

UK Adoption Agencies: Preliminary Study of Data in Two Official Directories

Introduction

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 and its accompanying orders and standards represent a landmark change in the law and practice of adoption in England and Wales. At the same time the UK government is committed to the provision of government information and services via the World Wide Web by 2005 at both local and national levels (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003). This paper reports the result of a preliminary study in mid-2003 of the information presented by 50 UK adoption agencies in the two online directories of agencies in the UK. It is co-published with permission of CIQM and the original publication may be found, as one of the CIQM Website Quality Surveys, at http://www.i-a-l.co.uk/ciqm_greport2.html The study was followed up by a comprehensive study of 30 of the agencies' own Websites; this is available at http://www.i-a-l.co.uk/Print_Resources/Adoption_websites_2.doc.

Methodology

As a starting point, the government-sponsored British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) list of local authority and voluntary adoption agencies was taken, downloading the entries in their Find Your Agency pages, at http://www.baaf.org.uk/agency_db/intro.html.

There were 143 entries, of which four were eliminated as not being appropriate. A random sample of 50 was then selected, using the random.org random number generator. For this exercise, the 50 agencies' entries in the BAAF list were evaluated against a set of 12 basic criteria. The 32 English agencies from among those 50 which also appeared in the Department of Health's (DoH) lists Voluntary Adoption Agencies or Local Councils were further evaluated against the same criteria for their entries there (no equivalent lists were available for Welsh or Scottish agencies). (These URLs will probably change again in the near future, as responsibility for adoption and other children's social services has been transferred from the DoH to the Department for Education and Skills.) Results of the evaluations were entered into an MS Excel spreadsheet and SPSS for analysis.

Characteristics of the samples

The 50 agencies included 39 local authorities and 11 voluntary agencies. Thirty-four were located in England, four in Wales, 11 in Scotland, and one elsewhere. In terms of the origins of the children placed, seven served London boroughs, 17 served other urban centres (populations of 100,000 or more or officially designated as metropolitan borough councils), 19 served less populated districts, and seven draw their children from a wide geographical area and multiple local authorities, including both urban and non-urban districts.

Results From the BAAF Website

The most common information given by agencies on the BAAF Website was contact details. All 50 provided a street address or PO box number; 33 gave telephone numbers, 20 gave e-mail addresses, 18 fax numbers, and 16 gave their Website URLs. Half gave no information at all other than basic contact details, often not even including a telephone number. Six provided the name of the director or an individual to act as first contact. Just four gave any indication of the numbers of children they place per year or have waiting for a placement, and 18 gave some indication of the kinds of children they place. Sixteen gave an idea of the kinds of people they were looking for as adopters. Eight gave information about their process of assessment.

Only three said anything about what adoption is, but 22 gave some other information about themselves and their services or about adoption itself: information about or promises of post-adoption support : 9 agencies reporting specific information about their catchment areas for prospective adopters : 7 explicit undertakings to assess prospective adopters within a specific time period, or a statement of the average time taken : 3 more detail about pre-placement training for adopters : 2

mention of the availability of financial assistance for adopters : 2 information about open adoption : 1
information about services to birth families : 1 their policy on fertility treatment ending before adoption
assessment can begin : 1 the provision of birth-records counselling for adult adoptees : 1 referral to
other agencies or photo-listing publications after assessment : 1

Scoring one point for each of the 12 data elements (including 'other' information), no department scored zero or more than 10 points. The modal score was 1 (for nothing more than a mailing address), with 15 agencies. The next most frequent scores were 2 and 8, with 10 agencies scoring each. The results resemble a catenary curve, with agencies either scoring very low or high. The average score was 4.3. The typical entry (there were 26 such) in the BAAF directory sample consisted of nothing more than the agency name and contact details, sometimes including their Website URL, with nothing whatever about their services, the children they have available or the types of families they are looking for. But almost half the entries were much fuller, providing a reasonable basis for a prospective adopter to make a preliminary decision about whether or not to approach the agency.

From the DoH Website

The DoH (England) also provided a list of adoption agencies, also with self-provided data and narrative descriptions. Unlike the BAAF agencies list, the DoH lists (there were separate local authority and voluntary agency lists) only included agencies based in England and were not accessible by county or postcodes served, so in addition to the features analysed for BAAF entries, the DoH entries were rated for information about their catchment areas for prospective adopters. Thirty-two agencies of the 50 in the main sample had entries in the DoH lists. Four of the 34 English agency profiles in the BAAF list were for branches of two nation-wide voluntary agencies which in the DoH voluntary agency list had single entries.

None of the agencies provided information about the number of children placed, only one gave the name of a contact person. All gave addresses and all but one provided a telephone number. Nineteen gave fax numbers and 16 gave email addresses. Twelve provided a URL for their Website. Just three gave any general information about adoption. Only five gave any information about the kinds of children they place and only six any indication of the kinds of families they are looking for. Considering that unlike the BAAF Website entries, the DoH lists were not accessed by area, only six gave any indication of what their catchment area is for assessing families. Seven gave a short description of their assessment process. Thirteen agencies gave other information: membership of regional placement consortia to match waiting children with prospective parents : 5 agencies reporting the agency does assessments for international adoptions : 4 the agency provides birth records counselling : 3 a list of specific post-adoption services : 2 the availability of preparation for adoption in different community languages : 1 services available to birth families : 1

Scoring one point for each of the 13 data elements, no agency scored zero or higher than 9 (scored by only one agency). The modal score was 2 (for address and telephone number), achieved by 8 agencies. The curve was flatter than the BAAF score curve, indicating perhaps that the DoH had been more specific in its request for data from the agencies than was BAAF. The average score was 4.7, typically representing the address, phone and fax numbers, email address, and some other item of information.

Comparing the BAAF and DoH lists

Table 1 compares the BAAF and DoH entries for adoption agencies. On six measures the same agencies' information given in the DoH Website was the same or less complete than in the BAAF list, and on six measures the DoH entries gave the data more often.

Manual comparison of the BAAF and DoH entries for the 32 agencies appearing in both lists found that there was great variation. Table 2 compares the results. Instead of the 32 agencies submitting identical or virtually identical profiles to both, which would have been quite possible, there were only two cases where this seems to have happened. In a third case each entry contained substantial information not contained in the other. In the other 29 cases one entry was clearly more informative than the other, with DoH entries on balance being poorer in content.

Table 1

Data element	BAAF list (n=50) %	DoH list (n=32) %
Number of children placed	8	0
Named contact person	12	3.1
Address	100	100
Telephone number	66	96.9
Fax number	36	59.4
Email address	40	50
Website URL	32*	37.5**
General information about adoption	6	9.4
Types of children placed	36	15.6
Types of family sought	32	18.8
Family assessment catchment area	Not evaluated	18.8
Assessment process described	16	21.9
Any other information	44	40.6

* 2 of the 50 agencies have no Website, thus n = 48.

** 1 of the 32 agencies has no Website, thus n = 31.

Table 2

DoH profile is the BAAF profile (n=32)
Much fuller than	... 3
Fuller than	... 11
Nearly identical in scope to	... 3
Less full than	... 3
Much less full than	... 12

Discussion

It should be remembered when considering the results of the survey that the BAAF and DoH Websites, as much as the Websites of individual agencies, are intended as shop windows. These agency directories have no statutory purpose: their reason for being is to alert prospective adopters to agencies where they might be assessed for the placement of a child. A public service which is actively seeking custom, as adoption agencies must do if they are to fulfil their statutory duties, needs to do more than just put its name and address on a directory Website, particularly when the government is currently mandating a large increase in the number of placements. In addition, local authority agencies do not have an internal monopoly: prospective adopters are free to apply to agencies anywhere in the country, and an agency which provides more information and presents itself as welcoming and professional is likely to be able to attract applicants where others will not attract, quite possibly "poaching" from other local authorities, near or farther away.

The information provided by most agencies to both the BAAF and DoH lists is clearly far from adequate for its purpose. At the very minimum each entry should contain the following data: mailing and street address email address Website URL telephone number fax number minicom or other telephone number catchment area for prospective adopters whether or not they provide assessment for international adoptions the average number of placements they made in the past five years, or some other indicator of their level of placement activity the kinds of children they place the kinds of families they are looking for roughly the length of time an average assessment takes (with cautions about being flexible) the process of assessment post-adoption services available services provided to adult adoptees services provided to birth families

Reference Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2003). Framework for the Future: Libraries, Learning and Information in the Next Decade. Online. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: http://www.culture.gov.uk/global/publications/archive_2003/framework_future.htm . Accessed 20 February 2004.

Roger Fenton

Centre for Information Quality Management, Information Automation Limited