

# Children Moving Between UK Nations - Briefing Paper

Considerations and challenges when children are placed for adoption from elsewhere in the UK with families in Scotland: Key Messages Summary

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In Partnership with:



## Key Messages

1. Lack of consistent and reliable data on cross-border adoptions means local authorities do not always know how many children in their area may be eligible for adoption support in order to offer appropriate support and plan responsive services.
2. Adoption processes aim to secure the 'right' match for children and adoptive families, but the matching process is influenced by formal and informal matching criteria. The concept of a 'right' match raises important questions about approaches to recruiting, assessing, training and supporting prospective adopters, and the resources available to achieve this, particularly in relation to children who are older, children with more complex needs and sibling groups.
3. There is substantial variance across agencies regarding what additional time, resources and planning, if any, are built into support plans for children matched with families at a greater geographical distance away from their placing authority to ensure meaningful connections with birth families are sufficiently supported.
4. Scottish systems and practices were perceived as slower, less supportive of adoptive families and more complex compared to the equivalent systems and processes in place in England and Wales by adoptive parents and workers. The decision-making institutions and associated processes in Scotland were viewed as a key barrier to the essential planning and timely support required to ensure the needs of children and their families can be met.
5. In line with other research, there was considerable disparity in the adoption support provision available in different local authorities. Social workers and adoptive parents advocated for a more nationally consistent approach to financing and resourcing adoption-competent services.

## Why Is This Topic Important?

This is the first national study to explore the numbers and context of cross-border adoption placements of children from elsewhere in the UK with families in Scotland. Whilst recognising the value and necessity of cross-border adoptions for many children and families, especially those who otherwise may not have found a permanent family, this study aimed to develop a better understanding of the key factors that led to a rise in recent years, as well as consider the subsequent implications and challenges of adoption in the context of cross-border placements.

In exploring the context and implications of cross-border adoption placements, and the experiences of adoptive parents, social workers and agencies, this study highlights key implications specific to cross-border placements which all stakeholders working in the area of adoption across Scotland need to consider, given the well-documented differences in practice, legislation and policy between the UK nations. However, the findings also call attention to broader systematic issues that adversely affect the adoption processes and experiences in Scotland and transcend the subject of cross-border placements. These include important messages regarding supporting meaningful relationships for adopted children and providing and maintaining whole family support when permanence is achieved. Recently practitioners and agencies across Scotland have started making changes to implement the recommendations of [the Promise](#). As these changes will take time to take effect, the findings from this study remain highly relevant for considering the wider picture of adoptions in Scotland.

The study is based on an online survey of all 32 local authorities (LA) and 4 voluntary adoption agencies (VAA) and interviews with 8 adoptive parents (from 6 families) who adopted their child(ren) from elsewhere in the UK and 9 social workers with experience of supporting cross-border adoptions via interviews.

## What Does the Research Tell Us?

### National Overview of Cross-Border Adoption Placements

Between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2020, 139 children from elsewhere in the UK were adopted by families in Scotland, compared with only 32 children from Scotland placed with families elsewhere in the UK during the same period. Of those 139 children, 121 were placed with adoptive parents approved by VAAs and 18 with adoptive parents approved by LAs across Scotland. However, the study found stark inconsistencies and gaps in the national data collected on this issue across the 36 agencies involved in adoption placements throughout Scotland. Most markedly, there was substantial variance between what data is collected and

both how and when this information is shared between placing and receiving agencies. The process of data collection for this research, and the difficulty some local authorities had in identifying accurate figures for a recent three-year period, indicate that information on cross border adoptions is not recorded consistently or regularly by a relatively high proportion of agencies across Scotland. This lack of consistent and detailed data has important implications at both national and local levels for planning, evaluating and providing holistic support to adopted children and their families.

Although patterns in cross-border adoptions fluctuate, the findings from this study, along with figures previously gathered, indicate that there are hundreds of children who have joined their adoptive families in Scotland via cross-border adoption placements, and local authorities do not always have an accurate picture of how many families in their area may be, or become in the future, eligible for adoption support. This situation has sizable planning and resource implications for services. The lack of reliable data makes it difficult for adoption agencies to plan for and provide adoption support, and to evaluate whether that support is adequately meeting the need of these children and their families.

### A 'Right Match' Is Constrained by Formal and Informal Criteria

One of the strongest factors identified by adoptive parents and social workers in the research was that the adoption process is about the 'right' match rather than where the child's placing authority was across the UK. However, what makes a match 'right' was found to be framed by formal matching criteria and informal preferences, some of which encouraged widening family finding processes to the whole of the UK for prospective adopters in Scotland. The interviews highlighted a mismatch between the demographics of the children who need adoptive families across Scotland and prospective adopters' preferences, pre-existing ideas of the child(ren) they imagined themselves adopting and what they felt able to offer. In some instances, this involved considering children's and prospective adopters' ethnic and cultural heritages. The child(ren)'s age and the level and/or complexity of children's needs were also frequently mentioned.

The concept of a 'right' match raises important questions about the processes of recruiting, assessing, training and supporting adoptive parents. This includes exploring prospective adopters' expectations of adoption and understandings of children who are older, children with more complex needs and children in sibling groups. It is important to recognise that the point of placement is only the beginning of a lifelong experience for children and their families.

## Geographical Distance: Challenges and Perceived Advantages

A significant challenge identified in this study was the support required to ensure children can maintain meaningful relationships with people important to them - including birth parents, brothers and sisters, and foster carers - where it is safe for them to do so. In cross-border adoptions contexts, this may require additional considerations of how geographical distance and differing practice cultures may affect the likelihood of relationships and connections being supported and sustained over time - although the same may also be true for children moving between authorities in different parts of Scotland. Findings suggest that while social workers and adoptive parents were aware of the importance of children maintaining these relationships, it was not always clear how these were effectively supported in practice. In particular, there was substantial variance between agencies in whether additional time, resources and planning was built into support plans from an early stage for children matched with families a greater geographical distance away from their placing authority to ensure, as far as possible, that such connections are not lost.

Greater geographical distance was also found to be considered a potential advantage by workers and adoptive parents in this study, where birth family members were seen to pose potential on-going risk to children. At times, the distinction between individual situations where risks had been assessed and clearly identified for a particular child, versus a more generalised view of birth parents as 'risky' was not clear. This approach sits at odds with the Promise, which has strong emphasis on children being able to maintain meaningful connections with people who are important to them, and recent legislative changes which have strengthened children's rights to build and maintain relationships with their brothers and sisters, whether or not they have lived together previously.

Any inter-agency placement is likely to involve navigating different expectations and negotiating provision and costs, but this was found to be particularly difficult in cross-border adoptions where practitioners were often unfamiliar with the legislation, policies and established practices in different jurisdictions. Geographical distance also brings additional costs of travel and time, as well as practical difficulties in visiting the child(ren) and during transitional periods, which in several instances resulted in a family being supported by a different worker at each stage of a cross-border placement. None of these challenges are insurmountable, but they require additional planning, resources and knowledge which workers felt would have been easier if they could access cross-border specific training or guidance. To our knowledge, no specific training or resources currently exist for the workforce or prospective adopters which specify the unique considerations and challenges which arise when adoption placements are across UK borders.

## Perceived Differences Between Jurisdiction: Timescales and Complexity

Whilst this study was focused on Scotland and did not have data to compare timescales with other UK nations, practitioners (and two adoptive parents) who had experience of both cross-border and within-Scotland adoptions compared their experiences of the systems in Scotland to those in England and Wales. There was a consistent view that within-Scotland adoptions tended to have higher levels of drift and delay, with the complexities of the Children's Hearings System and the two different legal routes to adoption frequently cited as adding time to the process. The general perception was that Scottish systems and practices were slower, less supportive of adoptive families and more complex than the equivalent systems and processes in place in England and Wales. The Scottish decision-making institutions and associated processes were viewed by workers and adoptive parents as a considerable barrier to the essential planning and timely support required to ensure the needs of children and their families in Scotland are adequately supported before, during and beyond the Adoption Order.

## Social Work Practices and Perceptions of Practice

Practitioners' lack of familiarity with the differing social work practices underpinning the distinct legal processes in cross-border adoptions was found to be a key challenge. Inconsistent messages provided by legal advisors and gaps in workers practice knowledge when working across different legal jurisdictions found that prospective adopters were often being given incomplete information. Social workers also expressed concerns about decisions and practices made in other jurisdictions which may have been different from advice they would have provided in Scotland. Many had not accessed information regarding the differences of supporting cross-border adoptions before, and according to the LA practitioners who participated in the study, much of the experience and knowledge of cross-border adoptions was held by a single worker within their agency. Information about how best to support cross-border adoptions – including the key practice and legal differences regarding adoption processes and underpinning responsibilities of each party - needs to be consistently and easily available so that practice and decision making is guided by accurate, up to date and reliable advice.

This research also found a consistent perception amongst the VAAs and adopters who participated that LAs in England were more proactive than their counterparts in Scotland in responding to and following up on potential matches. Throughout all stages of the adoption process, participants commented on how much better organised, quicker at responding to notes of interest, quicker at starting the process of discussion and better at communicating with prospective adopters, workers outside of Scotland seemed to be due to the regional adoption agency model. That speed was described in contrast with practitioners' experiences of adoption practices in Scotland. This perception has considerable implications for future family findings processes of VAAs and potential prospective adopters, as

well as highlighting long-standing concerns about the negative and long-term impact for children of 'drifting in care' without safe, nurturing and reliable care from a consistent caregiver which all adoptions in Scotland (cross-border or otherwise) needs to address.

## Disparity in Available Adoption Support

The majority of children who need adoptive families, particularly those who wait the longest, are likely to have significant needs related to their early experiences, whether before or since entering care. Some of these needs may take time to emerge and are likely to change over time. Consequently, support for adoption which reflects this timeframe and can adapt to children and adoptive family's needs as they change over time was stressed as vital by all participants. However, this research highlighted strong views about the considerable disparity in the availability of consistent adoption support provision across Scotland, echoing concerns raised over the past three years in the [Adoption Barometer survey](#) comparing the four UK nations. In England, a centralised Adoption Support Fund offers adopters early support, regardless of whether that child is matched with a family in England or elsewhere in the UK. To date no such equivalent national adoption support is available for adopted children from Scotland, which was raised by nearly all participants in the current study.

Although participants welcomed the idea of a nationally available, ring fenced fund for adoptive families, they also noted the limitations of the Adoption Support Fund's model in England, including increasing conditionality and inconsistent application between different agencies. They advocated for a similar but more consistent approach to financing and resourcing adoption-competent services to support adopted children and their families throughout Scotland. Within the current system, this study found social workers in Scotland often had to find 'creative' work arounds to secure support not explicitly set out in children's adoption support plans. Bureaucracy was found to add an additional level of difficulty to contracting and commissioning extra support and resourcing beyond the original plan agreed at matching, creating a significant barrier to providing timely and appropriate support for children and their adoptive families. To address this, Scotland's adoptive families could benefit from a nationally consistent approach to whole family support which is driven by children's and families' needs.

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The full report to this briefing paper can be found [here](#)