

# BIRTHLINK BULLETIN

Autumn 2023

## Editorial

Adoption Week takes place every year at the end of October or beginning of November. The Week's traditional focus is upon children deemed in need of adoption, and prospective adopters, adopting or adoptive families. What would an Adoption Week for Adults look like?

What are the day-to-day challenges and issues for adults affected by adoption and what would we highlight in a dedicated week?

### Adopted Adults

We might lead with the latest findings from a study that gathered the views of nearly 400 adopted adults, the vast majority of whom were over thirty-five years old with nearly two-thirds over 50 yrs old. A span that covers today's more open adoptions and those of previous decades that were closed. Unfortunately the study, funded by PAC-UK, an independent Adoption Support and the University of East Anglia, does not seem to have asked the age at adoption of those that replied to the on-line survey, so the findings seem to be more associated with the early years of adoption. That said, the key take-aways from the study are interesting. These have been abridged.

#### 1. Wide-spread support for the prioritisation of birth-family relationships

"Separation from birth family is trauma and this growing up without biological family is an extremely difficult and abnormal experience for adoptees which is why birth family links are so important."

The researchers asked about the maintenance of relationships with birth family, but for many respondents (the majority of whom had not had contact with birth relatives whilst growing up in their adoptive families) their own life experience entailed the re-establishment of contact prior to any relationship maintenance. Thus, understandably, prioritisation around finding birth relatives and reunion featured heavily within responses. Some people called specifically for intermediary support in searching and making contact...In advising caution, respondents emphasised a need for informed choice for adoptees in which both the "cautions, fears and pitfalls" and "huge joys and benefits" are explained.



Adults Affected  
by Adoption

#### 2. Adopted people feel their needs around contact are not always prioritised

Two main and overlapping areas of need were highlighted.

- Identity needs: the importance of knowing heritage and life story prior to adoption, and how contact was an important component of achieving this. Many spoke of not knowing their heritage when growing up, and the harm they experienced because of this. For some, the loss inherent in adoption was compounded by a lack of contact and exacerbated by a lack of truth and transparency.

"Adoptees do not arrive as a blank slate. They/we have our own history and family tree no matter the circumstances of how we came to be adopted." "It is traumatic enough to be separated from your mother without it being shrouded in secrecy."

- Emotional needs: a need for support in managing the emotions related to adoption, including the emotional demands of establishing and maintaining contact. These emotional needs included references to a sense of 'guilt', 'powerlessness', 'lack of trust and security', and 'rejection'. "Making peace with the past. Coping with loss and jealousy. Finding the joy in reunion." "Addressing the limbo a lot of adoptees feel when stuck between two families." "Managing expectations and loyalties."

Responses highlighted a feeling that historically the needs of adopted people have been second to the needs of the adoptive parents. Many referred to the conflict adopted people can feel trying to balance their needs with those of their adoptive parents e.g. "Guilt of not wanting to upset adoptive parents" when making decisions around birth family contact. "Much more needs to be done to centre the child's needs and not the adopters' needs."

### 3. Adopted Adults need more support

Discussion focused on three main themes: making and maintaining relationships, therapeutic support, and greater use of legislation and policy that supports contact.

**Making and maintaining relationships** Requests for support in this area ranged from advice and information about how to search for and go about making contact, to intermediary support in making and managing that contact. “Funding for search & reunion. Case study examples of good birth family contact.” “Support with dealing with subsequent rejection and unsuccessful reunions.”

**Therapeutic support** The need for therapeutic support was evident in responses referring to emotionally difficult and sometimes traumatic adoption related experiences. Some were specific in specifying the need for counselling as a component of the contact process:

“It is imperative that help is on hand in the form of counsellors or experienced mentors who can provide support and advice for all those involved in the reunion process regardless of their relationship. eg siblings, cousins, parents etc on all sides of the adoption triangle.”

Others called for therapeutic counselling regarding the often unacknowledged difficulties inherent in their experiences of adoption and separation from their birth family:

“It would go a long way if there were therapeutic services available for adoptees ending the gas lighting [and trauma] that adoption (and the secrecy and shame that surrounded it) has caused.”

**Use of legislation and policy** ...there were calls for significant legislative action including: mandated contact unless otherwise directed by the court for safeguarding reasons; laws preventing adopters from changing the name of the adoptee or hiding their birth identity; and the prioritisation of other forms of care such as guardianships, that do not include “forever severing family links”. At the other end of this spectrum were calls for a greater professional and systemic commitment to contact, including case workers that check adopters are pursuing contact and, where they are not, that it is because of the child’s wishes.

### 4. More open discussion about birth family links is needed

“A focus on consistency, reliability and the importance of open discussion within the adopted family on this topic (neutral and supportive with the adoptee’s needs in mind).”

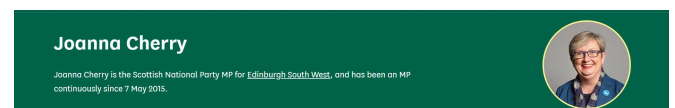
People identified this need for greater openness both within the adoptive family and in the wider adoption community. Some spoke in terms of changing the adoption narrative on a wider social scale. They talked of dispelling society’s “fairy tale myths” of adoption and the idea of all birth families being “bad people”, replacing them with nuanced and more accurate depictions of adoption, the harms of not knowing your heritage, and the potential risks and benefits of maintaining contact with birth families.



The full report can be read here: <https://www.pac-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Maintaining-Relationships-with-Birth-Families-Research-Briefing.pdf>

### Birth Mothers

This Podcast run by Edinburgh MP Joanna Cherry was found on ‘Committee Corridor’.



It involved conversations with an adopted adult and a birth mother. It has been edited to foreground the contribution of the birth mother.

Joanna: Hello, and welcome to Committee Corridor. I'm Joanna Cherry, and I chair the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I represent Edinburgh South West in Westminster for the Scottish National Party. Today, we hear the stories of two women (Ann Keen and Liz Harvie) who suffered great pain and great loss as a result of decisions which were taken out of their

hands...We're going to talk about the right to family life, and one of the fundamental parts of family life is the right of a child to be with its mother, and the right of the mother to be with her child.

Ann was born in 1948 in North Wales. She became pregnant and was sent to a mother in baby home at the age of just 17, back in 1966. She went on to work in the NHS as a nurse, and later, she served as the Labour MP for Brentford and Isleworth from 1997 to 2010.



Joanna: Ann, can I ask you, what were your feelings on discovering you were pregnant? What was the reaction of people closest to you? Can you tell us a bit about your experience?

Ann: Well, my personal thoughts immediately was I was terrified. I was so anxious that this would have a disastrous effect on my parents and my family. And I knew this, and I tried very hard almost to pretend it wasn't happening. But of course, the reality was I was pregnant, and I felt ashamed. I felt I'd let everybody down. And really, the only way I can say it, is I was terrified.

And there came a time when I had to tell my mom, and this was so awful. She cried, I cried. And when I say we feared telling my dad, it wasn't because he was an angry, horrible man. It was because it would have such a serious effect on him. Because his education stopped at the age of 12, and he was so concerned that his children had the very best, even though he was a steel worker. He had a very manual job and with low pay, but he wanted better for us, which is fairly typical of parents everywhere. And I knew this would really affect him.

We thought about different things, is it true? Is it correct? And then my mom took me to my GP who I'd known from school days. And so, this was even so much more embarrassing. He didn't express judgement, he just confirmed the pregnancy. And in those days, you didn't have an appointment. You just all went and sat in a waiting room.

And when I came out, I just felt everybody in that waiting room had heard what had happened to me. And I don't know whether they did or not, but my mum was crying, I was crying. And then we had to go and wait for a bus to go home.

It was awful because my mum was obviously devastated and very worried about what she was going to do. This was 1966, the famous year of

England winning the World Cup. And the day that was chosen (don't ask me why) to tell my dad was the day of the World Cup. And my mum's thoughts were that if England won, he would be in such a good mood. He wouldn't be thinking about anything else. Of course, we were waiting for this result. We were in the back kitchen and we heard the cheer and that saying, "They think it's all over." It is now. Well, it was for me because it was the worst thing that could have happened for my dad because he was elated, and he was a shift worker.

And then he heard the news and he was angry. Not in a physical way, but he was angry to towards me, that how could I do this? How could I bring this shame on the family? How could I have ruined my life? It was again, it was fear all the time. We were afraid people would find out. Nobody was supposed to ever find out about this. And I was to be sent away — sent away just at the time when actually I needed to be with my family more than ever.

Joanna: It sounds like you were very much alone, Ann. Nowadays we would expect a young woman in the situation that you found yourself in to have access to different services to offer support and advice. But it was really very different in 1966, wasn't it?

Ann: Well, it was so different, we were told we wouldn't have any financial support by the sort of, I suppose, a social worker, you would refer to the lady today, but she was the moral welfare officer. Now, that name in itself, again, it goes in very deep in and still with me. It goes in very deep that I was not a good person. I was a bad person because I'd brought all this onto the family and all this stress and concern, and most of all shame.

So, you start being coerced into believing that you cannot have this baby, keep this baby, and this baby will go to a home with a mother and a father. And this home will love your baby and care for your baby so much better than me because you won't have any money. Where will you live?

You know, you've said about how your parents are having such difficulty on — they would wait for the wage packet to come in every week. So, I knew that an extra (as it was called then) mouth to feed and all these expressions are used. And it's also an expression that's used is often, "This is for the best, this is for the best for the baby, and in the end, the best for you, because you will have a life. You won't have to worry, you can go on and do things."

But most importantly, and it was reinforced by this moral welfare officer when she sent me a photograph of my son at six-weeks-old, in the letter, which I gave to the inquiry. She writes, "You must be so pleased to see him look so well, and you'll now know that he will never grow up with the stigma of illegitimacy." So, really, it was about that. It was about being illegitimate. It was about special love, because if you say you love this baby, you let him go because you can't possibly love him.

And when that is said to you on a regular basis and you're told that you brought shame and everything, it's the behaviour. Well, I believed it because what was the alternative?

I didn't want to lose my baby. When he would move, I didn't feel alone because I didn't know it was him, but I had a baby and I wasn't alone. I was only really, truly alone when he had been taken and he was taken. He was taken from the nursery on the eighth day when I begged and begged and begged, could I see him? Could I hold him? No, no, no.

And then, I saw this staff nurse and she had something about her face and her eyes, and I thought, I'll ask her. And she was brilliant. She said, "Yes, but Ann, please don't get close, don't get close. You can have him, but only for 10 days," which was the time you stayed in hospital then, for 10 days.

And I went to the nursery on the eighth day and he wasn't there. And this cruel person in the guise of a nurse's uniform, said to me, "Oh no, he's gone. You'll never see him again. In fact, if you look through the window, he's in that building there and his new mommy is going to come for him and you can come with me now." And she took me into this as it was then, and maybe some bathrooms in the NHS are still horrible.

But it was a cold, horrid bathroom. And she made me have a bath and then she got my breast and she expressed milk because she said, I will not need this milk. So, again, I can say to you and anybody listening, that was the lowest I've ever felt in my life. And I knew I had no rights, no rights at all.

And I wanted to say this, my mom and dad never knew about that. They would never have wanted me treated like that. So, the fact you were sent away, it was for my benefit and the baby's benefit was the thinking at the time. If they'd have known I was being treated in that way, they would've intervened. But again, I didn't feel I could tell anybody because nobody

might believe me.



Ann: [she goes on to talk about how she and her son met] my son found me when he was 27 years of age. He didn't know he was adopted. He'd never been told. And he has been so traumatised by all of this in so many ways. I wanted to introduce him to everybody, I wanted him to be part of the family, my nephew in particular, who I'd been godmother to.

And when I held him, I was actually holding my own baby. And all these sorts of things were going through my mind. He didn't want to hear that. He just wanted me and he didn't forgive me because there was nothing to forgive, he said. He was just angry with the system.

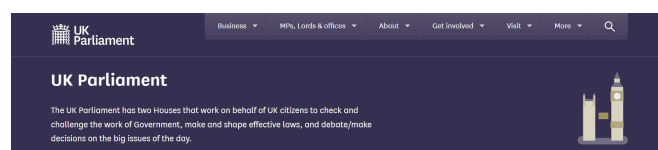
And who knows what our life would've been like but it would've had a lot of love. His parents had a divorce when he was three, and he'd spent his entire adult life trying to have a relationship with a man that didn't want to know him, but he thought was his father. So, that was so damaging, so very damaging. And I think that really affects me today, the shame of whenever it — more likely to be written about maybe than maybe other people.

Certainly, when I was first elected, they wrote, "She gave him away," and I didn't have any choices. I didn't, but technically, he was adopted.

Was he adopted with me screaming and was he taken away and me put in a straight jacket? No, but he was taken away. And that does live with me. The shame is easier because more people know.

The full Podcast can be found at:

[www.parliament.uk/business/commons/committee-corridor-podcast/committee-corridor-adoption-of-the-children-of-unmarried-mothers/](http://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/committee-corridor-podcast/committee-corridor-adoption-of-the-children-of-unmarried-mothers/)



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**Birthlink 21 Castle Street, Edinburgh, Scotland EH2 3DN**