

# INVOLVING PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

Advice and guidance about involvement and participation when working with people with lived experience of adoption. Developed with members of the Adoption England adopted persons and birth parents reference groups.



regional adoption agencies working together



# INVOLVING ADOPTEES AND BIRTH/FIRST PARENTS IN ADOPTION PREPARATION, WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING, AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES SHOULD BE A PRIORITY FOR ALL ADOPTION AGENCIES

Involving adoptees and birth/first parents in adoption preparation, workforce development, and other opportunities can help prospective and approved adoptive parents, and social work staff develop deeper understanding of the lifelong impact of adoption and subsequent support needs following adoption. It can also help influence policy and practice at a local and national level and inform future training and support needs by highlighting the real-life impact of adoption. Feedback has highlighted that adoption professionals are keen to increase the involvement of adopted people and birth / first parents in adoption preparation sessions, subsequent training, recruitment, commissioning, research and in presenting at conferences. In some instances, the involvement will be a one-off event and in others, it will involve ongoing or longer-term activities.

## Voice and Influence, and Social and Peer Support

'Voice and Influence' (V&I) refers to any activity either direct or indirect with stakeholder groups whose lives are or have been touched by adoption, where the activity or engagement aims to influence service design, delivery, evaluation etc.

Voice and influence (V&I) and hearing the voices of those with lived experience without anything changing or improving, is not enough and is not V&I. V&I relates to groups and/or engagement activities which are designed and delivered with the specific intention of creating the opportunity to influence change at a strategic / practice / service delivery level.

Social and Peer Support refers to individual and group activities which can often be concerned with a person's individual adoption experience and/or addressing issues such as loneliness and isolation.

Sometimes the involvement or participation work may involve a hybrid of the two.



## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide for practitioners, leaders and commissioners has been developed with people with lived experience of adoption to help those planning to involve more people.

We hope you find this guidance useful. Please note this is not designed to be an exhaustive checklist - when you consult locally other issues may be highlighted.

We encourage you to consult those with lived experience of adoption in your local areas to identify anything else to be aware of. We hope this guide is a good start and will be helpful.

We have structured this document so that it starts with the behaviours and considerations we want to be in place, and this is followed by things that need to be thought of practically.

## ABOUT ADOPTION ENGLAND

Adoption England is a collaboration of regional adoption agencies working together with a small central team working nationally, aiming to improve adoption practice and develop support and services to better meet the needs of children and families.

Adoption England receives funding from the Department for Education and works in partnership with all agencies involved with adoption in England, including voluntary adoption agencies and local authorities, as well as specialised adoption charities and third sector services.



## Impact of previous services/ adoption services

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Some of us may not have had good experiences with services over the years. Please have a conversation with us to check in about this. Some venues may hold difficult memories for us if we have had difficult meetings or experiences there, so please be considerate of this.

## 2 Impact of trauma

Many of us are still working through the impact that adoption has had on our lives. Some of us will not have found counselling support and those of us who have, may be still navigating the realities. Everyone impacted by adoption will have their own individual support needs and boundaries about what they wish to share. Please be trauma informed and sensitive to individuals' situations. There may be specific issues which are difficult to talk about or answer questions about. Where possible, screen questions beforehand to avoid insensitive or inappropriate questions being asked publicly.

## Language

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Take care and courtesy to check our preferred terms and language. Some people prefer the term adoptees to adopted person or first parent to birth parent etc., so please ask.

## 4 Views and feelings about adoption

Every adoptee and every adoption is unique. Some adoptees have not had all together positive experiences, or their views may have changed over time. Take some time to talk with us about the event being arranged and our views and experiences. Most contemporary birth parents will not have consented to adoption. Many will not have had support around their experiences and loss.

## **Including transracial adoptees and considering equality characteristics**

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Transracially adopted contributors may have additional layers to their adoption and this may include experiences of racism and/or bias, please be aware and sensitive to this. Even when adoptive parents and families are more reflective of the adoptees racial and ethnic background, there may be pain and difficult experiences the contributor is navigating. Equally, people's gender, sexuality, faith, and cultural differences can also shape their lived experiences.

## **6 Have enough contributors to give breaks**

Speaking about lived experiences, especially around such life changing issues, can be exhausting. It takes its toll emotionally and physically. Please ensure you do not rely on the same people continually; people need some time to recover and re-charge so it's important to give breaks.

## **Anonymity/confidentiality issues**

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The adoption community is relatively small, some contributors may be concerned that staff or event attendees may know them and/or their families. This may be a particular issue in smaller areas, or when involved in a local speaking events. Please ask and talk through any concerns. Some may prefer to be anonymous or use a middle name or nickname. Screenshots and tagging photos of events should also be discussed. Some may wish to be credited because of their contribution. It is important to check first.

## **8 Including people with disabilities or access requirements**

Consider any specific issues or adjustments, including accessibility for people with disabilities, sensory, communication, and mental health needs. Ensure you have discussed requirements well in advance and clearly explained what is and is not possible. Planning and considerations will be different for online and in person events. Be sure that contributors are fully briefed and prepared and have the offer of support before, during and after an event. Not all disabilities are visible, so make it the norm to ask if anyone has a disability when making arrangements.

## Reimbursement for time

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Value our time and commitment to take part in events and have a guidance document to ensure a consistent approach to reimbursement. We work and study, have other commitments which demand our time. Reimbursement helps us feel valued for our time and emotional energy in sharing our experiences. Recognise and respect that many contributors are professionally qualified and have years of experience. Also, consider that for in person events the contributor may need assistance with travel to the venue and subsistence allowance for meals and perhaps childcare.

## 10 Planning the work

**Give sufficient time for the work** – Develop a suitable time frame for the work to take place in good time – the work shouldn't be an afterthought. Early planning will ensure that the work is more meaningful, and it can help to shape the process as well as the end result and help avoid tokenistic last minute add on. For example, is the work about helping to form the ideas, or just checking out the ideas once other people have developed them?

**Location** - In person or online - Planning and considerations will be different for online and in person events. Be sure that contributors are fully briefed and prepared and have the offer of support before, during and after an event. Think about the environment if it is in person. How welcoming is it? How flexible are you being about the location. By avoiding the usual professional settings, you may better enable people to be more open and personal. Check out locations with participants first to ensure they would feel safe and comfortable there. Ensure privacy of emails and seek permission first before recording online meetings.

**Clear on time / expectation** - Please be clear about the details of the work and how much time will need to be committed. Remember that participants are not employed by the organisation and have other responsibilities and commitments.

**Clear on purpose** - Be clear about what the aims are when asking a participant to contribute.

**Barriers** – check out any potential barriers with each participant – access, time, language. location etc.

**Being safe** – Work within local safeguarding protocols. Depending on the activity, you will need to decide if a risk assessment is necessary. Consideration should also be given to whether professionals should have a DBS check. Also, you may need to have contact details for the participants.

**Consent for photographs, visuals, and quotes** – make sure you get consent if you are planning to use photographs, visuals or quotes of participants or created by participants. A standard consent form is often used.

## Support needs before, during and after events

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Contributors may feel very anxious before a session so please check in to see what might help us prepare our section in advance and to ask what support may be needed before, during and after a speaking event.

Some participants might value a phone number or means of communication in a session (online) in case of any issues arising in the session: if a particular question has brought up difficult feelings, or made one uncomfortable, for example.

## 12 Feedback to the participants

Be sure to share feedback from the session so contributors feel they are valued and have had an impact. Get back to people on the outcome of their involvement as soon as possible, and provide updates if there is a longer process, don't just disappear! This will include explaining how you will evaluate the impact of people with lived experience's involvement on policy, practice, or training outcomes.

## Practical toolkit preparations

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It can often be helpful to have ready a sample consent form (for quotes/photos), a sample reimbursement / expenses policy and form, and a checklist for planning an event with lived experience contributors.



## Questions to ask those with lived experience after the involvement work

We encourage you to gather feedback from those with lived experience of adoption after working with them. Confirm with them that there will be no consequences to them for their honesty.

This will help to ensure their needs are considered on an ongoing basis and so that you can continue to learn when doing this work.

### Below are some questions you could ask as a starting point:

- What could have gone better?
- Did you feel you had all relevant information- if not, what would have assisted you?
- Did you feel valued and included through the session - if not, what could be improved?
- What do you think had the most impact on the audience?
- Are there any gaps from your perspective?
- Are there any suggestions you could make to help the organisation or team improve the inclusion and participation of people with lived experience?



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