Adoption reform Managing diversity and delay

While many aspects of current government policy on adoption are welcome, there is concern that some key issues in the adoption process are not adequately addressed in the Adoption and Children Bill, 2001, and that the use of quantitative targets will not necessarily support the good practice identified. In this article Margaret Bell, Kate Wilson and Marilyn Crawshaw consider, in particular, two areas of difficulty in the selection and preparation process: managing diversity and delay. Their study highlights the need for practitioners to be flexible and open in their approach to shared assessments, and for agencies to have robust formal and informal communication systems which are transparent and accountable to users.

Introduction
The commitment of the present government to adoption law reform in England and to the increasing use of adoption is demonstrated by the speed of the publication of the Adoption and Children Bill, 2001, based on the earlier White Paper, Adoption: A new approach (Department of Health, 2000). The publication of the National Adoption Standards in 2001 further emphasised governmental commitment to reform. Although broadly welcome (Collier, 2001), concerns have been expressed that some of the proposals for reforming the current system are either simplistic or problematic (Ball, 2001), while other key issues are not sufficiently addressed (Triseliotis, 2002). Our intention here is to contribute to the debate, arguing that some of the proposals in the Bill, which are buttressed by the targets in the Standards, set out potentially unrealistic timescales which deny the complexity of the exercise, while others do not go far enough in requiring authorities to respond to the needs of the social diversity in contemporary society. The article will consider these two aspects of the assessment, preparation and placement process which we consider present particular areas of difficulty in the enactment of the new Adoption Bill. The discussion will be illustrated with reference to a study of the experiences of 39 adoptive parents of their assessment, preparation and selection. We conclude by considering the extent to which the dilemmas experienced in this process are addressed in the proposed legislative reforms.

The study
The study described here was commissioned by one northern English local authority in 1999, to explore the experiences of approved adopters of their assessment and preparation. The authority used a standard assessment procedure, from an information meeting, through preparation groups, to home visits to prepare the report for the adoption panel. Following approval and a three-month wait (apparently to create psychological ‘readiness’) adopters were in most cases introduced to a child. A limited post-adoption telephone help service was available.

The research was commissioned because the authority wished to understand the impact of changes in procedures which had been implemented between two periods, 1995–98, by gaining information from service users about how effective the preparation felt some time after placement. Fifty applicants (couples or single people) who had been through the assessment and preparation process in the years selected were approached, of whom 39 (18 couples and three single women) agreed to be interviewed. All were aged over 25, 73 per cent being between 35 and 45, and five over 46 years of age. With the exception of two Asian women and one Asian man, all were white British. Everyone had gone through the standard agency assessment procedures, with the majority attending preparation groups solely for adopters, and a minority

Margaret Bell is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of York
Kate Wilson is Professor of Social Work at the University of Nottingham
Marilyn Crawshaw is Teaching Fellow in Social Work at the University of York

Key words: preparing for adoption, managing diversity, appropriate timescales and delay.
for adopters and foster carers together. At point of interview all had children placed with them apart from two couples who had withdrawn from the list. A limitation of the study, as with others which have broadly similar findings (see Parker, 1999), is that we were not able to include potential applicants who did not pursue their initial enquiries or who were not approved, as the agency did not keep these data. Clearly this is an important area that requires further research.

Addressing the diverse needs of potential applicants
Research evidence suggests that the existing system of recruiting and preparing people for adoption fails to attract and adequately prepare applicants from diverse family units and social and cultural backgrounds. Murch et al (1993) identified a number of ways in which the assessment experience was daunting. More recently Owen (1999) has described how potential adopters are confronted with agency policies which are discriminatory and oppressive, such as requiring women to give up full-time work or to discontinue infertility treatment. Single persons consider themselves the last to be included. Sarah’s experience (see the Guardian, 27 June 2001) is typical: ‘At the age of 44, childless and single, Sarah had given up hope of being a mother . . .’ Singh (1997) in Scotland identified some of the ways in which black families can be put off by assessment processes which were culturally blind and based on a deficit model of parenting. The impact of recruitment campaigns, such as ‘Never thought I could’, mounted by Southwark Council in March 2001, or the Adopter Recruitment Toolkit published by the Department of Health at the end of 2001, has yet to be tested, but early indicators are that such proactive campaigns are succeeding in targeting people who assumed they were unsuitable to adopt. ‘Never thought I could’ received a huge response from those who ruled themselves out of being adoptive parents because of their sexuality and age, and encouraged lesbian and gay adopters by highlighting fair and equal access. Factors such as a 24-hour response to enquiries were important in encouraging people to progress. However, the Draft Practice Guidance to Support the National Adoption Standards for England (Department of Health, 2002), while emphasising the inclusion of all, fails to address ways in which minority groups should be targeted or to provide guidance on handling the diverse needs of applicants during the assessment and preparation process. It is unfortunate that there are no specific recommendations encouraging applications from single parents or unmarried partners – including gay and lesbian couples – although Parliament’s recent decision to allow unmarried partners to apply is encouraging. Of equal concern given the disproportionate number of black and mixed race children awaiting new families is that, although the Standards expect preparation groups to address the needs of black and minority ethnic children, no specific encouragement is given to recruiting families of mixed race or origin.

Others before us (Kaniuk, 1991; Owen, 1999; Fenton, 2001) have highlighted the need for agencies to be aware of the diverse needs and experiences of applicants if they are to be successful in recruiting and preparing would-be adopters, and the applicants in our study provide graphic illustration of this. The authorities’ response to initial enquiries can be crucial in maintaining commitment from applicants. In our study most enquirers felt they had been sensitively handled at point of enquiry and that information was ‘pitched just about right’. Nevertheless some thought the beginning stages were designed to discourage some and encourage others, especially those considering older children and those from minority ethnic groups. Linked to this was a sense that the social workers had preconceived ideas about what adopters should be like. We do not, of course, have information from people who enquired and did not proceed or from people who never enquired in the first place. Their views are likely to have been more negative.

According to our respondents, the preparation groups had some shortcomings with respect to addressing the diverse needs, background and experi-
ences of the applicants in a way which was respectful and encouraging. The differences highlighted by our sample were as follows.

**Diversity of family unit**

As far as we could tell, the gender, age, marital status and racial origin of our sample seemed to be similar to other such groups (Murch *et al.*, 1993) in that most were white British, married and aged between 35 and 44. Even so, while most felt comfortable with the value base and general approach of the agency to their needs, some experienced difficulties. Three couples felt that differences in religion or class had been handled in a discriminatory manner. One couple from a minority ethnic group expressed concerns about the failure to allocate an appropriate same-race worker:

*We were not offered an Asian social worker. This was the most upsetting thing... he wanted to meet my family, would not accept that [my wife] was at work, would not accept that [my wife] wouldn't see the birth mother, would not accept our Muslim ways.*

There are clear implications for agencies in tailoring their procedures and employing staff to meet a range of different family values, family units and child-rearing patterns.

**Differences in experiences of parenting**

While some of the respondents in our study, like those in others (see Quinton *et al.*, 1998; Lowe and Murch, 1999) were first-time parents, others already had children in the family. Even with the first-time adopters, experience of being with children or young people varied. Those with experience thought the sessions too elementary:

*It wasn't anything new – they were very basic, but I always felt that I needed to keep quiet and I felt like not a total group member because it wasn't meeting my need in terms of new information.*

Lowe and Murch (1999) suggest that this group of adopters may be larger than is commonly assumed (34 per cent in their sample were foster carers), which raises the question of the value of the sessions for a number of the attendees. Those who had little experience of parenting did value much of what they were taught:

*It did point out a lot what could happen and it got you thinking because like you wouldn't have thought of them issues.*

**Different views on what personal material should be addressed**

Another difference lay in respondents’ views on what personal material it was appropriate to address, as well as where and how. Prospective adopters' wishes to have a child derive from a range of personal experiences and circumstances, defined broadly by Murch *et al.* (1993) as revolving around infertility or altruism. Motivation is known to be a factor in successful outcomes (Triseliotis *et al.*, 2000) and so has to be considered. However, the respondents’ perceptions of what it is necessary or appropriate to consider differs widely, and their reluctance may be insufficiently appreciated by social workers from professional backgrounds where exploration of feelings is largely accepted as given. While practitioners may hold the view, for example, that individuals who are infertile need to have accomplished a range of grief tasks before they can psychologically embrace a new child (Courtney, 2000), this may well not be shared by the applicants. The purpose of such questioning is not always understood:

*They dug so deep I was in tears, she was trying to find out anything that would give her clues as to why I should not be a good mother.*

Some of our respondents found discussion of personal material over-intrusive, but did not feel they could openly refuse to engage, thinking this would count against them. For them, the sense of being tested all the time blocked their openness to learning: ’It was like 18 months of driving test solid.’

**Different views on the methods used**

There were also differences in preferred
learning styles. Some felt uncomfortable with group discussion and would have preferred personal issues to be addressed privately during the home visit. Role play was valued by some but not all, although there was general agreement, again reflecting other studies reported above, that hearing from experienced adopters in the preparation groups helped in maintaining a balance between the difficulties and rewards of adoption:

They sort of went overboard with it . . . that a child can have tantrums for six months without getting any sleep.

While differences of view did not accord with gender, they did relate to background experience in the caring professions and prior experience of learning through training groups. What stood out was the need for a more flexible approach to the diverse needs of the applicants, and for an enhancement of the applicants’ involvement in the assessment process.

Differences in purpose
Perceptions about the purpose of the groups varied. When foster carers were also included in mixed foster carer/adopter groups, a number of the adopters felt the needs of foster carers were different and unhelpfully took precedence:

It was a bit disappointing. I would have liked to ask more questions but because it was geared to fostering we just sat there and sort of listened really.

This raises issues about the nature of the task, and whether the particular issues relating to adoption, especially around continuing contact, identity and the court process, should be managed separately. For example, when encouraging adoptive parents to think how best to maintain links between the children and their birth families, it is important that the differences between contact in adoption and contact in foster care are clarified and managed appropriately in the preparation process (see Waterhouse, 1999; Triseliotis, 2002).

Another area of confusion and uncertainty was whether the purpose of the groups was for imparting information, for providing time to discuss and reflect or for assessment. Most agreed there should be more openness and feedback from the social workers because no information was provided about the assessment component in the groups, or what information might be passed on. A number described some sense of a hidden agenda:

There was a lot of speculation as to whether they might be assessing us while we were there . . . people saying, ‘I wonder if they’re making secret notes’.

Hopefully, the emphasis in the National Standards on the importance of openness, honesty and transparency in the process will be reflected in agencies’ improved policy and practice in this respect.

Avoiding delay
The concept of delay and appropriate timescales is problematic. Preparing children to leave one family and enter another takes time, care and skill. The research on outcomes is clear that ‘success’ is not determined by how long the process takes – or the numbers that are placed. Determining success is extremely complex (see Triseliotis, 2002), although most studies suggest that the main factors in ‘successful’ outcomes (ie placements not disrupting) are the age of the child at placement – the younger the better – and the lack of behavioural problems before placement (Borland et al., 1991; Fergusson et al., 1995; Howe et al., 2001). Further, with the development of alternatives to permanency, such as special guardianship and programmes of kinship care (Broad et al., 2001), decisions about whether or not adoption is in the child’s best interests may take longer to achieve than hitherto. Equally, there are no short cuts to achieving the successful adoptive placement of difficult older children. There are dangers in using ‘delay’ as a measure of failure or bad practice, and in assuming that delay is always detrimental. The worry is that the complexity and inherent difficulties in managing the different interests that agencies face will be diluted in order to achieve the quantitative targets identified.
in Quality Protects to increase the numbers of children adopted.

This much acknowledged, there is general agreement that too many stages in the process are characterised by unnecessary delay. The Draft Practice Guidance (Department of Health, 2002) recommends that the process from enquiry to decision should not take more than eight months. Enquirers should receive a written response to their enquiry within five working days; they should be invited to attend an information meeting within two months; and decisions about suitability to adopt should be made within six months of receiving the formal application. Such tighter timescales would, for many applicants in our study, have provided a welcome contrast to their experience. In common with other studies already cited (eg Murch et al, 1993), they described delays at every stage:

The process for recruiting adopters is too slow. There are too many long gaps between each stage and the potential for long waits for a suitable match once approved.

After initial enquiries, few were clear about next steps and almost all experienced unexplained delays in moving on, in one case for four years. What made it more difficult for them, taking into account their reluctance to appear awkward, was that the delays were not explained. Several commented that a standard letter from time to time would have helped: ‘It’s like you get all these parents and drop them in a black hole.’

Many were also critical of the length of time the home visits took and that social workers were too tied to a rigid schedule of work. Most accepted the rationale for the three months waiting policy following approval, but for some it seemed yet another barrier – ‘so it just goes on and on’ – adding a sense of inequity to one of helplessness. All but two had gone on to have placements; some had children placed immediately while most were approached to have children within six months of approval. Of the two where placements had not been made, delays had been experienced from the beginning and, in spite of positive feedback, nothing had materialised. This was particularly difficult for one family as preparation work had been done with their existing children and many years had been devoted to trying to achieve the adoption. When they finally withdrew, there was no contact from the department. In such cases there clearly is a need for an independent review to provide families with the opportunity to complain without fearing retribution, and the establishment of review mechanisms within the new Bill will provide a much needed accountability.

Some delay between approval and placement may sometimes be justifiable. Within the context of one in five placements breaking down before the applicants go to court (Department of Health, 2000) the speed at which the placement is made is not necessarily a criterion of ‘success’. It seems more likely that it is the care and skill invested in this key part of the process which counts. All of our respondents stressed the importance of detailed preparation for the placement meeting, including the involvement of older children in the family. Having background information mattered, as did seeing photographs and details, such as the fact that the birth father, like the adoptive father, had a beard. Pacing the work to suit the needs of all the parties involved was crucial in enabling them to assimilate information and prepare for meeting one another.

The introduction of the child’s social worker adds further to the complexity and time taken. In our study experiences of this involvement varied. Where the relationship proved difficult it was felt that the children’s social worker had divided loyalties and was slowing things down, for instance because of a focus on the birth mother. Of course, time taken in working more closely with the birth mother at this stage may mean time saved when the case comes to court. Additionally, consent from the birth mother, possibly achieved through painstaking but time-consuming work with her, may prove to be a factor in ‘successful’ adoption outcomes (see Hill, 2000).
Contact with the birth relatives

Issues concerning contact with birth relatives are sensitive for all parties and impact sharply upon timescales. Research suggests that a range of factors influence both what the adoptive parents promise under pressure to accept and what subsequently happens (Hill et al., 1989). For example, contact after placement is likely to be adversely affected if birth parents continue to be antagonistic to the adoption (Feast and Howe, 1997). In our study, although most adoptive parents agreed in principle to post-adoption contact, several retained mixed views about its appropriateness. One commented pragmatically that ‘at the end of the day, once you’ve adopted them, you do what you like’. In the event, most who had agreed to some form of post-adoption contact with birth family members found little positive in it and were relieved when this was not taken up:

*I understand why we have to do the letter and everything, but to be quite honest when I actually do it, it feels like I’m writing a report to parents and I’m only looking after them.*

Again, time spent at this stage in resolving disagreements seems likely to ameliorate problems later on (Hill, 2000).

Pre-contact meetings were hard to manage and were another point where delays could occur. Our respondents’ experience was that they were managed sensitively and were worthwhile. One couple had meetings with the birth mother who had mental health problems, at the end of which the mother had wished them ‘a nice life with him’, thus marking an important transition. Greater use of the Adoption Register, where the children, their birth families and the adopters live in different parts of the country, may mean more time will be needed to manage pre-adoption contact sensitively or less will be negotiated. Given what we know about the long-term benefits of post-adoption contact for the children where this is well handled (see Howe et al., 2001), it is concerning if opportunities to manage this sensitive process effectively are discouraged by tight timescales.

Introductions to the children

Delays and difficulties were also experienced during introductions to the children. Planning and prior preparation of all parties was key here. Most of our respondents found that the introductions were carefully planned and went well. However, in some cases the prospective adopters were taken aback at the first meeting when the children were introduced to them as ‘their new parents’. One couple, alarmingly, felt railroaded: ‘You daren’t turn them down because you think it will wreck your chances.’ Lowe et al (1999) have pointed out that children, as well as adults, find it hard to say ‘no’ at this stage. Feeling under pressure to decide quickly can only make this worse.

A further difficulty was the lack of clarity about who had overall responsibility for undertaking such tasks as introducing children to their new parents. Meeting with the child is a key transition point in the process – almost equivalent to a birth, as Prynn (2000) suggests. Our knowledge of transitions and attachment theory should alert us to the importance in the longer term of managing this key life stage and critical event effectively. Where foster carers in this study were skilled and willing, the transition to placement worked well; where they were not, more careful preparation and support was indicated for all parties, together with clarification of who, within the professional triad, was in the driving seat. To what extent this reflected uncertainty between the roles of the child’s social worker and that of the unit worker, conscious decisions about not being intrusive or other factors, we were not in a position to judge. Nevertheless our findings suggest a clear need for further work with both adoptive and foster parents at the initial meeting.

The importance of working towards a successful transition with the foster carers who had been looking after the child was a feature of our study. Some adopters described the foster carers as ‘brilliant’, and their expertise engendered confidence:

*If you can’t trust your foster carer, who’s looked after them [ie the children] for 18 months, you shouldn’t be doing the job.*
Others encountered resistance:

The foster mother wanted to adopt S herself and so was very anti. She was most thwarted because she’d been told she was too old and then she found out I was older. When I went to pick up the baby I didn’t get a look in. I just felt eliminated. It was an awful feeling.

Some of the adopters could understand that foster carers constructed barriers because of their own emotional ties with the child:

One of the things we weren’t prepared for was just how much the child would mean to the foster carer. She really loved him and was obviously very affected by handing him over.

Others queried the foster mother’s judgement. A couple who met the foster carers in advance of deciding whether to go ahead with meeting the child were nearly put off because the foster mother implied that the child was a slow learner (which he wasn’t). In such cases only skilled and time-consuming work could prevent the antagonistic feelings of the foster carers from being projected onto the accepted adopters. It remains to be seen the degree to which the new opportunities for permanence, which the White Paper and Bill encourage, make a difference to foster carers – either in enabling them to keep the child or to feel less angry where they cannot.

Post-placement and post-adoption support

Evidence from this study highlights the importance of supporting families at the time of placement and afterwards. Some respondents valued being trusted to go it alone and stressed the need to mark endings: ‘We had a few visits and then they drifted away.’ However, many wished for more help and guidance, for example, on how to respond to the child’s questions. More positive action, such as a letter from the agency asking how things were going, would have been welcome. A number commented that the emphasis in the follow-up visits was on the children’s needs, and while accepting that these should be the primary focus, urged social workers not to neglect their emotional needs too.

Most had little contact from the agency after the adoption order was made. For many this was fine – ‘Now we can get on with the proper business’ – but others would have found it helpful to talk to other adopters, possibly through a mentorship scheme or a group. Some had experienced significant problems in accessing help: ‘I was told the case was closed, which isn’t helpful when you’re going through a bad time.’ The new Adoption Support Regulations place a duty on councils to provide post-adoption support to all of the parties involved in the process, which is very welcome.

Need for specialist, trained practitioners and good agency management

This study drew attention to the complexity and skilled nature of the adoption process from the perspective of the adopters. The task adoption agencies face is challenging, and it is positive that the Bill endorses the need for specialist, trained staff and efficient, responsive agency systems. The introduction of post-qualification training for childcare practitioners and the National Standards practice guidance go some way to effect this. Our study suggests that there are two linked and interdependent levels at which practice requires development: that of managing process and that of developing group work skills.

Managing process

Being given honest and accurate information was an important feature throughout. Applicants needed to be kept informed about progress and provided with explanations about such things as basic criteria and procedures. Although communication had worked well for many, a number had been left without information on their progress for worryingly long periods. Many felt that the system was too rigid in the lead-up to the placement, and that afterwards there was a lack of communication, a failure to meet dates, difficulty in making contact and insufficient contact
with the social worker. In situations where the balance of power lies heavily with the professionals, and where challenging such power is seen as being personally risky, formal and informal systems of communication need to be in place to ensure the rights of applicants are met and their sense of disempowerment and helplessness is not heightened. Agencies can construct formal systems to ensure information is provided, and practitioners need to be supported in ensuring applicants know their rights and are kept informed. The National Standards make it clear that this should happen, and the review mechanism provides a point of complaint where they do not.

A further key feature of managing process highlighted here had to do with balancing the need for thorough scrutiny with a respect for the individuals’ self-esteem, privacy and a valuing of what they can bring to the process of selection. In an attempt to balance these potentially contradictory imperatives, assessment programmes have moved increasingly towards a collaborative approach, with an emphasis on preparation and education rather than assessment. The intention is that:

The majority of applicants . . . will come to understand better their own suitability as adoptive parents and withdraw if they no longer feel adoption would be right for them in their current situation. (Campion, 1995, p 59)

Developing group work skills
As we have seen, this agency managed some points of the process better than others. The preparation groups, where the emphasis was on information-giving but also involved some self-exploration, got a more varied response from participants, seeming to reflect the difficulties of managing a group with widely varying thresholds in terms of knowledge, experience and education as well as readiness to lower defences. The ambiguities of the groups’ purpose (Were they information-providing, support-promoting, assessing or self-assessing?) was reflected in our sample’s concerns over issues of content and inflexibility. Additionally, while some found the exploration of personal issues (eg infertility) too painful to be handled appropriately in a group, others found the information too basic and felt rather isolated as a result.

Such varied responses reflect the difficulties of offering a truly collaborative, partnership approach and of managing diversity. Some would have preferred to explore sensitive issues in private; others felt their level of previous knowledge made much of the content over familiar. However, there was no provision for applicants to opt out of the groups, or to have individual work concurrently with them. The majority, as we have seen, found the experience of the home study illuminating and validating and, generally, the purpose of the individual work was well understood and respondents felt more in control of what material was worked on. Collaborative approaches to assessment require greater skills on the part of agency workers and were clearly the key in helping applicants to reach self-understanding and think through personal issues, all components of a joint enterprise approach.

Literature over the last two decades (eg Hartman, 1979; Ryburn, 1991) has encouraged a more collaborative approach to assessment, arguing that those undertaking the assessment may have no superior knowledge base nor any proven methods objectively to assess fitness to be an adoptive parent. The agency in our study sought to include elements of a joint collaborative approach, but responsibility for formulating the assessment clearly remained with the agency practitioners. Clark et al (1998) describe a model of shared assessment built on the concept of interactive learning and with a view to shifting the power ‘from a position where the social worker uses their expertise to enable prospective adopters to assess themselves’ (p 35). Key elements of this innovative model are that the applicants complete their own self-assessment using the Form F, facilitated by a combination of group and home work led by one key worker. The difficulties experienced by our respondents suggest that the more flexible and collaborative approach to service
delivery described by Clark *et al* might well offer a way forward and meet the diverse backgrounds, learning styles and needs of prospective adopters more appropriately.

**Conclusion**

The Government is committed to modernising the adoption process and to making it faster and easier. A number of the proposed new measures are to be welcomed, such as ensuring prospective adopters get the information they need, placing a duty on local authorities to provide post-placement support including, where appropriate, financial help, and the determination to spread best practice by improving social workers’ training. Our study provides ample evidence that such measures are necessary and that adoptive applicants should be provided with a service which is clear, and more open and transparent than hitherto. Also receiving welcome attention is the way in which communications are managed and the power imbalance addressed, so ensuring that applicants are treated with respect and provided with review mechanisms where they feel wrong decisions have been made. Already in place are a package of measures, such as the National Register and a recruitment toolkit to speed up recruitment and the matching process. These should result in more applicants coming forward and more children being placed. Agencies need to understand who would consider adoption, as well as what converts that disposition into action. The emphasis on recruitment may trigger more thorough and informed scrutiny of existing procedures for attracting and responding to potential adopters from a wide range of family and cultural backgrounds. Finally, agreeing national practice guidelines may result in better practice skills and less patchiness across different authorities.

However, this paper suggests that while the new Bill, Adoption Standards and the recruitment toolkit may mean that agency policies and practices improve – both in relation to timescales and numbers to be achieved – other key issues at the heart of the adoption process remain problematic. The first is managing diversity. The process of recruiting, preparing and assessing applicants from diverse social and cultural backgrounds in a way which is respectful and encouraging, while at the same time being rigorous in assessing their capacity to parent often damaged and emotionally disturbed children, is an increasingly complex process. Practitioners need to arrive at the correct balance between imparting information, allowing time to discuss and reflect upon personal responses appropriate to the individual, and to provide opportunities for assessment. And they have to bear in mind the needs of children for permanent placement within the context of knowing that many of these children have special needs and the research findings on foster and adoption placement breakdown (Sinclair *et al*, 2000; Triseliotis, 2002). Such processes require careful professional judgement and skilled agency management. Most importantly, practice should not be rushed.

This paper has also indicated that the use of the concept of delay as a measure of success is problematic. We know that, generally, it is in the child’s best interests for permanent placement to be established at the earliest opportunity. Currently, the average time spent looked after before the decision is made for adoption is 16 months. The average time from decision to actual placement is another seven months. The law in relation to making parental consent easier to obtain is being addressed by the Adoption and Children Bill, as are a number of aspects of delay in the courts. Setting up an adoption register, also, is likely to result in more and quicker adoptions taking place. Taking age at placement as a factor in good outcomes implies that the younger the age at adoption, the better. Delays that are unnecessary are, by definition, unhelpful. As we have seen, some are due to poor administration and some to poor practice. However, our study has outlined a number of areas in which expending time and allowing for important work to be done is the key to good practice, especially where older children who are likely to have behavioural and other problems are concerned. Successful
outcomes in the longer term are more likely to be achieved by careful attention to all aspects of the adoption process, rather than by quick placement.

A further concern in setting high numerical targets as a measure of success is that alternatives to adoption, such as kinship care schemes, will not receive the support that research suggests they should (Broad et al, 2001). Also, for some children long-term foster care will always be the placement of choice (see Triseliotis, 2002), and special guardianship should allow greater security for this group of children. While targets provide management with useful tools for measuring numerically, they do not necessarily provide the indicators of good practice which we know are in the interests of individual children and young people.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge with gratitude the grants from the local authority and from the University of York Innovation and Research Pump Priming Fund which made this study possible.

References


Campion M J, Who’s Fit to be a Parent?, London: Routledge, 1995


Department of Health, Adoption: A new approach, Cm. 5017, 2000


Owen M, Novices, Old Hands and Professionals: Adoption by single people, London: BAAF, 1999


