
Change of plan away from adoption – an exploration from a practitioner perspective

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Adoption
England

regional adoption agencies working together

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Executive Summary

This study was designed to explore what is known of the practice and the reasoning when children's plans are changed away from adoption. The number of children who have had their care plans changed away from adoption to another form of permanence between 2020 and 2024 has ranged between 540 and 880 children annually. The administrative data that provides these figures gives a top-level indication as to why this change of plan happens using the following categories: adopters not found, Placement Order not made, children's needs changed or other. Placement Order not made has been increasing as a reason in recent years. Previous research has indicated that there have always been some children for whom plans for adoption are changed. This group of children is more likely to include children of black and minority ethnic heritage, who have disabilities, and who have additional risk factors such as parental mental health or experiences of abuse in their backgrounds. Although broad reasons for changes of plan are recorded, and categories of children whose plans are more likely to change are known about, there is an insufficiency of detail as to the professional practice and decision making that leads to changes in plan. This research aimed to address this gap by exploring occasions where adoption plans were changed with practitioners who were involved in these cases.

How the research was conducted

The focus of the research was individual interviews with professionals involved in 20 situations where a change of plan had been made. All Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA) were invited to take part, and each RAA was free to choose an example experience they forwarded, along with the contact details for practitioners involved who would be willing to participate in the research. Twenty examples were identified. The aim was to interview one professional who had responsibility/ connection with family finding (Family finder/ Permanence Co-ordinator), and one professional who had a role in care planning (children's social worker, Independent Reviewing Officer). However, it was not possible to interview two people in every case, and the final number of interviews held was 34 (with 2 interviews being carried out in relation to 14 cases, and one interview for the remaining 6 cases). Interviews were held on Teams and transcribed using the inbuilt functionality. Each interview was then summarised by the researcher, and these summaries were used for analysis. Following the practitioner interviews, we identified a need to understand further what was happening within the court process, and we held a focus group for Local Authority legal professionals using a vignette as the basis for discussion. This involved professionals from several Local Authorities who were not involved in any of the sample cases. This provided context to the themes from the interviews.

Findings

The twenty examples provided referred to thirty-one children:

Contexts

- All but one of the children identified in this sample were reported as having other siblings who were either already adopted, in kinship care, or another part of the care system. Thirteen cases had plans for the child to be placed with at least one of their siblings in the original Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decision.
- For most of the children the plan changed to long term foster care predominantly with a plan to remain with the foster carers they currently lived with.
- The change of plans occurred in twelve cases when adopters had not been found related to a child having complex or uncertain health needs or where the children were older. For four of the cases, a Placement Order was not granted and the final four cases had plans changed for other reasons that included experiencing a pre-Adoption Order disruption, the children expressing distress at a plan to move from foster care and complexities involved in sibling groups.
- All the situations covered in this report involved complexity in planning and the need for flexibility in the changing circumstances.

Decision-making

- Decisions to stop family finding were not straightforward and influenced by different factors but all decisions were carefully considered and were cognisant of what the child needed in the long term and the wishes expressed by children.
- Family finders were diligent in trying to identify families with examples that included earlier and wider searching for children who they knew would be difficult to place. However, with a lack of adopters at the national level, family finding was often exhausted with little or minimal interest from potential adopters. There were added challenges when the family finding was given a time-limit by the court.

Practice Challenges

- There were practice challenges involved in finding a home for children with multiple needs which was exacerbated by the lower number of adopters coming forward. Where a child had unclear or unknown medical or developmental needs, it was difficult to find adopters who were willing to take on the uncertainty of what this may mean for the child and them in the future. Conversely where a child had a diagnosis involving autism, the practitioners reflected that this means the “*pool shrinks significantly*”. This suggest both uncertainty of diagnosis and a definite diagnosis could be barriers to recruiting adopters.
- Further complexity was apparent in attempting to place sibling groups and ‘Together or Apart’ assessments highlighted difficulties in trying to balance the needs of each child with the (ongoing) quality of their relationships. There was also acknowledgement that older children can wait longer to find an adoptive family highlighting the need to start family finding at an early stage.
- Most of the time, there was professional agreement in the decision to stop family finding although sometimes it was not clear in what forum the decision was made or where it was recorded for future reference.

- Searching strategies for finding suitable families were varied across the country. Some family finders employed wider searches outside of their RAA almost immediately following permission to do so. Most family finders said it was helpful to find ways for adopters to ‘see the child’ other than potential issues. Methods for doing this included inviting the foster carer and adopters to have an early call to bring the child to life and give more detail to the child’s daily care needs or arranging ‘meet before the match’ which are opportunities for potential adopters to see the child first. Although mechanisms such as Link Maker¹ and activity days were helpful, there were issues identified that included lack of suitability for some children and adopters noticing (and possibly being deterred) when a child had been on Link Maker for several months.
- Although long term foster care was the outcome for most of the children, this was often not confirmed until the family finding for adoption had clearly come to an end. It was not clear when foster care began to be explored once more as an option for the child’s care plan. In interviews, the professionals often expressed the view that foster care was less favourable than adoption. These views were informed by a rights-based approach that prioritised less statutory intrusion in each child’s life and reflected professionals’ understanding of long-term outcomes when a child grows up in care. However, foster care was perceived as having some advantages due to the additional support and accountability of services it was believed to offer. A further positive of foster care was the view that it offered more fluidity in the long term for maintaining birth family relationships.
- The foster carers were observed as committed and giving a good standard of care. Some professionals described that family finding for adoption could be complicated by the carer’s engagement with family finding, particularly where the foster carer wished to have the child remain with them under a fostering plan. However, none described this as an outright barrier to finding a placement for a child.
- Many of the children, once the change of plan was agreed, remained with their existing foster carer. However, there was a reluctance for the foster carers to enter into a long-term legal relationship with the child either as adopters or under a Special Guardianship Order. Foster carers were not interviewed so we cannot comment on the motivations for this but the participants in the study reflected that this did not tend to be about finances but rather the perceived support and advocacy that foster carers felt both the child and they would receive if they remained as foster carers.

Placement Order not granted

- There were a small number of situations in this study where a Placement Order (PO) was not granted (n=4) and this has been increasingly identified as the reason for a change of plan away from adoption. The interviews with the practitioners

¹ Linkmaker: A national online platform that allows adopters and social workers to add profiles of families and children and search for links.

highlighted some pertinent reflections which also emerged in the focus group discussion with legal professionals. Professionals perceived that there were regional and even within region variations in decisions taken by the Courts about making or not making POs, suggesting practice may sometimes be driven by professional attitudes rather than case characteristics.

- The professionals in our research expressed not understanding the reasoning behind some of the decisions made by the Court and feeling their knowledge had been devalued considering the extensive work that had been undertaken to identify the right care plan for the child. This was particularly pertinent for where plans were changed in court towards family reunification.
- Legal professionals had also observed the variation in judgements reflecting that decisions could depend on which judge or Guardian was assigned and how they assessed evidence in relation to the case. This was particularly influential in the considerations of maintaining birth family relationships. Whilst the practitioners recognised the importance of maintaining birth family relationships, there were frustrations expressed at how increasingly they were being asked to give guarantees that contact would be maintained after adoption, something they were unable to do with the confidence that the court required. Where courts were uncertain that contact would be maintained after adoption, there were instances in which maintaining the sibling relationship (which was seen as being more likely to happen if the children remain in care) took precedence over the need for adoption in a Court decision.

Limitations of the research

The recommendations in this study were drawn mostly from the interviews with social work professionals. Further exploration of the views of legal professionals, and of other parties to care planning for children, such as foster carers or adoptive parents, would offer valuable additional insight into the dynamics seen in this report.

The example cases discussed in this report were put forward by the RAAs, and it is not known why they chose these examples. The only criteria provided was that the decision to change the plan should have been within the previous twelve months. As such, this cannot be considered a representative sample, but instead one that allows for an early exploration of the issues in this area of work.

It was intended to consider the care planning for children leading up to the initial ADM decision. However, many of the interviewees had not been involved in the cases at this point, reflecting both the transfers of cases between teams, and frequency in change of social workers. Further work to look at how this early care planning connects to later decision making might be helpful.

In moving forward there needs to be discussions at the national, operational and individual case levels regarding:

- How professionals understand permanency (for fuller discussion see main report), and what evidence and information they are drawing on when considering different placement options to achieve a “secure, stable and loving home” throughout childhood and beyond (DfE, 2021)?
- What assumptions and understanding do different professionals have regarding maintaining birth family relationships? In particular the assumption that contact is less likely to be maintained in adoption than foster care needs questioning, especially given Adoption England’s recent focus on maintaining relationships in adoption, and the evidence that contact is often lost despite children remaining in foster care (Selwyn & Lewis, 2023). Rather than a focus on links between placement type and contact, it may be more helpful for professionals to take a case sensitive consideration of the factors that support sustained and meaningful contact (Iyer et al, 2020), including professional efforts to support contact plans (regardless of placement type).
- Increasing the pool of adopters whilst also increasing the knowledge and confidence of prospective adopters in managing uncertainty and dealing with specific developmental and medical issues.

Headline Recommendations

Recommendation 1 - Continue the programme of work started by Adoption England to recruit more adopters, consideration should be given to:

- Understanding why adopters are not coming forward
- A targeted national campaign for adopters willing to adopt children with additional needs

Recommendation 2 - Conduct specific work on adopting children with uncertain health needs and/or autism, consideration should be given to:

- Support to help prospective adopters and foster carers who want to adopt to understand and live with uncertainty
- Research to understand how potential adopters perceive these needs
- A national action plan for recruitment, training and support in these areas.

Recommendation 3 - Consider the importance of timely decision making in the family finding process:

- For children with (potentially) harder to place characteristics there needs to be consistency across RAAs/LAs in when searching goes national to ensure that family finding can go as wide as possible as early as possible
- Further work on understanding the impact of court-ordered time limits on family finding success
- Clarity for practitioners on how to manage the decision to end family finding, and how these decisions should be recorded. Practice guidance should be developed and include guidelines for escalation to senior management when agreement cannot be reached.

Recommendation 4 - Continue the maintaining relationships programme of work paying particular attention to:

- Research into understanding how different actors in the adoption process perceive and apply this work
- Raising awareness of creative and innovative practice
- Consideration of training to develop knowledge in court work, and the use of Contact Orders
- Enabling more nuanced searches on Link Maker based on adopter willingness to accept contact with other family members such as siblings who still have contact with their birth family members.

Recommendation 5 - Identify support models for different long-term permanency options and plan accordingly, consideration should be given to:

- Understanding that the first requirement is *“a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond”*
- Wrapping an advocacy and support package around the child to meet the needs of each child
- Where adoption is considered harder to achieve, consideration of what support would be needed to enable their current placements to offer legal permanence
- Understanding and addressing challenges identified by foster carers in offering long term permanency.

Recommendation 6 – Consideration should be given to the administrative reporting on the reasons for change of plans as currently the data does not give an accurate picture of practice. In particular, the data does not capture the complexity of the reasons for the change of plan and therefore is not helpful for understanding what is happening at the operational level.

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1. Chapter 1 – Background to the Research

This study was designed to explore what is known of the practice and the reasoning when children’s plans are changed away from adoption. In England, 3,550 children in the last year available (24/25) had a plan made for adoption by the Local Authority (DfE, 2025). However, each year this plan will not be achieved for some children, and they will have their plans changed away from adoption. In the last year available, 640 number of children had a change of plan recorded. This report explores practitioners’ understanding of why this happens.

At present there is little information on the children whose plans change away from adoption. The current data available is administrative data collected by The Children and Social Care Secretariat (CSCS) and reported by the Department for Education (DfE, 2025). This data is reported in four broad categories for why this significant change has happened: ‘Child’s needs changed’, ‘Court did not make PO’, ‘Adopters cannot be found’, and ‘Other’. These categories do not allow for a detailed understanding of what is happening in practice. This study sought greater insight into children’s journeys and the professional decision making that led to plans changing. A series of interviews with social work professionals and a focus group with legal professionals were held to gain more understanding of the situations that led to change of plans. This report covers those findings, reporting on the case characteristics, the decision-making processes, and the complications that arise in the search for an adoption placement. The aim is to inform practice around adoption planning and matching and should be read in conjunction with the following recent reports from Adoption England: pre-order disruptions (Rennolds et al, 2025) and the evaluations of matching projects (Turnpenny & Neil, 2026).

The idea of planning for permanence is a central aim of children’s social work in England. The aim written into legislation is for “children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.” (DfE, 2021, p. 19-20). A change of plan away from adoption potentially represents a major change in the planning an agency may have undertaken to support a child and as such it is important to understand why this is happening. When a change of plan is agreed for a child away from adoption, the plan will already have been subject to a decision-making process to be approved for adoption. This process will be detailed in the first section of this chapter, with a focus on the agency decision maker and the regulations for changing plans. The second section of the chapter will review existing literature to understand what we know as to how and why plans change. Although there is limited research and information within the available work, there are two research avenues that offer insights. First, studies which have tracked care planning for children over time, and second, studies that have explored the challenges to family finding in the UK.

1.1. The process of agreeing an adoption plan for a child, and the role of the agency decision maker

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is a senior person within the adoption agency (The Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013, p.25). They must be a qualified social worker with at least three years' post-qualifying experience in childcare social work and have knowledge and experience of permanency planning, adoption, and childcare law and practice (Department for Education, 2014). The ADM is required to make a decision within seven working days of receipt of the relevant reports on the child (Adoption Agencies Regulations (AAR) No. 17). When a social work team determines that adoption is in a child's best interests, and this plan has been endorsed at a Looked After Children Review by the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), the agency must formally approve this plan. This process is supported through ongoing care planning and review mechanisms, including Permanency Planning Meetings (PPMs), which ensure that the proposed plan remains appropriate and that all relevant information informs decision-making.

For children where there are care proceedings, either on-going or planned, a report is prepared directly to the agency decision maker. If the ADM agrees that adoption is the appropriate plan, the Local Authority (LA) will apply to the court for a Placement Order (PO). The court may decide not to grant the Placement Order, representing a key point at which the care plan may change. In contrast, in cases where a child is relinquished by their birth parent and there is no plan to initiate care proceedings (i.e. adoption by consent), the case is typically presented to an adoption panel for recommendation to the ADM. In these situations, court proceedings are not required for a Placement Order.

Prior to September 2012, all children's plans were required to be presented to an adoption panel before a recommendation was made to the ADM. However, current practice limits panel involvement to specific circumstances, most commonly relinquished children. The implications of decisions not proceeding as planned will be explored further in Chapter 6

Once the Placement Order is granted, the Adoption Agency is required to regularly review the plan for the child. If an adoptive placement has not been found, the first review meeting is at three months after the Placement Order was made, and then at six monthly intervals. At the second review meeting, nine months after the Order was made, regulations state that the review should;

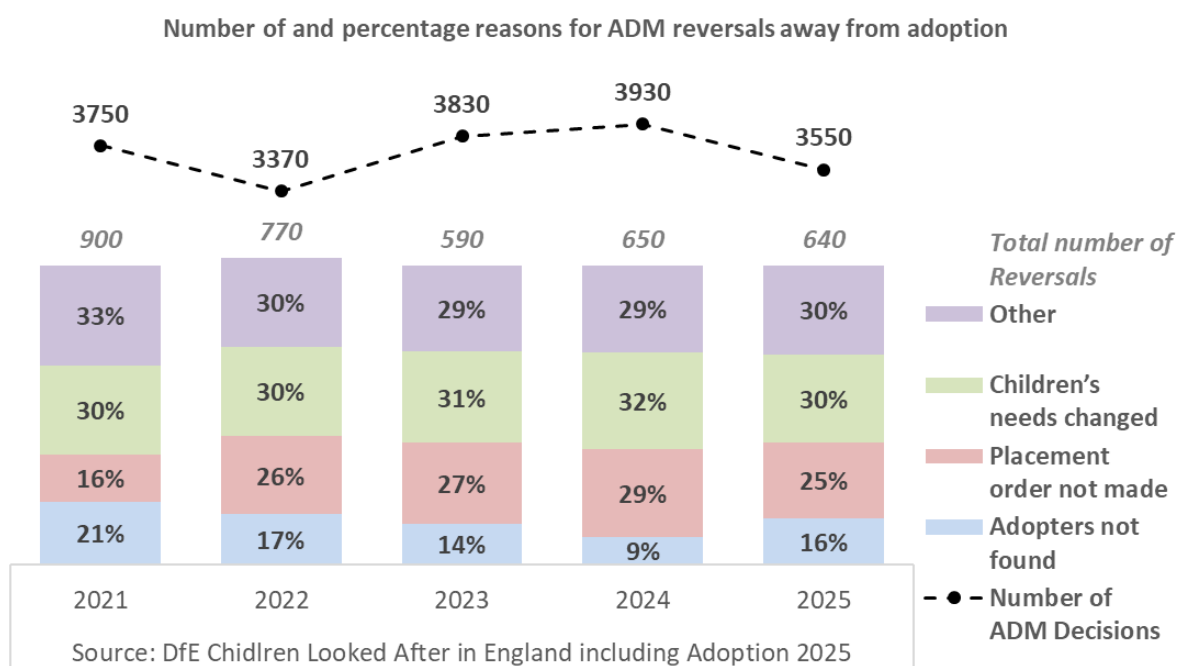
“establish why the child has not been placed for adoption and consider what further steps the authority should take in relation to the placement of the child for adoption; and consider whether it remains satisfied that the child should be placed for adoption” (AAR 2013, 36.7).

As a Placement Order provides greater restriction on a birth parents' involvement in their child's life than a Care Order, the guidance states that revoking the order needs to be considered if the child cannot be placed. The Local Authority can apply to revoke the Placement Order, but unlike birth parents, they do not have to establish a change of

circumstances. The guidance is clear that “it will not be appropriate for a Placement Order to remain in force indefinitely with little or no chance of the child being placed for adoption.” (AAR 2013, 5.38).

1.2. Number of and reasons for ADM reversals away from adoption

The graph below contains the number of ADM reversals for the last five complete years of data and the breakdown of reasons that are given in the agency returns. The number of ADM decisions each year is also included however reversals happen on a varied timetable depending on the reason for the adoption plan not happening, therefore figures cannot be compared year on year.



The purpose of this research was to explore the detail behind these figures and therefore the following research question was formulated:

- What do we know of the practice and the reasoning when plans are changed away from adoption?

1.3. Relevant research

This section will review existing research on changes of plans for children away from adoption. There is limited work in this area, but within the wider literature on care planning for children, there are two research avenues that offer insights. First, studies that have tracked care planning for children over time, that look at the frequency of children’s plans changing from the original intention of social workers, and second, studies that have explored the challenges to family finding in the UK. These avenues provide information on why these changes of plan happen and which children are more likely to experience a change of plan.

1.3.1. Placement Order not made.

As identified in the previous section, the first opportunity for a change of plan to take place is when the Placement Order (PO) is not made by the court. Harwin et al. (2003) followed 100 children who had Care Orders made in 1997. The study gathered information on the care proceedings, including the original plan on application, and tracked their outcomes after final orders were made for a period of 21 months. This was before the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, so the children did not have Placement Orders made. The aim was to explore outcomes for children following care proceedings. In only one instance was the plan changed away from adoption during the court proceedings which involved one child whose plan changed from adoption to long term fostering. By contrast, fourteen cases changed to adoption during the care proceedings, mostly when plans for rehabilitation to the birth family home failed. The outcomes of the plans will be looked at in the next section of this chapter, but at this point it is only necessary to note that they found that it was more common during care proceedings for plans to change towards adoption rather than away.

A similar study was undertaken several years later to track outcomes of children in court proceedings (Masson et.al., 2019). This study examined the impact of court reforms aimed at shortening the length of Care Proceedings by looking at planning for children in the court system and the children's outcomes both pre (Care Orders made in 2010) and post (Care Orders made in 2014) reforms. They found that in most cases the Orders made agreed with the local authority's care plan; 98.7% in the first cohort and 92% in the cohort post reforms. But the researchers noted that this might not reflect the occasions when plans were changed through pressure or the court process before final application. The report does note where children had reversals of their ADM decision and with the later cohort this was due to the Placement Order either not being granted or the application withdrawn by the LA. This study draws attention to the role of judiciary in setting the tone in family court, as it examined the impact of certain key judgements in care cases, and their impact on the whole family court system. Overall, there is a clear picture of the complexity of planning for children through the court system, a recognition of the tensions between local authorities and the courts and the interplay of the different professional roles in concluding on the best way forward for the child.

Another study which offers insight into the early changes of plans is an evaluation of a permanency project run in two Local Authorities (Luckock et al., 2017). This project used early tracking as one method to improve practice in finding permanent homes for children. They identified 30 children that could potentially be adopted and began to track them before any orders were made (pre-birth for some children). Only nine of these 30 children went on to have Placement Orders made. The number of POs made is partly reflective of the evaluation coming to an end as some children were still in care proceedings and their situations had not been resolved. However, fifteen of the children identified as being possibly in need of adoption had remained with or returned to the care of birth family member and not all of these children had an ADM decision as part of their

care planning. This study offers an insight into the sense of unpredictability of early care planning.

1.3.2. Adopters not found/ child's needs changed

This section will consider the information available on when children have an agreed plan for adoption, but this does not come to fruition. First, it will look at the studies which tracked a cohort of children over time to see how plans unfolded.

The first study considered the benefits and challenges of non-infant adoption (Selwyn et al., 2006). This study identified a group of children (n=130) in one region, aged between 3-11 years old, who had all had a Best Interests (BI) decision made during the 1990's that they should be placed for adoption. They were followed up between 6-11 years after the decision had been made. By this point 80 children had been placed for adoption. Of the other children in the cohort 34 were permanently placed in foster or kinship care, and 16 had what was described by the researchers as having unstable care careers. Of the children in long term foster care, there were higher proportion of children who were from Black or minority ethnic backgrounds or had some form of disability or chronic health conditions. For the smaller group (n=16) who had had unstable care careers, the children had higher prevalence of issues such as their mothers having reported mental health problems, or multiple forms of abuse in their background and expressions of violent behaviour.

Selwyn et al (2010) undertook a later study which focused on children from ethnic minoritised backgrounds in the UK, who had a Best Interest (BI) decision made between March 2005-April 2006 (n= 120) (Selwyn et al., 2010). On the completion of data collection, 28% of the children (n=34) had their plan changed away from adoption. The most frequent reason given for the change of plan was 'no adopters found' (44%). Some of these children returned to the care of their birth family (30%), and some had remained in their current care placement (23%). There were some indications from the case recording that there had been little effort to undertake family finding for some of the children, who tended to be older on average than those who were placed for adoption. When compared to a sample of white children with BI decisions, it was shown that Black and Asian children were more likely to have a change of plan away from adoption, and that the change of plan happened more quickly. This study shows evidence of differences in family finding activity according to the characteristics of the children.

The Masson et al (2019) study discussed previously, which looked at children who had Care Orders made in 2010 and in 2014, also considered the outcome of final care plans in their cohorts. They identified changes of plan away from adoption for some children but there is little information on why this might have happened. They did observe higher numbers of sibling groups having their plans changed away from adoption. The authors draw attention to potential procedural issues in relation to changes of plans. In eleven cases from the earlier cohort, there had been an ADM reversal. However, they note that eighteen children were not placed at all, meaning there were seven children that were potentially drifting with a PO still in force. Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) & LA

solicitors who were interviewed noted that it is difficult to persuade Local Authorities of the importance of returning to court to have a PO revoked. However, the researchers also suggest that there is a balance to be achieved between timeliness of planning, and the complexity of family finding for some children. They noted that around 50% of children took over six months to have a match identified. They also observed that some courts were trying to combat drift in care planning by ordering time-limits on family finding. They noted that time-limits placed on family finding might stop this activity too early and so prevent a match being made (Masson et al., 2019). Again, the complexity of planning for children is highlighted, as well as the role of the court and the multiple factors that have to be considered in making best decisions for permanency.

Burch et al (2018) looked at the outcomes for all children in Wales who had a Care Order made in a twelve-month period between April 2012- March 2013 (n=1076). This study found that of this group, 32% (n= 347) were adopted by the follow up point. The children adopted were more likely to be younger (mean age of two years old) and had a lower rate of disability than the cohort overall. The time between Placement Order and beginning an adoptive placement was between 0-1441 days, with an average of 262 days. Half of the adopted group had siblings who had also had a Care Order made at the same time. Of these children, a quarter were adopted without any of their siblings, and just over half with all their siblings. This study had planned to look at whether the cohort's placement outcomes matched the care plans made at court but due to data issues in the whole cohort, this was not possible. They instead examined a smaller subset of children across five local authorities in Wales (n= 79). Within in this group, 21 children had a plan for adoption only (rather a plan for "adoption or long-term foster care") and for five children adoption was not achieved. For four of the children the plan changed to long term foster care, but the new plan was not explicitly recorded for the fifth child. It may be read that this child had not found a permanent placement five years after their final court order.

Another study that considers permanence outcomes for children is Permanently Progressing, a Scottish study that is following all children under the age of five who entered care in Scotland in 2012 – 2013 (n=1836) (Cusworth et al, 2019; Whincup et.al. 2024). The longitudinal study reported outcomes four years after first entry to care (2016) and ten years after (2022). One outcome considered was whether the children were in a legally permanent placement (including living back with parents). In this cohort, 347 children achieved permanence through adoption. The study notes that the process to adoption took over four years for around over a third of these children. Data was also collected from social workers at both stages of the study around difficulties in achieving permanence, with "adopters not found" noted as a reason at both points (Whincup et al, 2024). In 2016, social workers reported that it had been quite difficult to find adopters for 23.5% of the children with an adoption plan, and very difficult for 9.5% of children (Cusworth et. al. 2019). It was noted that social workers felt that "children's disability, behaviour, developmental uncertainty or the risk of inheriting a particular medical condition had deterred potential adoptive parents" (Cusworth et. al., 2019, p.46). Finding an ethnic match, levels of contact with birth family, and court delays were also named as challenges to finding adopters. The authors of Permanently Progressing link their findings

to other studies of the challenges in matching and family finding; these challenges will now be considered below.

Other studies have looked at care planning for children from a later point in this process by looking specifically at family finding and matching. The key study in England was conducted with data collection in two stages (Dance et al., 2010; Farmer & Dance, 2016). The first stage established what practice was taking place in England around matching and family finding by means of a survey of 44 Local Authorities (Dance et al., 2010). One section of the questionnaire asked when family finding would stop for children. Two thirds of the respondents indicated a change of plan would be considered at 6-9 months, with the other responses ranging from under 6 months to never. The second stage of the research (Farmer et al., 2010; Farmer & Dance, 2016) followed a sample of “hard-to-place children”, to examine family finding. By the close of the study, 27% of the identified children (n=18) had not been placed with a family. Eleven of the children had their plan changed to long term foster care. There is not detailed analysis of the reasons for change of plan, but a lack of proactive social work was noted in eight of the cases. For the children who were placed the following factors were identified as helping to achieve good quality and timely matching: the availability of good quality information on the child, timely moves to widen searching, and established procedures to track children on their journey.

A later study also considered family finding, with a focus on matching children with multiple needs (Dance et al., 2017). One part of this study worked with focus groups of approved adopters. The adopters described that they wanted to adopt a child who would be able to live independently as an adult, and key to this decision was the severity of any potential issue affecting the child. Professionals were also spoken to, and they identified that certain factors could make family finding more challenging. These factors included developmental uncertainty, parents’ mental illness or learning disability, and experiences of sexual abuse. Characteristics such as age, siblings and minority ethnicity were not challenging factors on their own, only when they intersected with the other factors. This study also looked at additional factors around the practice of family finding, identifying that agencies often preferred placing children with their own adopters, due to concerns about being able to support adopters at a distance, and interagency communication. It recommended that there needed to be consideration of how to create a more uniform offer of adoption support to reduce variation across the country, early family finding for children with clear additional needs, and early planning between adoption and children’s teams. As the findings will show some of these recommendations have been taken on board but not all.

The research in this chapter should be read in the wider context of the research on the outcomes of adoptive family life and foster care in England. It is not in the scope of this report to provide a full account of this, but it is important to note that in the early 21st century, English and Welsh social policy has promoted adoption as a permanence option for children (Thoburn, 2021). This is due to its perceived better outcomes for children, and its provision of complete legal permanence for the child as all parental responsibility is held by the adoptive parents. It has been shown to have a lower disruption rate than other

forms of alternative care (Selwyn & Gardiner, 2025). However, it is also recognised that long-term foster care or special guardianship can be the best options for some children unable to live with birth family. Long-term foster care is now recognised as a permanence option, that can provide successful and supportive relationships for children (Schofield et al, 2024; McSherry, 2013; Thomas, 2013). When planning for children unable to live permanently within their family network, it has been described that social workers are now looking to identify “a family for developmental recovery” (Quinton, 2012, p.13). Quinton’s work looking at matching for adoption notes that uncertainty is inherent in predicting any child’s eventual developmental outcome, especially when it is planned to place them in the new environment of an adoptive home. The challenges and complexity of this task are recognised as this report moves on to consider how practitioners are working in this space, and the reasons that plans may change for children.

1.4. Chapter Summary

- There is research that evidences how plans for children change during care proceedings, both away from and towards adoption plans.
- Studies that track children over time indicate that there have always been children for whom it was not possible to achieve a plan of adoption.
- This group of children is more likely to include children of black and minority ethnic heritage, who have disabilities, and who have additional risk factors such as parental mental health or experiences of abuse in their backgrounds.
- System factors (such as barriers to interagency placements and deficits in the family finding process) are also influential in understanding why some children do not get adopted.

2. Chapter 2 - Methods

This study used a qualitative approach to examine the reasons behind changes of plan away from adoption. We explored twenty cases through semi-structured interviews. The aim was to recruit at least two professionals connected with the case to explore decision making from different perspectives, although this did not happen in every case (see below). Ethical approval was granted via the University of East Anglia. The data collection and analysis took place between November 2024 to May 2025.

Adoption England provided us with the contact details for each Regional Adoption Agency. The Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) were emailed with information on the study and asked to identify one example where there had been a change of plan away from adoption in the last year, and to provide the contact details for two workers involved in the process. There was no other requirement so RAAs were free to choose which cases they forwarded to the research team. Twenty-one RAAs responded to say that they had identified a child(ren) that fitted the research parameters and provided contact information for at least one professional who had worked on the case. We targeted one professional who had responsibility/ connection with family finding (Family finder/ Permanence Co-ordinator), and one professional who had a role in care planning (children’s social worker, Independent Reviewing Officer).

Contact was then made with the professionals identified by the RAA although not all of the professionals responded to the request for interview. For twenty RAAs, it was possible to make contact with at least one professional. In one RAA, no workers responded to the request for interview. In total thirty-four interviews were held, covering twenty cases.

Role on case	Number of interviews
Family finding social worker (FF)	17
Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)	8
Children’s Social Workers (CSW)	9 (two of whom also were family finders for children on their caseload)

All interviews were held online using Teams with an interview schedule used as prompts for the conversation. Interviews were semi-structured. The interview questions are available in Appendix I. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the Teams function. The researchers produced a summary based on the transcription and this summary was used for analysis². The summary followed a set format using a pre-determined framework for analysis (see Appendix II). The summary focused on what went well, what might have been done differently and as well as thoughts and feelings expressed by the participant. The summaries were used to compare cases to identify the following areas: shared case characteristics, professional decision making and systemic factors. Key transitions were tracked in the cases such as changes of social workers, when

² AI was not used in generating interview summaries.

family finders were allocated, if/when family finding was extended to a wider area and when family finding was ended. This allowed for themes to be developed around the commonalities and differences in how the social workers described this area of practice.

The analysis of the social workers' interviews identified a need for further data collection around the legal process from professionals more directly related to this arena. Time constraints did not allow for work with Judges or CAFCASS however we were able to arrange a focus group for Local Authority legal professionals to look at cases where Placement Orders were not granted. This did not focus on specific situations but instead a vignette (Appendix III) was designed based on the interviews from the first stage of data collection. Eight legal professionals attended the focus group from seven local authorities and the discussion was used to bring context to the findings.

2.1. Chapter Summary

- A qualitative study was undertaken focused on 20 cases where a change of plan away from adoption had been made.
- Thirty-four professionals were interviewed of which 9 people were children's social workers, 8 were IROs and 17 were family finders.
- Analysis focused on what went well, what might practice have done differently and the thoughts and feelings of the professionals regarding the case.
- A focus group was held with local authority legal professionals to get a legal perspective on general practice in the court process.

3. Chapter 3 - Case Contexts

This chapter will provide contextual information extrapolated from the interviews to set the scene for the findings. We did not explore the personal characteristics of each child, unless it was brought up by interviewee as a factor. As such, we will not be providing demographic information on each child. Therefore, in this chapter, first, the practice of care planning and family finding will be itemised and then the general characteristics of the cases are detailed.

3.1. The practice of care planning and family finding

This section serves as a backdrop to the overall findings from the interviews. As part of the interviews, we explored the steps taken in practice for care planning and family finding, as this aided in understanding when practitioners started to discuss or explore a change of plan away from adoption. The steps are detailed below and although there are some key stages to practice, this study has found some variations in delivery across the agencies involved, and attention will be drawn to these when relevant.

- *Initial Allocation:* Children in care proceedings were allocated to social workers in a family help/safeguarding team. This team made the plans for the children and saw the case through the court process. They were the professionals who approached the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for the 'Should be placed for Adoption' (SHOPFA) decision.
- *Tracking and co-allocation:* Most children had been 'tracked' by the family finding team before the Placement Order (PO) was granted. Family finding teams were, in the main, based within the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), but at least one was in the Local Authority (LA). Tracking start dates varied - from the first discussion a childcare team might have about adoption to when the ADM first made the SHOPFA decision. Tracking was co-ordinated by different practitioners, sometimes the matching co-ordinator for the whole RAA, sometimes an individual family finder was co-allocated at this point, alongside the child's social worker. When co-allocation happened, adoption workers could sometimes support the allocated worker with writing the Child Permanence Reports (or write it themselves) and provide evidence on family finding for the Court.
- *In-house searching:* In some agencies, searches were undertaken in-house with an anonymised profile before the PO was granted. These anonymised searches could be extended outside the agency with the court's permission, but interviewees who had requested this said the permission was rarely granted.
- *Placement Order:* Once the PO was granted, searching started in earnest. There was often a change of allocated social worker at this point, as children transferred in most cases to a team specifically for children with a PO. The team was either situated with the RAA or LA. In some cases, the case holding social worker remained in the safeguarding team. In two cases the social worker in the permanence/adoption team

was also undertaking family finding activity. For all the other cases this was a separate role.

- *Family finding:* A profile of the child would be created by the family finder and searching would begin with in-house matching with adopters from within the RAA. The profile of the child would be shown to the social workers of potential adopters:

“my colleagues in the recruitment and assessment team, they would look at the profiles and then they would speak to their families about whether this was a child that that would meet their needs” (family finder)

Most described that typical practice continued with internal searching for three months (at least) before asking for funding to explore wider searching. For some agencies, their internal tracking allowed them to identify if there were internal candidates before the PO was granted, and if not, it allowed a move immediately to a wider search.

- *Wider searching:* Agency agreement was needed to explore wider options such as placing children outside the agency. Once this agreement was in place, the children would often be profiled on Link Maker, an online platform accessible by approved adopters. Other tools for searching included exchange events and activity days. Exchange events were sessions where professionals, and sometimes adopters, came together to share profiles of children. These could be smaller “in-house” events, or national events. Activity days were sessions where children available for adoption and approved adopters were brought together, further information on these events is available in Simpson et al (2024).
- *Reviewing:* Throughout this process there were regular meetings, mostly called Permanence Planning Meetings (PPM) to review the plans. These functioned as the review meetings called for in the Adoption Agency Regulations (AAR) but could be more frequent than the three months required in the regulations. These meetings ran alongside the statutory Looked After Child review process.
- *Interest from adopters:* If adopters expressed interest (EOI) in a particular child, they were then sent more detailed information on child. Typically, this was the Child Permanence Report, plus selected other information that might be available such as court assessments or medical reports. If the adopters wished to pursue the match, then adoption workers visited them, along with child’s social worker (family finding visit). Some agencies reported a professional meeting afterwards to look at the potential match (selections meeting). If professionals felt that these adopters could be a good match for the child, then the case proceeded to the matching process.

3.2. Overview of cases

The case overview relates to the general categories used when reporting to the Children and Social Care Secretariat. Due to small numbers and the complexity of the cases, we have collapsed the two categories of ‘child’s needs changed’ and ‘other’ into one category.

When asked, the interviewees were often not sure or did not have a view on which of the categories their case would fall under. Whether a child was not placed because ‘adopters were not found’ or because the ‘child’s needs changed’ was a matter of opinion in some instances. For example, in one case, there was disagreement between the two interviewees, the family finder identifying that the child’s needs had changed but the social worker reflecting that the issue was adopters were not found, thus demonstrating that the categories used for reporting often hide the complexity when a plan changes. Therefore, the categorisation of cases in this study was researcher-led as part of the analysis to help with the reporting of the findings.

Reason for change	Number of cases
<i>Adopters not found</i>	12
<i>Placement Order not granted</i>	4
<i>Other/ child’s needs changed</i>	4

For the purposes of the report *adopters not found* has been separated into two groups, *uncertain health needs* and *older children* to draw out differences and comparisons between family finding for these two groups.

The twenty cases identified referred to 31 children overall, meaning most of the cases discussed involved siblings. All but one of the children identified in this sample also had siblings who were either already adopted, in kinship care, or another part of the care system. Thirteen cases had plans for the child to be placed with at least one of their siblings in the original ADM decision. In two of these instances, the plan changed away from adoption only for the older siblings in the group. The younger children were then placed for adoption without their older sibling/s. One case had originally planned to place three siblings together, but the plan then changed when the foster carer of the eldest children offered to adopt them but could not accommodate the younger siblings. In the remaining seven cases it was always planned for the child to be placed alone.

In sixteen cases the plan was changed after a Placement Order had been granted. These cases changed to the following plans:

- In two cases, the plan changed for the children to be placed under a Special Guardianship Order, either with their current foster care or a Connected person within their network.
- Eleven cases had a plan to remain with their current foster carers, with plans to confirm this as a long-term foster placement as set out in the regulations (Schofield

et al, 2024). This confirmation was to take place after the PO had been discharged by the court and the case had transferred to the local children in care team.

- For three cases, the plan was to move to a new placement that would be their long-term foster home. A new placement had been identified in one instance with the other two requiring a further search.

The earliest PO in this sample was made in January 2020, and the latest was made March 2024. The children ranged in age at time of care proceedings concluding (making the PO) from under one year to seven years old. The younger children were in cases where the PO was not granted. Sometimes the dates of the PO were not always clear from the interview.

The specifics of the cases are explored below in alignment with our categorisation.

3.2.1. Adopters not found: uncertain health needs

Within this category, the common characteristic for the cohort of children was uncertain futures related to health needs (n=8 cases). The health need either related to a diagnosed developmental condition, such as autism, or having significant developmental uncertainty with the possibility of a diagnosis in the future. The interviewees described the children as having a range of individual health needs, but with predominantly a combination of developmental delay, autism, and suspected genetic conditions. None of these children had sensory disabilities such as sight or hearing impairments alone, or a specific medical issue with a clear treatment plan. The challenge in finding adoptive families concerned the uncertainty about diagnosis meaning that long-term outcomes and needs were unclear, which was magnified when there was a suspected but not yet confirmed condition, in particular autism.

These eight cases involved both single children and sibling groups where one child or both children had uncertain medical needs. Family finding began as soon as possible after the Placement Order, with family finders being realistic about the challenges in finding a family for a child with a potential disability but demonstrating commitment to reflecting the child's needs. Though searches were often national from an early stage, they were unsuccessful with few expressions of interests. When adopters did ask for more information and heard more about the children's potential needs, they withdrew from the matching process. Length of family finding ranged between a year to three years, with family finders describing little interest from prospective adopters. This was discussed at the regular review meetings. Without exception, the long-term plans changed from adoption to one where the children remained with their current foster carers in a long-term arrangement. Despite conversations having been held with foster carers about utilising a legally permanent option such as adoption or special guardianship, the foster carers were unwilling to take this step but were willing to commit to long term fostering. The reasons for this will be explored further in section 6.4 on the positioning of foster care and foster carers.

3.2.2. Adopters not found: older children

Where children are over the age of five, this brought additional challenges to finding adoptive families. The group identified in this category were older but had no documented health or global developmental concerns. There were often significant concerns about their emotional and behavioural needs. In contrast to the children with uncertain health needs, there was often more interest from adopters, with social workers exploring matches up to the selection stage. Within this grouping, the matching process could end when the local authority declined to go any further forward with matches as well as potential adopters withdrawing their interest after hearing more information about the child. There was evidence of centring the child behind each of the LA's decisions, as either the child's wishes were listened to or there was recognition of the high risk of disruption with the match:

“...she's extremely traumatised child and she would need somebody really robust.... The social worker was like 'Whoever looks after this little girl, she cannot have a breakdown, considering her age and what she's been through...’ (family finder)

Two cases were solo children where the professional group around them reached the consideration that a well-supported long term foster placement was more likely to meet their needs than an adoptive placement. These were children had a high level of emotional and behavioural need, with a strong likelihood of on-going therapeutic input. It was not seen as possible to support the uncertainty of their future needs with an adoption support package, whereas foster care would mean that the local authority continued to have oversight. One social worker also described having more ability to be prescriptive over a foster placement, e.g. being able to say that a child must be the youngest in placement. For the other two cases, these were sibling groups where the decision was hastened by a time limit imposed on the search by the court. The outcome for this group was that one of the sibling groups had plans to stay with their current foster placement. For the other three cases, a long-term foster placement had been identified or was being sought.

3.2.3. Child's needs changed or Other

A smaller number of children (n=4 cases) had plans changed for reasons that were not solely because of the challenges in finding an adoptive placement for them. For instance, two cases involved plans changing after an adoptive placement disrupted. For one child after the disruption, a member of their network came forward to offer them a long-term home. Another child had experienced the disruption of two adoptive placements but had now been placed with foster carers wanting to provide a long-term home.

The other two cases involved sibling groups. One was a sibling pair, where following the withdrawal of a possible kinship placement for one child, the foster carers came forward to offer a Special Guardianship placement for both children. The last instance concerned the youngest two children of a large sibling group, who began to express distress at the idea of leaving their foster carer. In this case a potential adoptive match had been

identified, however professionals considered the children's wishes and decided to not move forward with this. The children remained with their current foster carers.

These cases demonstrate the change possible in planning for children under adoption plans. For the children in this category family finding had not been exhausted, in fact in one case, it had been successful. In two of the cases, there was a possibility of legal permanence in the future as the carers were open to applying to adopt or for Special Guardianship. To look at these four cases positively, it shows workers being able to respond to new circumstances and a flexibility of care planning to meet the child's needs. However, another interpretation could be that events were leading care planning and practitioners were being responsive rather than proactive in their planning. This highlights the complexity of matching and family finding, especially for sibling groups, and whether there is enough consideration given to the support needed to achieve/ maintain permanence for children in all placements.

The remaining four examples of Placement Order not granted. This reasons behind this change of plan will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

This chapter has described key contextual features relevant to each of the 20 cases and the top-level categorisation as to why the plan changed. In the following chapters we will explore in more detail as to how decisions were made and the barriers to placement that necessitated the change of plan before finally considering issues emerging in instances where the Placement Order was not granted.

3.3. Chapter Summary

- There are key stages in the process of children moving to adoptive homes however there are local variations in how these are delivered.
- For the children in this study, we categorised the cases as follows: 12 cases where the adopters were not found, 4 where Placement Orders were not granted and 4 where the child's needs changed/other where there were further complexities in the planning.
- All the cases shared a high level of complexity and demonstrated the need for flexibility when planning for adoption for children.

4. Chapter 4 - Decision-Making

There were some key factors that influenced decision-making to move the plan away from adoption. The following highlights the when, how and why the decision was made to cease family finding in the cases where it was not possible to find adopters, or alternatively where children's plans were changed to permanence within their foster family.

4.1. Why did family finding stop?

Family finding ceased for a number of reasons although central to the decisions were considerations as to what the child wanted and what was best for the child.

4.1.1. Child's views

Some practitioners named the child's wishes and feelings as a significant factor in the decision to cease family finding. This was specifically when at least one child of a sibling group expressed distress or concern at the prospect of moving or of not knowing where they would be living in the future.

"The child's social worker felt very clear that they needed permanency sooner rather than later. Particularly the older boy was really struggling with, 'well, where do I live? Where do I belong?' Kept asking his foster care 'can I stay with you? Am I going to stay with you?' And with some children that declines over the time of being placed. But it didn't." (family finder)

"She was clearly saying I want to live with Mummy and if I can't stay with Mummy, I want to stay with foster carer... So, at that point it was looked at that that actually have we got the right plan for these two children? The child's social worker did one piece of direct work with the girls about forever home and she got so distressed it stopped at that point." (family finder)

Though the child's expressed wishes were important, this was not the sole reason for stopping family finding as it nearly always considered alongside other reasonings and sources of information. A key driver to stopping the family finding was the impact that the child's strength of feeling might have on any future adoptive placement.

"I do think the younger child could have managed it, I do think he would have been able to attach to other carers, to adopters, but I think the older child would have found it very, very difficult and his younger brother would have then followed suit, seeing him kind of push against it." (social worker)

The worries of moving were not always directly voiced by the child, but the professionals were conscious of the need to pre-empt possible distress from the child, and to make plans before the child would or could become concerned regarding any uncertainty about their future. For example, in one case it was necessary to make a decision about when to cease looking for an adoptive placement due to the impact that uncertainty was having on

the child's social and educational welfare. The child had remained at a school that was at a significant distance from the foster home in order to minimise moves before living with an adoptive family. However, this decision began to affect the child's wellbeing and ability to make friendships in school as they could not take part in out of school activities easily. Therefore, the strength of the wishes of the child to remain with the foster carer when placed alongside the challenges in schooling gave a clear picture to stop the adoption search.

4.1.2. Time limits from the court

For a number of cases, when the Placement Order was granted, the Court ordered there to be time limited family finding. The imposed time limit varied between six months to eighteen months. The interviewees were aware that it was possible to return the court to ask for an extension on searching. The decision about whether to return to court was often influenced by if there was any interest being shown in the children from potential adopters:

“The judge gave us a time limit of six months to identify a family for the children. We weren't successful within that time, so we did go back to the court and at that time we'd had a couple of expressions of interest that hadn't gone anywhere.... think the judge saw that favourably and felt that we should continue. And he then gave us another 12 months, I think no, it might have been another six months.” (family finder)

“Family finding finished in March this year, and that was six months to the day. If we'd been in a position, I think, where there was expressions of interest, then you know, I think we could have argued and asked to go back to court to look at that six months' time scale. But the fact that there had never been any expression of interest- they had been included on Link Maker, they'd been to adoption events, but neither had progressed any interest.” (IRO)

Factors that influenced the decision to not seek an extension to the time limit included where children were becoming distressed by the on-going search as seen in the previous section. There was one case, which was noted as exceptional by the interviewee, where the birth family remained very involved and held the LA to account to return to court for the PO to be discharged when adopters were not found.

Both the focus group with legal professionals, and the interviews with family finders questioned the need for these short time-limited searches of six months. The family finders stated that more time would have been helpful, especially when searching for children who it can be more difficult to find an adoptive family for, such as an older sibling group. One family finder reflected on the pressure this placed on decision-making and the possibility of an inappropriate match:

“I think me and the child social worker did make the right decisions about that couple we said no to. But I do wonder if some other people, maybe with less experience of general social work would have felt comfortable making that decision with two

months to go. And whether that stress pushes you to make unwise decisions.” (family finder)

The AAR state that children’s plans need to be regularly reviewed to establish if adoption is still the right plan, so it is arguable that the court-imposed time limits on family finding are not needed. Within this study, there was little evidence of drift, with most cases having regular professionals’ meetings, and tight timescales, regardless of whether there was a time-limited search ordered. It should be noted, of course, that the agencies were able to choose which cases to put forward for the study and may not have put forward cases where there was considerable delay.

4.1.3. Family finding was exhausted

A significant reason for bringing family finding to a close was when social workers felt that family finding was exhausted and that there was no further benefit to continue to search. This was prompted by situations when family finding had been running for several years or there was no one suitable coming forward. The challenge for professionals was to know when the right time was to stop:

“...it wasn't like another three months might mean we get some people. Numbers of the adopters are still going down, numbers of children needing forever families are still going up. And they were getting older.” (family finder)

“...you get to that point where you're like ‘We've gone every angle here and nothing is going into the next step.’ (family finder)

For a few family finders the decision was made with the knowledge that they had seriously considered families, and that the special family that this child needed might not be there:

“...it was really time to look at her plan and think right, we've been looking for two years now and we have visited an array of adoptive families; but they didn't feel that they could meet her needs, so exhausted all types of families that we were looking at.” (social worker)

The stipulated regular family finding reviews were opportunities to discuss the particular child’s needs and what were the right next steps, allowing challenges to be discussed and to gain further insight into the child’s development. However, even with this collective discussion, social workers described it as challenging to know when to stop. In a few situations, family finders described leaving profiles open on Link Maker just in case the ‘right’ adoptive family showed an interest, even as plans were being made to take the case back to court to rescind the Placement Order. The practitioners showed care and compassion wanting the best for child, which was framed as child having a ‘family of their own’. This perhaps highlights the differences in perceptions of permanency and how adoption as opposed to long term foster care is viewed more positively in terms of long-term outcomes. This framing of adoption will be further explored in attitudes to foster care.

4.2. Making the decision

The previous section details when the decision to stop family finding gets made. This section explores how the decision was made. In most cases, the professionals described the team around the child as being in agreement to change the plan, or at least that it was a consensus view that people came to over time. This consensus happened via frequent meetings that examined the child's needs where a shared understanding emerged of the best way forward for the child. It should be noted that we only interviewed up to two people for each case, it may be that other practitioners were not necessarily fully in agreement with the final decision despite the shared understanding being reached.

For most children, the plan was kept under regular reviews via Placement Planning Meetings. Once it was agreed to stop family finding then this decision was taken to a Looked After Child (LAC) review for ratification. In making these decisions, there were variations in how the IRO viewed their role and how others viewed the IRO in the process. Some practitioners identified the IRO as the professional who would advocate for the continuation of family finding when others wanted to stop, but this was not in all cases. In one interview an IRO described being newly allocated and said it was a “tricky” situation to manage as they felt the decision had already been made for the children as the change of plan was discussed. There were cases described where IROs did not want to ratify decisions in the LAC review and instead sent the decision to a professionals meeting of those directly involved in the family finding process instead.

The role of the IRO was not the only area where different understandings of the process about changing the plan were described. Interviews suggested that there could be uncertainty and information gaps around the decision to formally change the plan. The family finders in two separate cases reflected that they were not clear if a wider professionals' meeting had taken place or if the decision making about the change of plan had taken place solely within the social work team. Both identified that in these cases they had wanted a meeting with other professionals to fully decide the new plan. It is not clear if meetings did not happen or if it was that the family finders were not invited to any such meeting. However, it does highlight the importance of an official meeting which can service professionals and minute the decision-making, but more importantly provide information for the children in the future:

*“But I do feel just for the boys as well for that to be recordable. I really hope this doesn't happen, but say they get to teenagers and their foster carer goes, I can't manage it ... I think for there to be a recorded professionals meeting as to why we decided not to keep searching, would be really lovely to have had for the boys.”
(family finder)*

The interviews with IRO's also reflected the significance of the decision to stop family finding and the importance of decision-making being completed in a transparent and well evidenced manner was crucial. One IRO was clear that everyone involved in a child's life needed to have a say on a decision that would potentially close the door on a child being adopted. Another IRO described entering a meeting aware they were making a decision

that might mean a child not being able to have their own experience of a “*private family life outside of the care system*”.

Only a few interviewees referenced disagreement or misunderstandings over whether a plan should be changed that could not be resolved within the professional meetings held during the family finding search. In these cases, there appeared to be disagreement on the severity of needs that the children had and therefore there was significant debate as to how these needs should be met for the children in the long term. The disagreements were resolved by involving senior management in the decision making when the professionals directly involved were not able to find consensus on the best way forward. In the interviews around these cases, there were examples of inconsistencies in the telling of what had happened in the process, such as how many adopters had expressed interest, or lack of understanding of the other professionals’ reasonings for their preferred care plan. These discrepancies perhaps indicate that there was a wider communication breakdown in these examples. In this study the cases resolved with plans for the children to remain with their current foster carer but in other situations this could lead to delay and unnecessary placement change for children.

4.3. Chapter Summary

- The decision to stop family finding was a carefully considered decision that took account of the child’s expressed wishes, time limits set by the Court and the exhaustion of all avenues of searching without adopters expressing an interest.
- The decision to stop was generally agreed by all professionals although there was not always a formal mechanism utilised to record this, and there is ambiguity in the role of the IRO in facilitating this.
- The few cases of disagreement highlighted that there was not agreement with the original plan for adoption with identified communication breakdowns and a requirement for senior managers to come up with a resolution.

5. Chapter 5 – Practice challenges in finding adoptive homes

This chapter will explore the work undertaken by the family finders and social workers to identify families, and the challenges they faced in identifying the right family for each child.

5.1. Challenges in family finding

5.1.1. Adopters' perception of child needs

Family finders talked about adopters wanting to have a degree of certainty about the future needs of a child for a match to go ahead. For instance, where there were diagnosed health and medical needs, the pool of potential adopters was smaller, the family finders were able to target their approaches to adopters who were open to such needs. However, when there was uncertainty about a child's future support needs, this became more challenging for the family finders, especially in relation to any health conditions they might have.

“The feedback from the families that my colleagues were contacting was that there was just too much uncertainty in respect of his health and too many unknowns and how would they be able to meet his future health and developmental needs?” (family finder)

This uncertainty was complicated by a lack of clear diagnosis. The children where this was a factor were all pre-school in age and medical professionals were sometimes reluctant or unable to offer certainty as to the child's future needs. The uncertainty was further compounded by the circumstances that led to the children coming into care:

“They're doing a lot of assessments whether there is some genetic condition within the family, but we also know that they were extremely traumatised children as well. So that's what a lot of professionals have been saying, that at the moment they are too young [for a diagnosis], they need to be in a stable place. But I mean, one of them said at least two or three years before we can even start and that's what adopters found hard, they almost wanted labels to say that they could imagine how they would be able to support that label going forward” (IRO).

The anomaly to the certainty of diagnosis was autism in which it became particularly challenging to family find for a child:

“as soon as a child has a diagnosis or some sort of needs, the pool shrinks quite significantly. There are certainly some more challenging than others. So, some people are not so bothered about ADHD, for example.... But as soon as it's autism, I think my pool shrinks significantly.” (family finder)

5.1.2. Other adopter preferences

Though developmental uncertainty was clearly named as the most significant factor in most examples, other child characteristics were mentioned. Some practitioners reflected on the importance of age for adopters:

“Sometimes I find if there's one child who's preschool age and the other one's just at school, they're more adoptable ones. They're both at school- there's a lot less interest.” (Family finder).

Others suggested that it was more challenging to find adopters for boys. One family finder was clear that for the children they worked with the challenges were linked to the intersectionality of medical uncertainty, being part of a sibling group, and the children being of Black heritage.

This perception of challenges in finding adopters for certain children did not mean that the social workers did not actively promote the possibility of adoption for these children. They spoke about thorough practice to attempt to identify potential adopters, beginning while the cases were still in the court process.

5.2. Searching strategies

Where professionals recognised matching to a family would be challenging, different strategies were employed to maximise the chances for the children. In a number of cases, the social workers described asking for permission to search anonymously before placement orders were granted although most requests were refused by the court due to the objections of other parties.

Some family finders described that their tracking systems for children with ADM decisions had identified the lack of suitable adopters in the local system and so began a national search immediately. The sense of urgency to begin searching was increased when a time limit was imposed by the court:

“We had external searches all done and dusted before we got that placement order... I think they got their placement order on one of my non-working days. So, I made sure our support person was aware so that she could click go live [on their Link Maker profile].” (family finder).

However, in other agencies, this move to an external search was not always immediate as some were required to search ‘in-house’ first, although what is meant by ‘in-house’ depended on the structures of the RAAs. It was not clear why some agencies were able to identify if there were any suitable adopters within the agency before a PO was made and others did not, instead requiring a three-to-six-month period of internal searching. This may be linked to the variation in the structure of RAAs, or to other factors. There was not a clear pattern in how practice/allocations were organised that led to a quicker start for wider searching. For a small number of instances, family finders were not allocated until

after the PO, and required a referral to be completed, unlike the early co-working model present in other agencies. However, some agencies (both as RAAs and LAs) did co-work prior to Placement Order, but still required an in-house search first.

For children who had uncertain medical needs, a key approach that family finders discussed was the importance of helping adopters to see the child rather than the potential issues. Several approaches were used to achieve this, for instance, when writing the profile, family finders emphasised:

“really focusing on the strengths because you have to make sure that you put that information in there with regards to potential future health needs. Obviously, we can't miss that out, but I think sometimes I feel prospective adopters could read that and just straight away be like, ‘No’. When actually there's so many positives to your children and the progress that they had made and how far they'd come.” (family finder)

One family finder spoke of the importance of professional photos and video clips:

“.. the boys looked absolutely adorable in them and you got to see their character in the clips.” (family finder).

Another approach was for potential adopters to have the chance to gain extra information on the child before a selections meeting took place such as speaking with foster carers early on in the process or setting up an opportunity where they could actually see the child, for example when playing in a park. Speaking with the foster carer allowed the adopters to hear about the day to day of caring for a child, rather than the more limited information that a profile could provide. The family finders were often proactive in using Link Maker and activity days, though there were issues connected to these tools. For example, one family finder expressed that adopters noted when children had been on the site for some time without a match and was concerned and frustrated about the impression it could create for adopters about the child.

Activity days were seen as potentially helpful but were challenging to get children to, and sometimes unsuitable for children with special needs, with one social worker giving the example of an autistic child who found the venue used too noisy. For those specifically finding families for children with additional needs, a challenge was little interest from adopters to the point where activity days had been cancelled due to lack of adopters attending. One family finder reflected how disheartening and difficult it can be for the adults at activity days:

“Families weren't approaching. And I think for foster carers, as they find that really hard when their child isn't being chosen or people aren't coming over to you to talk about your child.” (family finder)

5.2.1. Managing minimal interest from adopters

However, for most of these cases, the efforts in family finding came to very little. Two family finders described having no expressions of interest at all from adopters on Link Maker during the months that the identified children were on there. Others described only a handful of Expressions of Interest (EOI) from Link Maker, which then went no further once the adopters received more information on the child. One family finder who had made use of professional video of the children had a good number of EOIs, but families would not take matching further once they had more information on the children. Family finders described approaching adopters on Link Maker who met the matching criteria for the children but that they met with no positive responses:

“There wasn't even conversation started when interest was shown. Usually, you could have the adopters want to learn more about the children. There wasn't any of that.” (family finder).

There was only one instance in which the family finder acknowledged that there was little proactive family finding due to the awareness of the children awaiting paediatric assessment, and that the child had recently had several moves of foster home. The family finder was aware that in these circumstances that it would be challenging to search for a placement and that more information was needed to be able to make a good match. Though the family finder was not actively approaching families, the children's profile remained live on Link Maker, but no adoptive family came forward to express interest in them.

In two of the cases where a child had uncertain medical needs, there were adopters who were interested but the Local Authority decided not to proceed. These were cases where there were concerns on the prospective adopters' abilities to meet the additional needs of the children based on what the practitioners felt to be the adopters' limited experience with children. The withdrawing from potential matches emphasises an important factor seen throughout the interviews, and that is the family finders and children's social workers were focused on finding the *right* family for each child and worked hard to do this. The level of work undertaken is indicated by the length of the report one family finder prepared as evidence for the change of plan decision:

“six pages of a chronology of different families who were approached and different activities and events.” (family finder)

This is not to state that adopters can never be found for these children. Here a family finder described finding adopters for the younger sibling of one of the sample cases.

“this couple just dropped out of the sky for the youngest ... they were specifically looking for a child with additional needs, and they fell in love with her.” (Family finder)

This child had significant additional needs including autism. The success here suggests that the challenge to find families for children with this level of need is low number of families willing to consider children with additional needs, rather than the efforts of the family finders.

Family finders raised concerns on finding adoptive homes when there was an intersection of sibling groups and age. For instance, a family finder reflected how challenging it was to find willing families for a sibling group of three. They described approaching any adopter interested in a group of three, already a smaller group of potential adopters, but having no positive responses. It should also be noted that two of the sibling groups with additional needs were sets of twins.

There was often sadness expressed by practitioners after an unsuccessful search for an adoptive family. This sadness was expressed as sorrow at not being able to support adopters to see the “*beautiful children in their own right*” rather than the potential problems, and not being able to find the children a “*family of their own*”, as one family finder said:

“...for professionals when you are working with these children that are just amazing in so many ways, it can also get disheartening when you've been looking for so long because you get the same responses and you're like, 'what can I do to make you see actually that this child... is not just uncertainty.’” (family finder)

5.3. Complexity of planning for siblings

As discussed in the introduction, many of the cases explored in this study involved siblings and required professionals to make decisions around whether children were best placed together or apart from each other. Masson et al. (2019) identified that these are complex decisions with professionals needing to balance what is right for each child. These assessments recommend whether the children should be placed together or separately. Together or Apart assessments were often undertaken either in court proceedings, or after around 9-12 months of unsuccessful family finding or an adoption disruption.

When considering early care planning in the courts, participants discussed instances in which less knowledge was known about the children’s sibling relationships. For the sibling relationships that were known and prioritised, sometimes Together or Apart assessments reached a conclusion to separate siblings who had lived together and often these were a complex balance of the children’s needs and the quality of their relationships. These were difficult assessments as one family finder recounted:

“It was a very intricate assessment, very well thought through. Very difficult decision to make to recommend a plan of adoption for all three of them separately.” (family finder).

In cases where only one sibling had health issues, the balance of what was best for the children was especially difficult.

“There was those conversations because both children's needs were so complex, but also so different as well... if we were to redo the sibling assessment and separate the children, would we potentially find a family an adoptive family for them separately? But that was out of the question... I don't think he would have been able to invest in an adoptive family without his sister.” (social worker)

The will to maintain sibling relationships was given a high value. One interviewee described siblings as *“the most important relationship a child will ever have”*. It was recognised that this was an emotive piece of work that draws on practitioners' own feelings about the sibling relationship. Concerns were raised that sometimes the needs of younger children could be lost when plans focused on the older siblings. Other emotional factors could play into this crucial decision. In one interview, a practitioner wondered if the children's birth mother's feelings had driven a Together or Apart assessment, reflecting on how closely the original social worker had supported her:

“I wonder if there was that will to keep these boys together. This mum's wish, you know...” (family finder).

Throughout the interviews, the decision making around how to place siblings, together or apart, was discussed as finely balanced, with professionals sometimes expressing uncertainty about the best way to meet divergent needs of siblings.

5.4. The positioning of foster care and foster carers

This section looks at how professionals perceived the role of foster care and foster carers in the family finding process. It should be noted that this section is based on the views of the social work and legal professionals interviewed and that foster carers were not spoken to as part of this research. Further work which involves foster carers may be a helpful way to understand the dynamics at play during the family finding process.

5.4.1. Professional views

It was apparent in the interviews that foster care as a permanency option was not viewed favourably compared to adoption, particularly for children where there had been extensive attempts to find an adoptive placement. For most of the interviewees, this strength of feeling concerned considerations as to the continuous intrusion into family life that was viewed as inherent in a foster placement. This stance was indicative of a rights-based approach as one IRO commented:

“I was looking at the children's ages and their right to private family life. And do we really want a four and a 5-year-old in foster care that long? health assessments, CLA reviews every six months?” (IRO)

Although these views do centre the child, they did not always recognise the practice of delegated authority that is now available in foster care practice that could mitigate some of the intrusion into family life, although some remain inherent in growing up in

foster care (i.e. the need for statutory checks). However, they are indicative of the frequent concerns raised that a child should not grow up in care if possible. This was linked to concerns about the stability of foster care and the lack of legal permanency as evidenced in the following:

“...we know that if children end up with foster care plans, we know the outcomes aren't great for them. We know that there's the possibilities of them moving around are so much greater than if they are adopted. And that does kind of weigh heavily with us, you know, very much so...” (family finder)

“I do worry because... having been an IRO for such a long time, in my experience, very few children that are matched with their foster carers end up staying in that placement until they're 18 and often have numerous changes.” (IRO)

For a few cases, there was an active choice that foster care would be best for the child for due to having the support of a social worker and accountability of Local Authority oversight throughout childhood:

“...we know there's a risk of future moves in long term foster care, but we felt as a local authority, she needs that input from us to support her through whatever diagnosis she may get in the future. (children's social worker)

One positive of a foster plan was the possibility of contact and an on-going relationship with the birth family. Foster care was seen as more fluid in supporting birth family relationships as they changed over time, as foster care meant continued connection to services and regular reviews:

“...people do change, don't they? And I think Mum isn't at the point where she could care for the children at the moment, but she has made progress in the time since the placement orders were made.” (IRO)

The most salient example was of one sibling group who had gone, within a year, from a PO with a plan for indirect contact only with their birth family, to a plan for long term foster care, with overnight staying contact and a possible reunification assessment. This contrasts with adoption which was perceived as more of a closed door in maintaining birth family relationships. Practitioners spoke about changes of plan meaning that they could re-introduce birth parent contact to children whose contact had been ceased in anticipation of adoptive placement some time ago. This indicates an approach to contact that was dependant on placement type rather than the child's needs.

Most of the children in this study had a change of plan that meant they were staying in long-term foster care with their current foster carer. The next section examines the dynamics in changing a plan to one of long-term foster care with existing carers.

5.4.2. The foster carers' impact on family finding

Some family finders raised that one challenge to their role was working with cases where foster carers wanted to keep the child in their care. It is important to note that they did not describe outright resistance or undermining of the plan for adoption and were not directly critical of the foster carers practice. When making observations about how the foster carers worked with the children, they emphasised the quality of the care the children were receiving in the foster home and how committed the carers were. But alongside these positive descriptions, they also described comments from foster carers such as “*don't try too hard*”, or “*I don't want to know if you find anyone*”. Family finders also spoke of some difficulties in accessing updated information about the child which is essential for family finding, though this was couched in the context of busy fostering households.

Activity days came up in interviews as a particular point of contention. They could be challenging emotionally for carers, as they potentially see the child they are looking after being overlooked on these days. There were descriptions of foster carers leaving activity days early or planning other activities that clashed with activity days. This was especially challenging for family finding when the court had ordered a time limited search meaning that the children might miss the only activity day organised in that window. Two family finders raised issues around working with foster carers from independent fostering providers as they perceived different practice cultures regarding family finding for adoption. Family finders said that these reactions from foster carers did not influence their commitment to family finding, but they could make it more challenging. For example, a family finder spoke about an awareness that adoption introductions might be more complicated when a foster carer wished to keep the child.

Family finders raised concerns about the foster carers talking about the children in a negative way, as one family finder reflected on the concerns expressed by a foster carer regarding the potential foster family's capacity to manage the needs of the children:

“...sometimes you'd be saying, 'oh, they're doing so well.' And she was like, 'well, they'll never cope with them both together because, they're just such hard work.’” (family finder)

There was varied views amongst professionals about the nature of ‘negative’ comments, for example in one case the family finder said she felt the foster carers were negative in the reports about the children. However, the social worker's perspective was these were foster carers who were being honest about the difficulties of caring for this sibling group. These possible negative views were seen as particularly problematic given the degree of influence a foster carer may have in the assessments of the children, as shown here from a different instance:

“I think foster carers had a big voice in the assessments. How they felt very strongly influenced those assessments, shall I say?... .. with his speech and language difficulties as well, ... I'm not sure how much direct work was completed with [the child] to inform that assessment.” (IRO)

A similar issue was raised by the legal professionals. They described Children’s Guardians could sometimes be very reliant on what the foster carers had told them when formulating their view of the best care plan for the children. It perhaps points to a concern around what information is available, and how it is being weighed by professionals when changing the long-term plan for the child.

5.4.3. Support for other forms of legal permanence

As stated earlier, most of the children’s plans changed to long-term placement with their current foster carers. In almost all of these cases, the current foster carers had offered a long-term placement for the children and the local authority had asked them to consider applying for either an adoptive placement, or a Special Guardianship Order. In this section the reasons for their not applying for legal permanence will be explored.

In the simplest terms, the foster carers were reported to have felt that they would receive more support if they remained as foster carers, rather than taking on legal responsibility for the children. This was in the context of being given advice from different professionals to consider whether legal permanence would be possible:

“There was a lot of pressure put on the foster carers to go for special guardianship. I went to talk to them. I explained about all the possible options. Then they got the person who was completing together or apart assessment doing exactly the same conversation again.” (social worker)

The financial implications were explained to the foster carers, though these seemed to vary across the agencies, with some saying that the same level of allowance would be agreed, and others’ saying that the foster carers could not financially agree to SGO, or that it would not be equal to the full fostering package. Regardless of these differences, financial support did not seem to be the key issue. Repeatedly, the interviewees reported that the sticking point that prevented the foster carers from offering legal permanence was the level of support that they felt available to them:

“We did try to persuade them, but they didn’t want to feel they were put out on a limb” (children’s social worker)

“They just kept coming back with ‘we just want to keep the department involved at the level they’re in now..... They just felt safer with that.’ (family finder)

Others said that they felt there would be more support in accessing the services that children with additional needs may require from health and education, and that they valued having their own support from the fostering social worker. As explored earlier, almost all the children who remained with their foster carers had a high level of uncertainty in their developmental future or had regular levels of birth family contact. One participant provided the example of a difference in access to respite services for children in care, compared to children receiving community disability services. This perhaps indicates a gap in what can be planned for adoption support plans.

Support had also been an issue for these children with uncertain medical needs or high therapeutic needs when searching nationally for adopters. There was a challenge on how to suggest packages of support for the children when it was not known where they might be living, what support they might need and what might be available in that area, this brought a further degree of uncertainty:

“It's tricky with the ASF³ because I don't think it's been completely renewed. It's like time limited, isn't it? We can't say to them this will last till you're 18 because actually it could be withdrawn.” (family finder - interviewed before recent announcement of changes to the ASGF in April 2025).

“But I think sometimes maybe we're not so good at identifying that specific therapeutic support that would suit [child] that she might need after six months of being in the placement and getting that up front.... it can be very woolly.....I think it would offer a lot of reassurance to adopters if they had more reassurances of tangible support.” (family finder)

Family finders had been unable to find adopters who felt able to care for these children, because they are amongst those with the highest need. Their foster carers were already offering a loving home but were doing so within the expectation that they had support as foster carers to be able to meet their needs throughout childhood.

5.5. Availability of Adopters

The availability of adopters impacted the search for a permanent placement in two ways, first as a cumulative factor with time in the family finding process and then by considering the current picture of the adopter numbers.

5.5.1. Time

Within the process of identifying prospective adoptive families for the children, there is a need to both act quickly and to find time for reflection on life-changing decisions. The workers needed to find ways to manage both tasks. As seen in the section on challenges to family finding, for a number of cases, family finders began a national search for adopters as soon as the Placement Order was granted with an awareness it was going to be challenging to find a suitable adoptive family. However, seven of the agencies required an in-house search first, and were only able to do a national search after a two-to-three-month period in which local adopters had not been found.

Once a child was placed on Link Maker and open to other families, or any similar forums, family finders spoke about needing to respond quickly due to competition for adopters.

³ ASF/ ASGF refers to the Adoption and Special Guardian Support Fund, a government fund which can provide funding for therapy for eligible adoptive, special guardianship order and child arrangement order families.

“I’m like a rottweiler, I will chase everything I possibly can. We don’t delay, you know, somebody sends me a message, I’ve had some people, ‘Oh, I’m really busy this week. I’ll have to get back to them next week.’ I’m like, no, because this could be the one opportunity that we really have for these children.” (family finder).

Family finders proactively approached adopters who might be suitable, aware that for some children, such as sibling groups of three, there were very limited numbers of adopters who might be willing to consider a placement. Time-limits provided by the court also provided a focus on moving forward with searching fast.

This needed to be balanced always with the time to think over these vital, important choices, and to find the time to this. One IRO referred to the importance of informal conversations during planning, over “*chewing the fat*” with the social worker. Another social worker spoke about being able to work closely with the family finder, valuing being able to talk over a possible match for the children on a long car journey to and from the prospective adopters’ home. There was in this an urgency, with the awareness that children were getting older, and the importance of finding them a home as soon as possible, but still making sure it was the right home.

The older a child gets, as explored earlier, the smaller the potential pool of adopters, and the legal process can inadvertently contribute to this challenge. Half of the cases (including cases where Placement Orders were not granted) had care proceedings that lasted more than a year, and/or failed reunifications to birth parents, meaning the children were at least another year older in the process, and making family finding more challenging. This adds to the complexity of planning and will be further explored in Chapter 6.

5.5.2. Current adopter numbers

A common theme in all the interviews was the current issue of lower numbers of potential adopters, a situation that described as “*unprecedented*” by the professionals. Some family finders said that the low numbers of adopters contributed to the children not finding a placement.

“I think they just got their placement order at the wrong time, when we had hardly when we have hardly any adopters. I think 18 months previous and they were the same age as they are now, I would have placed them. I’ve placed children of their age... They are not the only children of that age group thing that I’ve struggled to place. We just are not finding adopters for them” (family finder)

The family finders were clear about their concern at the current situation.

“currently it’s quite disheartening as a professional when you go on Link Maker, and the way you used to find over 1000 adopters available There’s less than 300 available adopters nationally, which is a huge decrease.” (family finder)

This decrease makes it difficult to family find for children with multiple needs as adopters get to choose from a larger pool of children. Family finders were not sure why numbers of prospective adopters had fallen, with some suggesting that it was related to the current cost of living crisis. However, most were bewildered and concerned by the current changes, which left them concerned about their ability to find homes for children with harder to place characteristics.

This chapter focused on the obstacles that need to be overcome for an appropriate placement to be found – placing the right child with the right family. However, it was not just the difficulties in finding adopters that led to a change in plan away from adoption. In a smaller number of cases the Placement Order was not granted and this is explored in the next chapter.

5.6. Chapter Summary

- This chapter has highlighted the practice challenges that family finders and social workers face in identifying suitable families.
- With the potential adopter numbers at a low level, they can exercise more choice in who they are willing to adopt. This means where there is uncertainty or additional complexity for children, it is more challenging to identify suitable adopters.
- Methods such as Link Maker and activity days can be helpful but it was most important to try and help the adopters see the child rather than the potential future issues.
- Foster care was generally not viewed by professionals as a preferential placement option for the children. However, it was valued for the committed care that the fostering families provided, that services had greater oversight and involvement during a child's life, and that it was a more fluid option for supporting birth family relationships over time.
- The foster carers were committed to the children over the long term but unwilling to enter into legal arrangement due to fears of a loss of ongoing support and advocacy.
- The number of adopters is currently lower than previous years meaning when trying to identify prospective families there is a need to act quickly whilst balancing the need to find time to reflect on the decisions being made.

6. Chapter 6 - Placement Order not granted.

According to the national figures (DfE, 2025), the Placement Order not being granted has grown as a reason for changes of ADM plans since 2021. Within this study, they were a smaller proportion of such cases put forward for discussion but there were some pertinent reflections that came from the interviews with social work practitioners and the focus group with legal professionals.

6.1. Variations in court decision-making

Social workers have to evidence their assessments at a number of levels in the decision-making process before an adoption plan can be confirmed. This begins with the decision within their team, then goes to the ADM before the adoption care plan is presented to the court. However, professionals, both local authority solicitors and social workers, sometimes felt that judges and Guardians, despite the evidence presented by the local authority, made decisions/choices/judgements that did not make sense to the other professionals involved. There was frustration that the extensive work undertaken by social work teams did not appear to be taken as seriously as it was felt it should be:

“In every case that I come across, the social workers know the children extremely well. They've done, you know thorough assessments, obviously there's ones where it's a family assessment unit, who's done the assessment for various reasons. No one wants adoption to happen where it doesn't need to happen” (children's social worker)

Practitioners expressed surprise and concern about decisions being made where the plans were for reunification or long-term foster care instead of the local authority's preferred plan of adoption. In two of the cases discussed, it seemed that the LA concerns about reunification were confirmed, as both involved infants who went home to the care of birth mother under Supervision Orders and both children were returned to the care system within a year. Again, it should be noted here that the agencies chose which cases to put forward, and they may have chosen examples where they felt that they had been correct in their original planning. However, practitioners also spoke about cases where the court had favoured children remaining with foster carers, rather than searching for an adoptive placement. The social workers found it hard to understand the reasoning behind some of these decisions, and they struggled to know what other evidence they could have provided to support their preferred care plan.

These feelings of frustration were not just across individual workers connected to the court, but also across regions. This was especially evident in the legal professionals focus group who described very different experiences of court judgements and concern over what was happening. One participant described being alarmed that they were seeing the “end of adoption” except for “really nailed on cases of young children” in their local area, which caused consternation amongst the other focus group participants:

“it shouldn't be that different from one part of the country to the other... we're all working under the same law.” (legal professionals' focus group)

It was reflected that the variability in decision-making within the courts and differences in how evidence is weighed and considered in the process can depend on the judges and Guardians assigned to the case:

“Almost the first thing we ask ‘who's the guardian’ and you know where it's going.” (family finder)

Some judges and Guardians were seen as being less likely to agree with adoption plans. Adoption is a complex process driven by humans, so full objectivity will never be possible, but there was a perception amongst participants that professionals' personal views of adoption could impact the decision-making process for all involved in adoption work.

6.2. Decision making around siblings and issues relating to contact

Social workers noted particular concerns about cases where decision making hinged on issues relating to siblings and maintaining relationships with birth family after adoption. There were cases where professionals felt that the court was concerned that adoption would negatively impact sibling relationships, and this deterred them from making a PO. This meant that the children would remain in long term foster care as this was seen as facilitating siblings living together or remaining in regular contact with each other. It was felt that the Court saw that contact could not be guaranteed under an Adoption Order or would not be sufficient to meet the children's needs. The need to maintain the sibling connection therefore took precedence over the need for adoption. The decision to change the plan in such circumstances was sometimes seen as being taken in spite of extensive work that had gone into the assessment and care planning.

In interview, workers described providing reports to the Court on the prospects of family finding. The reports included information on available families on Link Maker who would potentially adopt sibling groups or facilitate sibling contact. Workers were however clear that such reports had significant limitations. These limitations were in two ways: firstly, information on Link Maker changes daily; secondly the categories for potential adopters to describe what contact they are willing to facilitate are not helpful as for example, indicating a general willingness to consider contact with birth family did not provide enough information about whether a family might be able to consider the specifics of the contact plan before the court. One worker used the example of the category around contact with siblings as a specific area where this information is not detailed enough.

“It's really hard on link maker. I think they need to add a new category. There needs to be the question ‘direct contact with siblings in adoptive placements’, ‘direct contact with siblings who still have contact with their family or in foster care’ because that is a big distinction to make. Nine times out of 10, or pretty much 100% of the adopters say if they're in an adoptive placement, of course [we will support contact]...” (adoption social worker)

Before a specific adoptive family is identified, a proper exploration and discussion around a child's contact needs cannot be conducted. These factors meant that social workers were unable to provide courts with watertight plans to preserve sibling relationship. However legal professionals often pushed for more certainty, as seen in the following quote:

“Four different lots of solicitors for two hours were asking, which was quite challenging; ‘How confident are you that you could find an adoptive placement with adopters that would support 6 times a year direct contact with the brothers?’ So that was the issue. And my answer to that was that even though I did a Link Maker search, the figures change daily. ... But as a ballpark, just to give people an idea of what was out there and who was willing to do what they were looking at- 330 families and out of those, there was 20 that met the full criteria in terms of... they're willing to promote direct contact, but the frequency wasn't there or any of that. So, they just kept focusing on that and saying it was less than 3% and blah blah blah. And I kept saying yes, it might only be 3%, but we only need one family.” (family finder)

The social workers were generally wary of the impact that S.26 Contact Orders (which determine the contact plan between the making a PO and the Adoption Order) might have on family finding, feeling that such orders would be seen as inflexible and deter prospective adopters. Several social workers noted that though changes in the approach to maintaining relationships were happening, in practice the teams needed to support post-adoption contact were not set up yet. The legal professionals focus group supported the social workers' observations of the increased importance of contact in the Court's thinking:

“What is happening.... the sibling attachment and doing those assessments has become A1 important and how we're bringing in contact now and how they're looking at contact and it's no longer, and hasn't been for some months now, the letterbox contact, reducing contact, off you go. The judges are really looking at the family time.” (focus group)

It should be noted that the participants generally agreed that sibling contact was important but they wanted the difficulties, in providing certainties at the point of a Placement Order being made, to be understood and considered in light of the extensive work undertaken by the team of professionals around the child. Social workers and legal professionals sometimes felt the thinking of courts was too inflexible by prioritising (the in-reality impossible) certainty about sibling contact over all other factors.

6.3. Chapter Summary

- Social workers perceived differences in the judgements and decisions made by different professionals within the court process, resulting in care planning that was dependent on which court/judge or guardian was involved.

- The disparity in decisions could leave social workers and family finders with feelings of surprise, concern, frustration as they felt their assessments of the child's needs were undervalued.
- The variations in judgements were echoed by the legal professionals who reflected that how evidence is weighed and considered can depend on the assigned judge or guardian to the case.
- It may be useful in the future to consider how personal views of adoptions and care impact the decision-making process across different professions.
- There has been a move towards decisions in Court prioritising sibling contact over adoption due to the difficulties in giving guarantees for contact in an adoptive placement.

7. Chapter 7 - Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was an exploration of practitioners' perceptions as to why plans for children are changed away from adoption. The aim was to understand the practice and experiences of people involved in these cases and to bring detail that lies behind the administrative data that records the reasons for changes of plan. The interviews evidenced committed and thoughtful practice in which people really wanted the best outcomes for the children they were working with. All parties were invested in finding stability and long-term care for the children living within the care system, to the extent that professionals expressed sadness when an adoptive family was not found for the children and engaged in considered reflection as to what could have been done differently.

7.1. Summary of key findings

7.1.1. Efforts to find adoptive families

Strong efforts to find adoptive families were made, but plans changed away from adoption when searches were felt to have been exhausted or when they 'timed out'. Determined, proactive and continuous efforts are needed in family finding activities, particularly when children have additional needs (Selwyn et al, 2010; Farmer & Dance, 2016). The current study found that this effort was apparent in most of the cases with diligent and committed work being employed to find an adoptive family. Children's plans changed away from adoption because professionals felt family finding had been 'exhausted'. However, these attempts were sometimes stalled by system related factors including undertaking in house searches for a period of time before looking outside the placing agency and fixed time limits for family finding suggested by the courts; hence some searches 'timed out'. Problems such as this that delay or limit assiduous family finding run counter to advice from previous research studies (Turnpenny & Neil 2026). Several projects funded by Adoption England to promote matching addressed these system related factors. Activities included employing dedicated coordinators to improve matching across adoption agencies; earlier and enhanced family finding for the hardest place children; improving the content and distribution of information about waiting children and waiting adopters and supporting better assessments of children's needs (Turnpenny & Neil, 2026).

7.1.2. Potential adopters' wishes for matching.

The challenges in recruiting adoptive parents for children with additional health or behavioural needs or whose development is uncertain are also well established in the literature. In this study, prospective adopters did come forward for some of the children but the children's additional needs proved to be the barrier to the match, with adopters withdrawing upon receiving more information, or with Local Authorities not taking the match further due to concerns about the adopters' capacity to meet the level of need. Learning from the evaluation of matching pilots suggest some useful ways forward as this

was an area several projects aimed to address. Several projects developed additional support and consultation for adoptive parents to help understand children's needs and characteristics, helping to create 'personalised risks formulations' needed to look beyond broad categories like 'autism'. In particular, pilots that offered multidisciplinary assessment in considering children's developmental needs, and/or their sibling relationships, appeared particularly promising in helping both professionals, foster carers and prospective adoptive parents think about and understand children's needs, and cope with the lack of certainty about children's development (Turnpenny & Neil, 2026).

7.1.3. Current issues with adopter insufficiency

The study has touched on a number of the issues and anxieties that have long been noted in work around care planning for children; namely having sufficient people come forward to adopt and finding adopters willing to adopt children with specific needs. The difficulty of achieving matches for children with harder to place characteristics due to falling numbers of prospective adopters has also been seen to impact matching and early permanence pilots (Turnpenny & Neil, 2026; Copson & Neil, 2026). It is important that any work to the pool of prospective adopters has a focus on parents willing to consider harder to place children as low numbers of adopters across the country means that there are more children are waiting to be adopted than there are adopters available. The consequence of this is that with 'choice' the pool of adopters willing to adopt a child where there may be uncertainty with the future needs of that child, becomes much smaller. This relates to a further structural factor, that of a wider ableist society. The children in this study were defined by uncertainty both in terms of maintaining relationship with siblings but in particular where health diagnoses were uncertain or where there was uncertainty over specific conditions such as autism. There is a challenge to how we help adopters to deal with this uncertainty but also how they understand conditions such as autism. This is also linked to the nature of support available for children and adopters, again seen in the recently published report on pre-order disruption (Rennolds et al, 2025).

7.1.4. The impact of understanding maintaining relationships on change of plans.

Concerns of professionals (and sometimes children themselves) over maintaining relationships with the birth family, particularly siblings, meant that sometimes adoption plans did not go ahead. This suggests that some practitioners (legal or social work) lacked confidence that plans for contact after adoption would reliably be kept up over time. Whilst a failure to maintain agreed contact after adoption has been identified as a problem (Neil, 2024) it is also the case that a substantial proportion of children in foster care can also lose contact with birth family members (Selwyn & Lewis, 2023). In terms of both the legal framework and research evidence, issues related to family contact have many similarities in adoption and foster care. In both placement types the court has a duty to consider what birth family contact should happen and make decisions in the child's best interests (albeit there is a duty to *promote* contact in foster care *if that is consistent with the child's welfare*, and no such duty in adoption). In both cases the child's welfare is paramount, and in both cases, orders can be used to facilitate or deny birth family contact.

In both long-term foster care and adoption, ultimately whether contact continues and is beneficial to the child is likely to depend on the quality of such contact and the relationships between people involved (Iyer et al, 2020).

Assumptions that adoption equals the probable loss of contact and foster care means there is guaranteed contact are too simplistic. What is important in either placement type is that children are enabled to stay in touch with people who matter to them and that the families (foster, birth, or adoptive) have the support needed for this contact to be positive and meaningful (Iyer et al, 2020). Driven by Adoption England's priorities, there is a move towards maintaining relationships in adoption (Copson et al, 2025; Neil, 2024). If legal or social work professionals are interpreting a renewed focus on a child's contact needs as a reason to move away from adoption as a plan, this suggests further work is needed to educate courts/professionals about how maintaining relationships can be achieved alongside whatever is seen as the best placement for the child. This balance between legal permanence and maintaining birth family relationships has already been considered by the court of appeal (Re: R and C (ADOPTION OR FOSTERING), 2024).

7.1.5. Changes of plan to long-term foster care.

Most children whose plans changed had a new plan of long-term foster care, typically with existing foster carers. Whilst foster carers often wanted to keep children, they were reluctant to adopt them for fear of losing support.

The professionals involved in these cases were all committed to finding permanence for the young children in this study, ideally through adoption. This is in line with the vital importance placed on permanence (via adoption or other routes) in English social work practice, that care planning is to *ensure children have access to a secure, stable and loving family* (DfE, 2021, p. 19-20) which lasts through childhood and beyond. This commitment is reflective of a rights-based approach, in particular Article 8 – The right to private and family life (European Convention on Human Rights, 1953) and Articles 16 and 20 within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which state a child has the right to privacy and a right to live with continuous alternative care if unable to live with their family. Adoption in the UK upholds Article 21 (UNCRC) ensuring that the process is safe and lawful.

Within this study, the professionals discussed wanting a life for the children that did not involve ongoing required social care involvement. This, together with concerns about the comparative (in)stability and lack of legal permanence of long-term foster care, meant that most of the interviewees felt that it had to be right to try to identify an adoptive family for these children. In line with the findings of Schofield et al (2024) there was evidence that some professionals do not consider long term foster care as an offer of permanence. Despite this preference for adoption over long-term foster care, the majority of the children in this study had their adoption plans changed to long term foster care. The perception that adoption was the best possible option meant that family finders left profiles open on Link Maker, just in case, even as they were going back to court to change the plan.

Brodzinsky & Smith (2019) identify that permanency can be considered as three aspects; legal, relational and residential permanency. In this study, foster carers were sometimes willing to offer residential and relational permanency but did not want to take on legal permanency (either adoption or SGO). The reluctance of foster carers to adopt children seem to stem in the main from their fear of losing support from the local authority for the child and/or for themselves. In this respect their anxieties about the child's needs in the longer term were similar to those of prospective adopters in that they worried about accessing the right support in relation to the child's educational, health and behavioural needs.

Where foster carers and children have established a good relationship, the child remaining in the foster family is potentially a very good outcome as it builds on existing attachments and avoids the need for the child to experience further loss and separation. To achieve legal permanence in such cases, a thorough assessment of the child's needs and caregiver's capacity, together with a robust post adoption or guardianship support plan, could help more foster carers consider adoption or guardianship (Dibben & Howorth, 2024). The commitment and capacity of foster carers to provide support in the long term for the child needs to be assessed, exploring both formal and informal sources of support extending throughout the child's childhood and into adulthood (for example discussing support for the child post 18, and staying put options). Where the plan changes to the child remaining with existing foster carers on a long-term basis, then the placement should be managed and recorded as a long-term foster care placement with attention paid to options such as delegating authority to foster carers for day-to-day decision-making, and flexibility around how reviews are conducted. Ongoing support for birth family members also needs consideration, starting with discussing the change in care plan with the birth family, and involving the birth family network in considering support for the child.

7.1.6. The importance of long-term planning for support for individual children

Most importantly, whether the child is adopted, long-term fostered, reunified, or subject to guardianship the support provided to the caregiving family should not be driven by the legal status of the placement, it should be grounded in the child's and caregiver's needs in the short and long-term. Where the legal permanence of adoption is considered important, which is often the case for very young children, barriers to committed foster carers adopting need to be unlocked through the provision of robust support plans. For both potential adopters and current foster carers, there is deep concern over meeting the need of the child in the long term. This reflects both the wider negative societal views of children with additional needs, be these health issues or emotional-behavioural needs, and the widely reported issues of accessing support and treatment for children with those needs. In this climate, prospective adopters sometimes felt unable to provide a home and foster carers felt unsure about taking full legal responsibility for the child's upbringing. This suggests that when it is going to be harder to place a child, close attention should be paid to the support the child will need in the longer term whether this is to help their current carers provide a legally permanent home for them, and/or alongside the search for an adoption placement with unconnected parents.

7.1.7. Complexity of planning in the court arena.

A reluctance of courts to make placement orders was reported in some areas/courts, leading to variance in care planning driven by professional attitudes. Social workers and legal professionals perceived differences in the judgements and decisions made by different professionals within the court process, resulting in care planning that was dependent on which court/judge or guardian was involved. The disparity in decisions led to feelings of surprise, concern and frustration as they felt assessments of the child's needs were undervalued. It was also noted that the time limits on family finding could perhaps bring searches to a conclusion perhaps earlier than needed. It may be useful in the future to consider how personal views of adoptions and care impact the decision-making process across different professions. It was only possible to identify these issues in this study, rather than explore them in detail, suggesting that further research is needed in this area.

7.2. Areas for further consideration

This suggests the following areas for consideration:

- The need to discuss at institutional, operational and individual case levels how professionals understand permanency, and what evidence and information they are drawing on when considering different placement options to achieve a “secure, stable and loving home” throughout childhood?
- Having care and support plans and subsequent planning related to the needs of the child not the legal status of the child.
- Consideration of the foster carers from an earlier stage as a possible placement for the children as part of the longer-term plan.
- Supporting the child's important relationships post-adoption to ensure that care plans for adoption do not mean a child has unnecessary loss.
- Further work with professionals, including judges and Guardians, to understand maintaining relationships for adopted children.
- Understanding why adopters are not coming forward, this research provides further evidence and support for the work currently being undertaken by Adoption England
- A focus on autism to understand the particular barriers or enablers for people to adopt a child with this condition – potential or diagnosed.
- Guidance on different family finding strategies and approaches informed by the matching evaluations.

This research has found several areas for further consideration that are supported by recent research in pre-order disruptions as well as the evaluations of matching initiatives. These complimentary findings highlight adoption as a networked system of overlapping and interdependent actions rather than a series of discrete sequential steps. It is a system that requires working within an ecological framework that embraces both/and thinking rather than either/or approaches at the individual, micro and macro system levels.

7.3. Strengths and limitations of the research

This study explored 20 cases meaning that we were able to gather some rich data on the experiences of those involved. We were also able to interview two different practitioners for the majority of the cases meaning a more rounded understanding of each event at the completion of care proceedings. However, we were unable to get direct insights into early care planning as the cases often changed to adoption specialist workers at the point of a Placement Order being made. We had hoped that interviews with IROs would give the early planning insight, however several of the IROs interviewed had taken over the case after care proceedings had finished. It would have been even better if we could have got the legal position from a legal professional or insights from the guardian involved in each of the case. However, the focus group with LA solicitors gave context and confirmed the observations of the interviewees. Whilst it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about why changes of plans are happening across the country; this study does offer some insights into what may be useful in exploring further in moving forward.

7.4. Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Continue the programme of work started by Adoption England to recruit more adopters, consideration should be given to:

- Understanding why adopters are not coming forward
- A targeted national campaign for adopters willing to adopt children with additional needs

Recommendation 2

Conduct specific work on adopting children with uncertain health needs and/or autism, consideration should be given to:

- Support to help prospective adopters and foster carers who want to adopt to understand and live with uncertainty
- Research to understand how potential adopters perceive these needs
- A national action plan for recruitment, training and support in these areas.

Recommendation 3

Consider the importance of timely decision making in the family finding process:

- For children with (potentially) harder to place characteristics there needs to be consistency across RAAs/LAs in when searching goes national to ensure that family finding can go as wide as possible as early as possible

- Further work on understanding the impact of court-ordered time limits on family finding success
- Clarity for practitioners on how to manage the decision to end family finding, and how these decisions should be recorded. Practice guidance should be developed and include guidelines for escalation to senior management when agreement cannot be reached.

Recommendation 4

Continue the maintaining relationships programme of work paying particular attention to:

- Research into understanding how different actors in the adoption process perceive and apply this work
- Raising awareness of creative and innovative practice
- Consideration of training to develop knowledge in court work, and the use of Contact Orders
- Enabling more nuanced searches on Link Maker based on adopter willingness to accept contact with other family members such as siblings who still have contact with their birth family members.

Recommendation 5

Identify support models for different long-term permanency options and plan accordingly, consideration should be given to:

- Understanding that the first requirement is “*a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond*”
- Wrapping an advocacy and support package around the child to meet the needs of each child
- Where adoption is considered harder to achieve, consideration of what support would be needed to enable their current placements to offer legal permanence
- Understanding and addressing challenges identified by foster carers in offering long term permanency.

Recommendation 6

Consideration should be given to the administrative reporting on the reasons for change of plans as currently the data does not give an accurate picture of practice. In particular, the data does not capture the complexity of the reasons for the change of plan and therefore is not helpful for understanding what is happening at the operational level.

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Appendix I – Interview questions

Adoptions – Change of Plan Interview Schedule

On entering the Teams room

Introductions

Clarify consent and ensure participant understand the aims of the research and what will be explored.

Thank them for agreeing to participate.

Check ok to start recording.

Questions

1) Please could you summarise the case we will be exploring today?

Prompts: Who was(were) the child(ren) involved, age at start, how old now, where they are now?

What was the timeline with the case – what happened and when?

Who were the people involved (professionals, parents, other family members, possible adopter parents)?

When did each person become involved?

Note: It may help them or you to draw a timeline as they speak

.

2) How did the change of plan happen?

Prompts: When did it become apparent that a change of plan would be needed?

Who first raised it?

What were the reasons given?

At this point, what consensus was there for this?

If no consensus, when did this start to change and what prompted this?

What did you think/feel at the different points? – What were your reasons for this?

What was the final reason given for the change of plan?

3) What do you think the strengths were in the planning for the child(ren)?

Prompts: What do you think was done well?

Who knew what the child wanted? How did they know?

Where did the system work well, give examples?

What did you do well during the process?

4) Were there areas that could have been done differently?

Prompts: What do you think could have been done better? What stopped this from happening?

Were there areas of potential problems and conflict – how did these get raised and dealt with?

Would there be any part of the process that you would change? Why?

Is there anything you would have done differently?

5) How well do you think all the professionals worked together?

Prompts: Were there organisational obstacles to the planning and decision-making? Which agencies and what was the issue?

Were there examples of good multi-agency working? How did the organisational structures help with this?

6) How do you feel about the change of plan decision? Why?

7) What have you learned from this case that you will take forward in your work?

8) Is there anything else you would like to say?

To finish

Thank them for their time and ask if they have any questions or comments.

Give debriefing sheet.

Appendix II – Interview Summary

Interview summary

Reason for change of plan
Role in case

Case summary

What went well

--

What could be different.

--

Thoughts and feelings

--

Children’s views

--

Problem

--

Their learning

--

My reflections

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Appendix III – Vignette for Legal Professionals Focus Group

This is a case concerning a sibling group of four, aged 6 years old, 5 years old, 2 years old and 6 months. The older three were all removed into care together. The concerns were over domestic violence in the relationship between mum and her partner (not the father of the older children) and suspected non-accidental injuries caused to the two-year-old. It was not possible to find a placement for them together, and the eldest two were placed together, and the younger was placed separately. During the care proceedings, mother announced that she was pregnant, and the father was her partner. The baby was removed at birth and placed with the same foster carer as the two-year-old.

During the proceedings, mum and partner/ father to youngest separated, and mother has said that he was responsible for the injuries. The mother has asked to be reassessed in relation to the care of the youngest two, acknowledging she would struggle to manage the needs of all the children together. The Guardian has indicated they might support this. The Local Authority care plan is no reassessment on the grounds of failure to protect, and that the youngest two should be placed for adoption together. All other connected persons have been ruled out.

An additional factor is that the foster carer for the older two has come forward to offer a long-term placement for the two children in her care. This has been agreed as the best care plan for the older two. They have regular weekly contact with their younger siblings, facilitated by the foster carers. The two-year-old has a close relationship with her older sisters as it seems they offered care to her in the family home. It is being raised by the mother's legal counsel that the local authority cannot guarantee to find adopters willing to support direct sibling contact, and if they cannot return home to her, that the children's sibling relationships should be prioritised by a plan of long-term fostering for the children.

In this scenario, what would you be advising the Local Authority?

What evidence would you want to be able to present to the court to support the plan of the placement order?

Do you recognise these issues?