



Finding adoptive families for black, Asian and black mixed-parentage children: agency policy and practice

Executive summary and Best practice guide

Julie Selwyn, Lesley Frazer and Angela Fitzgerald



the children's charity

Finding adoptive families for black, Asian and black mixed-parentage children: agency policy and practice

Executive summary and Best practice guide

Julie Selwyn, Lesley Frazer and Angela Fitzgerald

**Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies
School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol**

Research funded by Scottish Power and commissioned by NCH

NCH, the children's charity, helps children and young people facing difficulties or challenges in their lives.

We work with more children and young people than any other UK charity, including those affected by poverty, disability and abuse.

Further copies of this report can be ordered by calling NCH's Supporter Helpline on 08457 626579 (calls charged at local rate, open 9am–5pm Monday to Friday).

Email: supphelp@nch.org.uk

©2004 NCH and Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol.
www.bristol.ac.uk/hadley

NCH
85 Highbury Park
London N5 1UD
Telephone: 020 7704 7000
Fax: 020 7226 2537

ISBN 0 900984 880

Executive summary

Introduction

Where adoption is the plan, statutory and voluntary agencies involved in finding permanent, substitute placements for children from black, Asian and black mixed-parentage communities have been concerned for some time that these children and young people:

- appear less likely than white children to find a family
- remain longer in the care system

The study

This study, commissioned by NCH and funded by Scottish Power, examines the barriers that stand in the way of black, Asian and mixed-parentage adults and those in mixed relationships coming forward to adopt. It also highlights what is known about best practice.

It confirms the needs of black, Asian and black mixed-parentage children awaiting new permanent homes and reviews what is known about the successful recruitment of adopters.

The study also illustrates:

- how a sample of local authorities view the needs of black, Asian and black-mixed parentage children
- how local authorities strive to match those needs with appropriate placements
- the policies and strategies used by local authorities to recruit the adopters required
- policy in relation to black mixed-parentage children
- examples of good practice
- the barriers adoption agencies may face

Three local authorities with large minority ethnic populations agreed to take part and each provided data on their minority ethnic looked-after children, children adopted and minority ethnic adopters. Social work team managers were interviewed and questionnaires were sent to prospective adopters. A best practice tool for adoption agencies was also developed as a result of the findings.

The main bulk of the work took place during 2003.

'The characteristics of children placed for adoption have changed dramatically since the 1970s. Attitudes and policies relating to birth control, abortion and single parenthood have reduced the number of babies available, typical adopters are no longer childless couples and the children adopted are rarely the babies of young single mothers.'

'In the intervening years, older children, children with disabilities, sibling groups and black, Asian and black mixed-parentage children have formed the majority of the young people waiting for a home.'

Linda Plummer, NCH
Family Placement Adviser

'A lot of myths make people feel they're not suitable to adopt. They wonder if they'll be good enough. It's amazing. They think they need to be white and middleclass, or working and married. Or they think that if you're black and single you can't adopt. But the reality is very different. You can be unemployed and still adopt. Good parenting skills are the main thing, safe parenting and openness.'

Jyotsna Karsan, NCH
Adoption Project Worker
in the North East

Analysis of data

- There is a shortage of all minority ethnic adopters and in particular, a desperate need for black, black mixed-parentage and mixed-relationship adopters (pp 35–36).¹
- The difficulties in recruiting minority ethnic adopters and possible solutions have been known about for the last 15 years (p 74).
- The impact of racism has affected people's willingness to approach agencies (pp 73, 75).
- Minority ethnic children comprise 18 per cent of all the children looked after in the UK and 22 per cent of children on the national Adoption Register, but only 13 per cent of those adopted. No matter what the age of the child the process, from best interest decision to adoption, took longer (pp 32–33, 35).
- If all the 'potential' and 'viable' links identified by the national register for black, Asian and mixed-parentage children and adopters had converted to placements, the entire pool of adopters would have been absorbed but 150 children would have been unmatched (p 34).
- Some minority ethnic groups have very young age structures. There may be few minority ethnic adults living in the community and thus a very limited pool of potential adopters. As a result it is important for agencies to understand the demographics of their areas, so that they can identify which groups of adopters they will struggle to recruit (pp 24, 74).
- Social work matching reports need to give greater consideration to how adopters would help a child understand their heritage, culture and form a positive sense of self. Neither a black nor a white family is a perfect match for a black mixed-parentage child (p 75).
- Adoption practice has to respond to the prevalence within minority ethnic communities of large family sizes, poverty, poor housing and language barriers (pp 25–28, 76).
- Myths and stereotypes around adoption are still prevalent in minority ethnic communities, despite all the advertising and publicity. Community development approaches to recruitment are needed rather than traditional casework methods (p 76).
- Where agencies had recruited more minority ethnic social work staff, there had been an increase in applicants, but most had difficulty attracting staff (pp 59, 76).

¹ The page numbers refer to pages in the full report.

- Adoption agencies need far better information systems that can be easily accessed, so that scarce resources can be more effectively targeted. Agencies need to understand their own communities and the needs of the children waiting for placement. Ethnicity and culture should be clearly described, rather than using 'black' as a blanket term to cover all children from a minority ethnic background (p 74).

Recommendations to statutory and voluntary adoption agencies when recruiting adoptive families for black, Asian and black mixed-parentage children:²

- promote the importance of diversity in adoption across all sectors of the service (p 85)
- understand the demographics of your local community (p 86)
- build a strong reputation within the community (p 86)
- make broad ownership of 'corporate parenting' a reality across the whole local authority (p 86)
- place children at the heart of recruitment activity (p 87)
- understand the recruitment process from an adopter's point of view (p 87)
- promote adoption through high-quality advertising and publicity (p 87)
- know your current recruitment processes and attend to the detail (p 88)
- deliver high-quality assessments (p 89)
- develop good post-adoption support (p 89)

Discussion and conclusion

This report examines the many barriers that stand in the way of people coming forward to adopt. These barriers include reluctance by black and other minority ethnic adults to approach social services departments, the persistence of myths about what kinds of people make suitable adopters and social services' lack of strategic planning in this area.

By highlighting best practice in this area and the lessons to be learned, it is hoped that adoption agencies will collect better information about their local populations, critically review their own practice and develop proactive recruitment strategies. This will enhance future practice and policy development to the benefit of those children who need our care.

'The families I talk to see social work as something negative... people that come and cause problems... but over the years I've found that publicity, word of mouth and putting ourselves out there shows people that we are human and "not out to get you". Families appreciate the personal touch and the best way to find people who could adopt is to go where the people are.'

Steve Mitcham, NCH
Adoption Project Worker
in the Midlands

² For the recommendations in detail, please refer to the best practice guide.

'NCH exists to make a difference to some of the most vulnerable children in society today.'

'We believe that the study and the recommendations in the best practice guide will make a significant contribution to the development of strategies that meet the needs of the black, Asian and black mixed-parentage children waiting for new families.'

Linda Plummer, NCH
Family Placement Adviser

Further information

NCH has been registered as an adoption agency since 1926 and has been working for over a decade to increase the numbers of adopters for black, Asian and black mixed-parentage children. Our adoption services are run in partnership with local authorities and adopters. We aim to involve adopters in all stages of the process and provide services most relevant to their needs and to those of the children placed with them.

www.nch.org.uk/adoption

The Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, based in the School for Policy Studies at Bristol University, was established in October 2000 through the generous funding of the Hadley Trust.

The Hadley Centre aims to promote best practice in the field of adoption, foster care and placement with kin by linking research, practice and training in order to provide these children with stable and predictable family experiences. The intention is to promote scientifically rigorous research and evaluation and to develop ways of disseminating research findings that will be of direct use to practitioners and will influence policy makers.

www.bristol.ac.uk/hadley

Scottish Power plc is an international energy business, committed to Corporate Social Responsibility. Scottish Power plc generates electricity, operates and maintains large power delivery networks and provides a full range of energy supply services, including metering, billing and call centre support.

www.scottishpower.com

Best practice guide

This best practice guide brings together the findings from a study examining the recruitment of black, Asian and black mixed-parentage or mixed-relationship adopters. The ideas and strategies outlined in the margin come from practitioners working in this area in the UK and the States.

This guide is not intended to be followed step-by-step. Instead it is suggested that agencies should take a holistic approach in which the following elements are addressed as part of an overall strategy. You will therefore first need to think about what process your agency will follow, in order to review your practice and develop an action plan. You might, for example, set up an internal working group or wider stakeholder group including minority ethnic adoptive parents and use the guide as a tool to assess your current performance in each area and to identify priorities.

Nor does this guide represent a 'quick fix'. The experience to date of the most successful agencies and projects suggests that they have invested significant resources and time in critically reviewing their own policy and practice and in developing new ways of reaching out to communities. It has then taken time and patience before the benefits of that work, in terms of improved recruitment and retention of adopters for black, Asian and black mixed-parentage children, have become apparent.

With these provisos, we suggest that agencies need to build the following elements both into their thinking and into their practice in developing effective recruitment strategies:

Develop an authority-wide approach to welcome diversity in adoption

- At a senior level ensure that the commitment to anti-racist practice is integrated in the whole organisation.
- Ensure all staff are well supported and have access to high-quality training.
- Develop an agreed philosophical approach and improve the communication between adoption/fostering teams and childcare teams.
- Monitor permanency planning to ensure minority ethnic children have the same opportunities as white children.
- Challenge lack of commitment to family finding for minority ethnic children.

One adoption agency set up a working group to explore its own assumptions and behaviour in relation to black, Asian and black mixed-parentage or mixed-relationship adopters. The agency wanted to embrace diversity and make itself welcoming but, as a very traditional, white agency, recognised it had much to learn. This was essential underpinning for the subsequent development of a successful recruitment initiative.

Some agencies have introduced training in culturally sensitive practice for all frontline staff, including those on reception desks.

Others have reviewed policies and procedures to ensure they support diversity.

Using postcode and census data, decide on a neighbourhood to target and focus recruitment in that community for eight weeks. Evaluate whether this approach is successful.

Some agencies have found that having a distinctive name is helpful if the community views the local authority negatively.

Many authorities have established permanency panels to ensure appropriate care plans are in place for all looked-after children.

- Ensure minority ethnic staff are employed and supported appropriately.
- Ensure that minority ethnic groups are represented on adoption panels.

Understand the demographics of your local community

- Use the census and local data to construct a demographic profile of your area, ensuring that information is collated on both the adult and child populations.
- Ensure that the characteristics and needs of children needing permanent placement are available to recruitment teams. This will enable you to target recruitment activities more effectively.
- Develop partnerships/consortia, choosing areas that have different demographic profiles to your own, so that you can share approved adopters.

Build a strong agency reputation within the community

- Use community development approaches to complement traditional casework methods, and recognise that different skills are involved in these activities.
- Connect into the community through those who are already connected, eg your own staff, health visitors, elders, teachers etc.
- Demonstrate respect and avoid pushing solutions onto the community.
- Build up within the community a network of minority ethnic advisers. Explain to them the problems you are facing and use their ideas for recruitment.
- It is important to have good relationships with current adopters and fosters carers, as word of mouth is an excellent recruitment tool.
- Good or bad experiences of applying to adopt will quickly filter through communities. Understand the 'ripple' effect on recruitment of negative and positive contact with your agency.

Make broad ownership of corporate parenting a reality

- Ensure reports on recruitment and placement are regularly sent to the appropriate committees and that a two-way dialogue is established.
- Make effective links with councillors.

- Use all the resources within your authority, including advertising in free newspapers. Create partnerships with education; send out flyers/leaflets to schools.
- Ensure your team has a presence at authority-sponsored or authority-run events, not just those connected with social services.

Place children at the heart of recruitment

- Understand the characteristics of the children waiting to be adopted. Know who they are and identify the children's needs.
- Ensure that all the information available has been collected on children's histories and religious and cultural backgrounds.
- Ensure you understand the significance of the information and what this means for the child. Be specific about the cultural needs of the child.
- Ensure reasonable efforts have been made to trace the birth parents and seek information on their backgrounds.
- Ensure all this information is passed to the adopters and that they understand its implications.

Understand the recruitment process from an adopter's point of view

- Apply to your agency as a minority ethnic prospective adopter and analyse how you are treated.
- Have you tried ringing your agency? What's it like? Is it a free phone number? Does a person or a machine answer the phone? How many times is the call transferred? Is the response polite and helpful?
- Remember that the first contact with your agency might well determine whether prospective adopters continue with their enquiry.
- Does the information you send out enable the prospective adopters to understand the process? Is it available in the language of the applicant? Does it contain what an adopter would want to know? Is it written clearly?

Promote adoption through high-quality advertising and publicity

- Take every opportunity to get your message across. Leaflet churches, GP surgeries, leisure centres etc and use the internet and Yellow Pages.

Develop detailed portfolios of the waiting children and use these to make the children 'real' to prospective adopters. There is evidence that this does not deter potential adopters.

Flowchart the process of an adoption enquiry in your agency. Examine possible points where adopters may drop out because of system difficulties or failures and identify ways you could prevent this.

An American agency developed child-specific recruitment badges large enough to hold a picture of a child, saying something like 'Ask me about John'. These are worn all day and have been very successful.

Develop posters with pull-off cards that have pre-paid postage.

Contact adopters and ask them to host an open house where members of the community can come and learn about adoption.

To keep families, you need to offer consistently good customer service. One agency calls prospective adopters to thank them as each step along the way is completed and to remind them what has to be done next.

Train and support experienced minority ethnic adopters so that they can act as mentors for those going through the recruitment process.

- Aim to have adoption material everywhere prospective adopters might go and in the languages of your community.
- Develop a distinctive agency identity.
- Make advertising and publicity material attractive and clearly linked to your agency.
- Advertise at two levels, a) to develop public awareness and give information, b) child-specific.
- Advertising should include images of all kinds of adults, including those in mixed relationships, as well as accurately reflecting the ethnicity and age range of children needing placements.
- Think more about those who do not speak English. How can you reach them? Ensure materials clearly state how to take interest in adoption forward.
- Use the minority ethnic media such as *The Voice* or specific radio stations.
- Work with the media and be proactive in looking for opportunities to place positive stories about adoption.

Know your current recruitment processes and attend to the detail

- Know how contact is generally made with your agency.
- Send materials out quickly. Information should be sent within five working days and the follow-up interview/invitation to an information meeting should happen within two months (Adoption Agency Regulations 2004, 7 & 20).
- Know how many adopters apply, are assessed and how many are eventually approved each year. Are there differences by ethnicity?
- Locate responsibility with one staff member for the overall monitoring of an applicant's journey through the process.
- Challenge stereotypes and consider how far your assessments are influenced by Eurocentric views about housing, income, family size, language, employment, punctuality and open discussion of private life.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of your materials and recruitment strategies.
- Ensure assumptions are not made about applicants dropping out without first checking. Who chases if a form is not returned?

- Conduct exit interviews and analyse the information to improve services.
- Keep adopters interested by telling them about waiting children, especially older children and sibling groups. This helps adopters know about the kinds of children waiting and the need for families. It also helps them to know when families are found and children are placed.

Deliver high-quality assessments

- Include current adopters from ethnic minorities in the preparation groups.
- Ensure that any case examples used reflect the diversity of children waiting. Do not just describe white children.
- All material should reflect the diversity within the population of children needing adoptive families.
- Run preparation groups in different languages and be prepared to have separate male and female discussion groups.
- Establish a group of interpreters who can build up expertise in this area and whom social workers and applicants can trust. Be aware that applicants may need a female interpreter.
- Develop a shared view about the criteria by which you would wish to counsel someone out of the process. Consider whether these exclusions have any basis in evidence or whether they are based on racist assumptions/folk lore/other influences.
- Sometimes the placement of a minority ethnic child with carers who are not a perfect match in terms of their ethnic or cultural background will be in that child's best interest. Develop a framework for assessing the cultural competence of those carers. Ensure that these placements are properly supported and parents are linked to either a mentor within the community or to other experienced adopters.

Develop good post-adoption support

- Give welfare rights advice and enable prospective adopters to access their rights to benefits.
- Ensure that prospective adopters are not dissuaded from continuing by lack of finance. Use the adoption allowance and settling-in grant as creatively as possible.
- The whole range of post-adoption services such as out of hours services, access to CAMHS and educational services may be

Project workers can hand-deliver information packs to people at home. This helps prospective adopters feel more able to ask questions and allows the workers to quickly assess whether translation services are needed.

(Anancy black families initiative, St Francis' Children's Society)

Thoroughly assess the community where the applicants live. Pay particular attention to the school the adopters would choose for an adopted child.

Local authorities should take into account all factors when assessing the need for financial support. In determining the amount, enhanced allowances that foster carers would have received because of the child's needs (not any reward elements) should be included in the adoption allowance (Adoption Support Services Regulation 7 (4)).

Set up support groups led by a minority ethnic staff member or adopter.

Develop a target conversion rate for the number of enquiries converting to approvals.

Establish a strategy review group that includes black, Asian, black mixed-parentage or mixed-relationship adopters.

needed and should be thought about when developing post-adoption support plans.

- Information about the range of support should be provided in writing to the adopters.

Collate and evaluate monitoring information and review effectiveness

- Managers should regularly collate monitoring information on children of black, Asian and black mixed-parentage who are looked after long term, including accurate information about their heritage, religion, culture, age, any special needs, how long they have been waiting for permanent placement, what efforts have been made to identify potential matches for them, and what other factors may have delayed placement.
- Information should be routinely collated about the number of enquiries from potential adopters converting to applications and approvals, in order to identify and address any apparent differences in outcome for black, Asian, black mixed-parentage or mixed-relationship enquirers.
- This information should be combined with analysis of exit interviews in order to identify particular recruitment issues that need to be addressed.
- Monitoring and evaluation of collated information should form part of a regular review of the effectiveness of the agency's strategy for the recruitment and retention of black, Asian, black mixed-parentage and mixed-relationship adopters.

Research funded by



NCH, the children's charity, helps children and young people facing difficulties or challenges in their lives.

NCH
85 Highbury Park
London N5 1UD
Telephone: 020 7704 7000
Fax: 020 7226 2537

www.nch.org.uk

Registered charity no. 1097940/company no. 4764232

Cover photo: NCH/Sara Hannant. Some NCH photos are posed by models. Produced by NCH 08/2004. 04/05 0500



the children's charity