senior managers we interviewed said they would take culture and ethnic background as the only factors to be considered. Nor would they ‘wait forever’ to get a minority ethnic child placed, but would choose long-term fostering if appropriate, and if a suitable adoptive placement was not available. They generally argued for the necessity of making judgements about complex situations, though one black social worker took the view that if you had sufficient commitment to finding a good ‘cultural’ match you could usually find it:

... every child I've placed has matched their background, in terms of religion, culture, race, language, and I've never had a problem. Because I think if you feel strongly about something the commitment's there.

However, for many LAs there was serious concern about the availability of minority ethnic adopters. As one manager observed, ‘The agency has difficulty in recruiting black and minority ethnic carers’. Another stated that ‘Some carers do need financial support, for example, black carers’. In the second stage of our research, interviewees from every organisational level in all the LAs interviewed in this region expressed concern about the difficulties of placing minority ethnic children, including Asian and ‘mixed race’ children. Examples were given where appropriate adoptive carers could not be found, or could only be found at great distance (and great expense). Across the country an understandably more varied pattern was evidenced, with a substantial minority (approximately one-third) of LAs (mainly in urban areas) expressing concern about this issue. Only two LA interviewees thought that local initiatives had solved this problem, in one exceptional case as a result of a VAA campaign to recruit black families. Other LAs were not concerned because, as one manager succinctly put it, ‘We have no black adopters – but we have no black children to place’. The social workers interviewed in the southern LA came into this category, being less concerned with the problem of finding minority ethnic adopters, but largely because of the specific demographic differences between their LA and those in the north.

However, one of the reasons for LA reluctance to use VAs is that the latter have not always been able to come up with the kind of placement the LA needed. This has been a particular problem where VAs with religious origins are concerned, which predominate voluntary adoption placement in the north-west. The majority of LAs expressing concern are supported by research which shows that ‘considerably more minority ethnic children were placed by secular agencies’, and that ‘black single adopters in particular were much more likely to be placed by secular agencies’. This is partly as a result of the much lower percentage of minority ethnic staff in religious VAs (Ivaldi, 2000, p 42), but also because some ethnic minorities will not use
VAAs: ‘the majority of Asian families seeking approval approached local authorities because of the religious associations that voluntaries had’. The problems of recruitment of minority ethnic adopters also receive confirmation by a small but interesting piece of research which showed how poor a response black applicants get from all types of adoption agency but religious ones in particular (Fenton, 2001). Whether there are positive or negative reasons for not placing minority ethnic children with adopters, the end result is thus similar: the rate of use of adoptive placements may be lowered differentially across demographically different LAs. Those with high percentages of black and mixed heritage children needing permanence, especially in urban areas with higher percentages of minority ethnic populations, may (positively) wish to find alternative solutions or (negatively) be unable to find suitable adoptive parents, especially where the local VAA has a (Christian) religious background and few black staff or black adopters.

Conclusion
While the Prime Minister’s review and the media target the alleged incompetence of LAs as a major barrier to adoption, they have ignored the factors which we have gleaned from across the country concerning the sluggish performance of LAs in the 1990s, and what has been happening since. The criticisms of LAs and social workers therefore arguably appear exaggerated, ill-informed or misconceived. Criticisms of ‘inexplicable’ differences in LA social services performance are often based on partial interpretations unsympathetic to both local government and social work. The evidence of widely differing circumstances and the complexity of the judgements to be made suggest the importance of flexible judgement to meet the needs of differing groups of children, negotiated both at the level of the demographic needs of different LAs, and on a case-by-case basis, a conclusion reached by recent related adoption research (Bell et al., 2002). This will inevitably result – rightly and wrongly – in variable patterns and rates of adoption placements between LAs, particularly in the light of the impact of re-organisations on LA workers’ abilities to maintain patterns of service and relationships in the various adoption networks.

Our research does nothing to undermine the importance of adoption as a positive resource for children. It should be viewed as one of a number of alternatives, as a matter of central and local policy and practice, supported at both levels by collaborative practices recruiting diverse adopters for diverse children and families. The dip in adoptions in the 1990s was not simply the ‘fault’ of the LAs, but it is widely accepted that the evidence of children waiting for placement demands much more effective use of all resources, including adoption. Equally, our research positively supports the importance of collaboration between LAs and VAs to meet the needs of local populations, as recommended to northern authorities a decade ago (Social Services Inspectorate, 1993, Appendix 2). The importance of local circumstances and demography should encourage community profiling and holistic approaches to longer-term strategic planning in which the VAAs can be included in consortia and contractual arrangements. This should include attention to the financial issues which are important both to LA and VAA planning and development.

Further reflection on our research suggests that LAs, VAAs and the Association of Directors of Social Services should consider much more frequently funding their own research (and not only in the area of adoption), to provide evidence to support alternative explanations to those favoured by the powerful combination of central government and the media. As a research team in social work we are conscious of the importance of evidence-based practice. Yet it is also obvious that identification of research issues, and the nature and interpretation of evidence are a critical question where issues of reflectivity and values bear heavily upon the compilation, evaluation and assessment of evidence (Clifford, 1998). The power of central government directs its research gaze in certain ways, producing ‘balanced’ research evidence.
that supports a policy direction favoured by itself. Professional and local government administrators need to consider how they respond to this kind of evidence, and what alternative kinds of data may be adduced. In the case of our own research, we readily acknowledge that it is funded on a very small budget, and our evidence draws on a limited number of interviewees, especially in the second stage. However, it provides some useful evidence to question political pressures which might lead to ill-considered swings, either towards or away from adoption.

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