It has been estimated that only one in ten people making an adoption enquiry go on to adopt. Lorraine Wallis undertook a study to explore these potential losses. She presents the results of a survey completed by 245 people who had made an enquiry with one of 17 adoption agencies in England. This random sample of enquirers was designed to explore the links between the characteristics of enquirers, their decision-making about adoption and their experience of making an enquiry. The findings indicate a less pessimistic view of the outcome of people’s adoption enquiry, with 46 per cent beginning the adoption process. However, it indicates the difficulties enquirers have in asking questions and finding answers to concerns about their eligibility. It shows the links between enquirers’ social and economic background and the decision-making process they undertake. The study highlights the vulnerability of some enquirers to poor agency responses and the impact that enquirers’ support networks and knowledge of organisations has on the outcome of their enquiry. These are issues adoption agencies need to address if they are to maximise the potential of those coming forward to enquire about adoption.

Introduction
There is little research that explores the experiences of people who do not pursue their adoption enquiry. It is estimated that only one in ten people enquiring about adoption go on to adopt yet little is known about the characteristics of the people who do not proceed or why they do not become adoptive parents (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000). Given the current emphasis on providing more adoption placements for children in the looked after system, such information is important in helping adoption agencies to maximise the potential of those coming forward.

A small amount of research has sought to understand what prevents people from adopting but the focus has been on the views of professionals (Luken, 1995), adopters (Jones, 1998; Owen, 1999) and those who have not yet made an enquiry (Sunmonu, 2000). The findings from these studies have focused on agency practices, such as how the initial contact with enquirers is handled, how information is shared about adoption and how stereotypes that people might hold about adoption are addressed. These studies have not been able to tell us anything about the characteristics and experiences of those who do not pursue. The exception to this is a survey of people who made enquiries with the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) during National Adoption Week (Simmonds, 2000). Marital status and age were identified as key characteristics linked to whether or not people pursued their enquiry, with only 11 per cent of single enquirers taking their enquiry forward.

The study reported here sought to explore further the views and experiences of a random sample of people making adoption enquiries. The study focuses on whether or not these people begin the assessment process.
of the information sent to enquirers and their policy and procedures relating to this stage of the process. One thousand questionnaires were sent out to people who had enquired at the 17 agencies. We received 245 questionnaires back, giving a return rate of 24 per cent. The low return rate means we need to be cautious about generalising from the results of this sample. However, wherever possible comparisons have been drawn with findings from other research in this field, in particular Simmonds’s survey of adoption enquirers (Simmonds, 2000).

The data from our survey were analysed to explore the relationship between the outcome of the enquiry and the characteristics of the enquirer, how they went about making their enquiry, their questions and concerns about adoption and the response they received from adoption agencies.

From the returned questionnaires, forty people were identified for a telephone interview. The interview sample was designed to enable the exploration of the links between the outcome of the enquiry and the enquirers’ characteristics. In this article the interview data will be used to explore the enquiry experience of particular groups, such as black enquirers, enquirers who are non-professionals and those with birth children.

‘Active’ enquirers and their decision-making

Of the 245 questionnaires returned, two-thirds (113) were from enquirers who were actively thinking about adopting at the point at which they enquired. Forty-six per cent of these ‘active’ enquirers had begun the process six months after contacting an adoption agency. In Simmonds’s survey the percentage is lower at 36 per cent. Both these results are less bleak than the often quoted estimated figure of only one in ten enquirers going on to adopt (Department of Health, 2000). The latter figure does not take into account the status of people’s enquiry and it is misleading to view an enquiry as a commitment to adoption (Simmonds, 2000). This study focused on what influenced the outcomes for this ‘active’ group.

Twenty-three per cent of enquirers had decided not to adopt. This included five per cent who did not want to adopt at this point and 18 per cent – less than one in five – who had decided they would never adopt. The majority of those saying no to adoption did so because of what they learnt about the children awaiting adoption, eg the lack of babies and the backgrounds of the children:

We wanted a healthy baby and there are none.

I know there are a lot of children who are up for adoption that have a lot of problems coming from their parents. I thought, ‘Oh no, I don’t know if I could cope with it after we’ve been through’.

Birth families were a distinct group among those who said no. Their decision not to proceed was often linked to concerns about the impact of adoption on their birth children. In this sample at least, the decision to say no was often led by the male partner:

My partner wasn’t as keen as me. He still wants us to have another child of our own. Also we were both concerned about the effect on the two children we already have.

The second issue for those who did not
want to proceed related to the adoption process. This included concerns about the length of time that the process took and that it was ‘too intense’. Some people were deciding no on the basis of a misunderstanding of the process:

*We thought the child that you adopt could keep in contact with her parents. It was just the way she [the social worker] said it. I thought, ‘Hang on a minute: she’s saying the parents have got rights to come back and see the child.’*

One in five of those who said no to adoption felt this was because of the response of the adoption agency they had contacted – only four per cent of those actively interested in adoption. This included people who felt they had been dismissed by an agency without full consideration:

*All we wanted was information really and before they would give us information they were writing us off. ‘Go and get married, how old are your kids, the size of your house, have you got a spare room for the child?’*

*I said that I’d had bereavement and they just said, ‘You have to come back in two years.’ I said, ‘Surely everyone handles that different and I feel that at least someone should come and talk to me.’ They said, ‘No, we know about these things. Come back in two years.’*

Five per cent of enquirers felt they had been rejected by adoption agencies. However, only one person appeared to have been formally counselled out of adoption.

The remaining pool of potential adopters, who represent one-quarter of the enquirers, had not made a clear decision about adoption. Many were apparently ‘drifting’ without any direct input from an adoption agency:

*We need to find out more about adopting . . . Uneasy about phoning.*

*More info on how assessments are made. Less formal first meeting.*

The enquirers who had not made a decision included people who had not been able to access all the information they wanted, some who had received a discouraging response about their eligibility and others who did not know where to go next after digesting information about adoption which left them unsure.

**Characteristics of the ‘active’ enquirer**

The survey data enabled a comparison of the characteristics of active enquirers who began the process with those active enquirers who did not. Again, while we need to be cautious about generalising from these findings, there are patterns that are perhaps predictable. A higher percentage of enquirers who were able-bodied, in professional/supervisory occupations and who lived with a partner had begun the process. Enquirers from minority ethnic groups were as likely to begin the process, with 53 per cent taking their enquiry forward compared to 47 per cent of all enquirers. This finding differs from Simmonds’s study (2000) which showed slightly less minority ethnic enquirers beginning the process (31 per cent rather than 36 per cent).

Agencies in this sample were having some success in attracting people from the minority ethnic communities. Fourteen per cent of enquirers were from a minority ethnic group, a higher figure than the ten per cent recorded by the Social Services Inspectorate (Social Services Inspectorate, 2000). Comparing our sample with population statistics for ethnic groups in England (HMSO, 2005), enquirers of Caribbean origin were over-represented (3.6% v 1.1%), those of Indian origin were slightly over-represented (1.8% v 1.4%) while enquirers of Pakistani origin were slightly under-represented (1.8% v 2.2%).

In this survey, statistically speaking, occupation is the only characteristic that is significantly linked to whether or not
an active enquirer begins the adoption process. Enquirers from a professional background were almost twice as likely as others to begin the adoption process whereas none of the unemployed people in this sample did. They further differed in terms of their patterns of enquiry. Those from professional classes were three times more likely to be actively interested in adoption when they enquired and twice as likely to talk to social workers about their questions and concerns about adoption. Eighty-two per cent of the enquirers with professional backgrounds felt they had received enough information to make their decisions compared with 59 per cent from non-professional backgrounds. In addition, enquirers who were professionals were more likely to have wider support networks to call upon (82% v 64%). There is also a significant difference between professional and non-professionals in terms of whether they felt they received a positive response from the agencies they approached (79% of professionals compared with 56% of non-professionals).

### Links between agency response and the outcome of enquiries

The survey pointed to a very obvious link between whether people felt they had an overall good response from the agencies they approached and whether they went on to begin the process. Only ten per cent of those enquirers who felt they received an overall negative response from adoption agencies started the process. What appears from the statistical data to be pivotal to this pattern is whether enquirers had been able to speak with a social worker about the questions and concerns they had about adoption. Of the 85 per cent of enquirers who had spoken to a social worker, three-quarters had been able to discuss such questions and concerns, 58 per cent of them reporting a positive response.

Nevertheless the lack of a clear answer to questions, particularly issues around eligibility, left a number of enquirers discouraged, confused or ‘in limbo’. By conservative estimates this would affect around 3,500 enquirers across England each year. Lack of consistency between agencies only served to muddy the waters for enquirers searching for answers to questions about their eligibility:

> We have spoken to people on the phone but the information has been confusing. The gist of it seemed to be that it depends on which agency you went to as to how your age and circumstances were judged when adopting a small child.

While such inconsistency in response to particular circumstances may appear as a ‘fact’ to practitioners, it is a ‘shock’ to enquirers and often discouraging. Enquirers’ questions and concerns generally fell into two streams: questions about their eligibility and questions about the adoption process. The former had the greatest impact on the outcome of the enquiry.

Three-quarters of those replying to the survey were concerned that they would not be eligible to adopt. The most common concerns were age, resources, health and their status as a single person.

Those with concerns about income and

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eligibility concerns</th>
<th>% of active enquirers with these concerns</th>
<th>% of enquirers with these concerns who spoke to a social worker</th>
<th>% of enquirers with these concerns who began the adoption process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income and housing</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td><strong>29</strong>%</td>
<td><strong>18</strong>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status as single</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td><strong>56</strong>%</td>
<td><strong>22</strong>%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant (\(p < 0.05\))
hiring were significantly less likely to begin the process, with less than one in five doing so. This study provides evidence for an ongoing concern that income and housing issues can act as barriers to the progression of an enquiry. A MORI poll conducted for BAAF in 2001 found one-quarter of respondents would consider adoption if they had regular financial support, including larger accommodation (Pearce, 2001).

There are two important issues raised by this study. Firstly, money is regarded as a taboo subject. As Table 1 shows, enquirers are significantly less likely to talk about financial concerns with social workers. Unlike fostering, adoption is not associated with ‘payment’ and the interviews highlighted that enquirers clearly felt uncomfortable about raising financial issues. At the same time, it was rare for adoption agencies to provide information on finances at the beginning of the process. A few of the information leaflets sent to enquirers by agencies taking part in this study mentioned the possibility of an adoption allowance, but some gave the impression that it is rare for adopters to receive it. Two single adopters from the interview sample commented:

*I do think more information about the practicalities . . . maybe someone to help you calculate how you might manage financially. Things like the child tax credit and how all that works would encourage people on low incomes who are wanting to do it on their own, who just don’t think about coming forwards because they don’t think they will be able to afford to do it.*

*Once you have gone through the process and you tell people and they think, ‘Yes, I would really like to do that’. . . But with them as well I think it’s like, because you don’t get paid, you’re doing it off your own back. Some of them are thinking ‘Would I be able to manage?’*

The interview and survey data highlighted the ways in which enquirers addressed their concerns about resource issues. Some delayed the decision to adopt until they moved to new accommodation, increased their savings or changed their job. Some wanted help with issues like accommodation but had problems accessing it. Others chose not to raise their concerns about resources at this stage of their enquiry because they were worried about how it might look. A few reluctantly decided to foster instead because of the definite financial support.

The second important issue raised about resources in the interview data is that, despite it being one of the top four concerns people brought to the process, it was the one least likely to be resolved after discussion with a social worker. For example, enquirers having accommodation of a limited size was a particular problem for enquirers living in public housing in London. People often found little support from either adoption agencies or housing departments and would be sent back and forth between the two. Some persevered and found an agency that did not have an issue with their housing. Most drew an end to their enquiry and were both angered and frustrated by their experience.

Income and housing concerns, when combined with other issues, had a notable impact on enquiry outcomes. Single people and non-professionals were significantly more likely to have these concerns. Enquirers who were single and on a low income were two times less likely to begin the process than low-income couples. Half of those enquirers who had not made a decision about adoption wanted reassurance about financial support.

This study provides clear evidence that people with fewer resources are less likely to begin the process and the difficulties in raising the issue and getting clear answers compound this. Agencies could provide support about finances, for example, working with Citizens Advice Bureaux to offer enquirers a clear idea of the money they would be entitled to through tax credits and child benefit. Form Fs could be written to include a clear statement that adopters would need an adoption allowance to proceed with an adoption. This is about developing practices that challenge the view that money is an unmentionable subject, especially during the early stage of an enquiry. This will help to promote the
idea that adoption is a supported responsibility.

Relationship between an enquirer’s support network and the outcome of their enquiry
While agency response is crucial in predicting the outcome of an enquiry, it is by no means the only factor. The support network an enquirer draws on has a significant impact on the result. Single people with no support, or couples who were relying on each other for support at this stage, were seven times less likely to embark on the adoption process. We might ask whether more conventional adopters, ie childless couples, are likely to have a bigger support network. There is some evidence of this in the survey, since enquirers with birth children were significantly more likely not to have any support or to be relying solely on the support of their partner.

How might we explain the differences in the amount of support people draw on? The interview data shed some light on this process. Some enquirers felt the level of support they called on reflected their style of decision-making; some said they simply preferred to make decisions on their own. Others did not want to be public about the fact that they were considering adoption, particularly if people were not aware of their fertility issues. Some opted not to tell others, often family members, about their enquiry because they were concerned about feeling pressured in their decision-making. This was particularly true of enquirers with birth children.

It is important to acknowledge the impact that support networks may have on decision-making, especially for enquirers who challenge our understanding of who adopting? . . . I thought that I should perhaps wait a while. I’m not at the stage where age is an issue. That’s not the reason why I was doing it in the first place. I still stick to the reasons I think: that kids need a home and I think I could provide a good environment.

Her friends’ and family’s emphasis on biological parenting was clearly shaping the focus of her decision-making. The interview data indicate that enquirers with birth children also face the same pressure, which helps to explain their reluctance to share their consideration of adoption with others.

While contact with someone who has experience of adoption is not significantly related to beginning the process, the study data indicate the role they can have in normalising the experience for enquirers from less conventional backgrounds. Compare the views of these two enquirers talking about the support they received. The first person attended a support group for gay and lesbian carers: . . . people would say, ‘Yes, X are a bit slow’, it took them a while, and why don’t I follow it up? That was helpful. I think if I’d been doing it without knowing anybody else it would have been a bit more worrying really, that lack of organisation on their part at the beginning. (Single woman)

We don’t know anybody you know [who has adopted]. . . . in the Asian culture nobody has been having the adoption at the moment. I have not seen anybody that has been having that, so this is something different we are doing. (Asian male, married couple)

Motivation and inspiration to adopt and how it links to the outcome of an enquiry
It is very difficult to place people’s reasons for enquiring about adoption into distinct categories. While many people had a number of motivations, they were often clear about the main drive behind why they were considering adoption. For three in four enquirers their main motivation for adopting centred on the
desire to parent, eg people with infertility issues. The remaining quarter were driven by altruistic, child-centred motives for adopting, such as people who were adopted themselves or whose profession or area of study had made them aware of the needs of adopted children. The enquirers primarily motivated by altruism were significantly less likely to go on to adopt than those driven by a need to parent (30% v 53%). Furthermore, the first group was twice as likely to be single, to be on a significantly lower income and to be black. The latter pattern has been noted in other studies (Thoburn et al, 2000). These enquirers also appeared to feel less supported by the adoption agencies they approached.

Inspiration is another factor in the outcome of an enquiry. Given that the sample included enquiries made during National Adoption Week, it is not surprising that 58 per cent said they were encouraged to enquire because of adverts or media coverage, although this group was significantly less likely to begin the process (35% v 62%). Yet these ‘inspired’ enquirers were as likely to be actively interested in adoption. They had been considering adoption for the same period of time as other enquirers, so were not, as we might have predicted, ‘spontaneous’ enquiries.

There may be other processes at work that explain the outcome for this group. For example, recruitment campaigns that dispelled myths about who is eligible to adopt were particularly powerful in drawing people into the enquiry process, an influence noted by other researchers (Bell et al, 2002). In this study, over one-quarter of those inspired by adverts and media coverage were drawn in by campaigns which addressed issues of eligibility. However, the responses received by some of these enquirers were not always consistent with the recruitment messages:

I responded to a radio advert telling me, whether I am disabled, on low income, black, white, single, unemployed, etc, you can still adopt. What is stopping you? . . . I am a responsible, caring adult; I assumed the advert was aimed at people like me. Obviously not, as what the advert is not saying is you must have a large house and high income. (Single black woman)

Agencies need to be aware of the impact of their media messages and the expectations they raise. How enquirers are responded to and supported needs to mirror the media messages. If the message is that unemployed people can adopt, what support is there to explore financial matters?

Eleven per cent of enquirers were inspired to approach agencies by campaigns that emphasised the shortage of adopters. Again, some enquirers experienced a different response to what the advert led them to expect:

It was very stressful [during National Adoption Week] to hear things, they want people to adopt and no one seemed interested. We felt we were fighting a losing battle. (Married couple with a birth child)

I just thought, those adverts that said we need you and everything . . . But as I say, we didn’t really have anyone who was offering support and guidance. (Cohabitating couple)

The enquirers heard ‘we desperately need adopters’. What was meant was ‘we desperately need adopters for the particular children in our care’. Like a large trawler, these bold recruitment messages may secure a hefty catch of enquirers, not all of whom will be suitable; but those who are may not pursue their enquiry because of the inconsistencies between recruitment messages, the expectations that they raise and the responses that enquirers subsequently receive. Agencies have a responsibility to channel the skills, experience and enthusiasm many of these enquirers bring. One-quarter of them were primarily motivated by altruism. They were less likely to begin the adoption process yet, in many cases, their interest and commitment to help vulnerable children were being lost and not directed into other positive roles, such as independent visiting.
Vulnerable groups of enquirers

Only one in ten enquirers received negative responses from all the agencies they contacted. A further 50 per cent reported mixed responses. Yet it is important to be conscious that some groups are more vulnerable to poor agency responses than others. In line with the findings of other research, disabled people were significantly less likely to have a positive response from an adoption agency (44% v 76%; Wates, 2002). This study, however, focused on the experiences of two other groups: black enquirers and enquirers with non-professional backgrounds.

Black enquirers appeared to experience extremes of good and poor practice. Agencies had been very successful in encouraging them to begin the process. At the same time, black enquirers were over three times more likely to feel they had received a poor response from an adoption agency; these were often agencies that were not based in cities/metropolitan districts – a pattern commented on by others. There was a general feeling that awareness of and support about adoption needed to be developed within the black communities:

They should have done something about helping people out. The backbone to the community is the elders. If they had this information I would simply have gone to them and they would have done something to help me out, but nobody is bothered about this . . . The community should get actively involved in this. (Bengali woman)

Once you have gone through the process and you tell people and they think, ‘Yes, I would really like to do that.’ (Black British woman)

Six months after contacting an agency, black enquirers’ position in the decision-making process was significantly different. In this sample, none of the black enquirers said no to adoption; they had either decided to begin the process or they were pursuing despite an unhelpful response from the agency.

Just over one in five of active enquirers had non-professional occupations and they were twice as likely as enquirers with a professional background to receive a negative response from an adoption agency. These enquirers took a very different approach to information gathering from those with a professional background. They were four times less likely to have had contact with a social worker and four times more likely to have simply received information and gone no further. Where they had spoken with a social worker, they were still significantly less likely to raise any questions or concerns about adoption. Indeed, they were four times more likely to be worried about resource issues and, as we have seen, this is something that enquirers found more difficult to raise with social workers and find clear answers to when they did. Importantly, they were twice as likely to have no support in their decision-making about adoption from family and friends.

Interviews carried out with six enquirers with non-professional backgrounds, some from minority ethnic groups, confirm the patterns of vulnerability apparent in the statistical data. All these enquirers had received a poor response from adoption agencies which had shown them little support or encouragement. All felt uncomfortable about following up contact with adoption agencies; they were concerned about appearing pushy, or they had expected the agency to contact them if they were interested in their enquiry, or they simply felt they did not know how organisations worked.

Take for example a couple with birth children who were respite carers for disabled children and were interested in adopting a disabled child. They were told by the agency they contacted to, ‘come back in ten years’ when their youngest son would be 12 years old. They did not get in touch with other adoption agencies because they believed they would receive the same response. The agency sent them no information and, like other couples with birth children, they had chosen not to tell family members about their enquiry until they had begun a process. Despite their experience of providing respite care, they did not feel confident in dealing with organisations. Commenting
on their attempts to find information on adoption from the local authority for which they worked, the mother said:

*I wasn’t quite sure who to ring. There wasn’t any names given, to find out if we could do more long-term fostering or adoption. I was told that it was a different department anyway because we’re respite and it’s special needs. It’s a totally different department to the other side of it. I was a bit confused to be honest because I didn’t realise how many different departments and who to speak to.*

A black single woman whose work involved transporting adults and young people with learning difficulties was keen to adopt a child with learning difficulties. She had spoken to her mum about adopting but when asked if she had discussed it with anyone else added, ‘I just keep myself to myself really’. She had contacted lots of adoption agencies and at one point had been told she was, ‘just the kind of person we are looking for’, but her enquiry had not progressed because she lived in a one-bedroom flat. She had approached the council to request a larger property but they were unable to help until she had been approved as an adopter. She commented:

*People with one-bedroom properties, they should be allocated a social worker who works with them through the whole adoption procedure . . . They know who to talk to. People like me, I don’t know who to speak to.*

Issues about support and access to information are a genuine barrier for a number of people who may well be interested in adopting the very children agencies are having difficulty identifying families for. The National Adoption Register has highlighted the mismatch between the needs of the children awaiting adoption and the type of children approved adopters want to adopt (Department of Health, 2004). There have been some debates about how to address this disparity (Cousins, 2003). To this end, some have suggested the need to challenge the value bases of organisations, so a diverse range of people are accepted and approved (Cousins, 2003). This study would seem to indicate that there is a much deeper issue of accessibility of information and support for more vulnerable groups. Our survey found that non-professionals are four times less likely to go to an independent agency like BAAF for information and support. The survey data also highlighted the fact that help from such organisations is linked with enquirers starting the process (61% of enquirers who contacted BAAF began the process):

*BAAF have been very helpful both in sending out info and through speaking on the phone. Their advice helped me to stick to what I originally wanted. I had confidence in their interest in my enquiry.*

As we have seen, knowledge and appreciation of organisations can provide a framework through which enquirers can make sense of agency responses and provide them with an understanding of what steps to take. For example, lack of contact from an agency could be interpreted as organisational failure rather than rejection. One young professional interviewed had worked for social services and this provided a frame of reference for understanding what was happening to her enquiry:

*I used to work years ago in a social services office and I know that they are really busy. You just get put on hold and then the call would be lost, and that kept on happening.* (Single woman)

In contrast, a care worker of Asian origin commented:

*I rang and said I could not come [to the adoption meeting] because I’m working . . . I thought they would [visit] but they didn’t . . . After that I thought they are not interested.* (Asian male, married couple)

This enquirer felt the lack of contact from an adoption agency was a reflection of their lack of interest in his enquiry.
Conclusion
This study highlights how few people decide not to adopt (less than one in five enquirers). Yet those who begin the process are more likely to be couples in professional occupations with fertility issues who want to create their own family through adoption. Many agencies are successful in developing recruitment campaigns that encourage enquiries from less conventional groups, such as people who are single or on low incomes, but inconsistencies between campaign messages and initial response to enquirers can put enquirers off. The 17 adoption agencies taking part in this study had limited policy and procedures on recruitment practice. Where they existed, they tended to focus on initial recruitment strategies and guidance for social workers during initial visits but generally failed to focus on the period in between, when one-third of enquirers will be lost.

The outcome of an enquiry is not simply a reflection of agency response as the enquirer’s own support network, their motivation and inspiration for adoption have a clear impact. Nevertheless, agencies need to be aware that some groups of enquirers are more vulnerable to a poor response and that some groups bring different issues to the enquiry, and have different approaches to collecting information and different understandings of how organisations work.

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