

# FIRST 4 ADOPTION

## First Year Impact Report 2013



First4Adoption - the national adoption information service for England  
*supported by the Department for Education*

## What is First4Adoption?

First4Adoption is the national adoption information service for people interested in adopting a child in England. It is a digital service with an adoption agency finder and telephone information line providing potential adopters and those already in the adopter approval process (prospective adopters) with the ability to speak to friendly trained advisors to get information about adopting a child - from their suitability to apply to become an adoptive parent to how to navigate the adoption process. The service puts callers in touch with adoption agencies of their choice.

The First4Adoption information line on 0300 222 0022, is open from 10am-6pm, Monday - Friday and its digital service is at [www.first4adoption.org.uk](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk) All calls are confidential.

First4Adoption is independent of any agency. It is managed by the charity Coram Children's Legal Centre in partnership with Adoption UK and Coram. It is funded and supported by the Department for Education and steered by the National Recruitment Forum, a sub-committee of the Adoption Leadership Board.

## Executive Summary

First4Adoption – the national adoption information service for England - was launched in January 2013 and became fully operational in April 2013. In its first year of operation, the service has supported 94,752 individuals online (more than double the original planning assumption for the service) and 2,196 callers to its information line. This means that the service received 96,948 contacts from people interested in adoption in 2013, which equates to 372 contacts each working day. This compares favourably with the 27,080 initial enquiries received by adoption agencies across England in 2012-13<sup>1</sup>.

A total of 6,808 (15%) of unique online service users (16th August to 31st December 2013) went on to directly contact an adoption agency of their choice through the First4Adoption Agency Finder. In addition, all callers to the First4Adoption telephone information service enquiring about the adoption process and how to contact an agency are routinely given three adoption agencies' contact details so that they can contact an agency of their choice.

Use of the digital service has grown steadily from 5,679 unique visits to the First4Adoption website in April 2013 when it was launched, to 27,563 in December 2013. Average time spent on the site is 3.4 minutes and users read an average of four pages on their visit. The website had 16,910 unique visits around the time of the launch of the Adoption Maps.

Similarly, the number of calls to the telephone information line has grown and the service received 2,196 calls between January and December 2013, an average 180 calls a month. Callers tended to be female and the majority of callers are between 30 and 49 years old. Although call length varies depending on the subject, the average length of a call to the service is 5.9 minutes. Topics raised in calls were mainly about the adopter approvals process but also covered issues around foster carers wanting to adopt, fertility issues and housing requirements for adopters.

While the service has only been fully operation for just nine months, it is already having a tangible impact. From a sample of 48 service users between April and July 2013 who indicated they were happy to be contacted by First4Adoption for a follow-up study, two callers have already been approved as adopters and are waiting to be matched. A further nine callers are now prospective adopters and have started the Stage Two adoption assessment process and nine had attended an adoption information session. Although the sample is small, this suggests that the service is working in terms of directing serious potential adopters to agencies that are ready and waiting to accept them.



Gemma  
Gordon-Johnson  
First4adoption  
Customer Service  
Manager

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/adoption-quality-assurance-and-data-forms-2012-13-first-statistical-release>

First4Adoption has directly supported the adoption sector in several ways:

- It has handled enquiries from potential adopters and those already being assessed from across the country, in line with the distribution of population, offering them the chance to be referred to local adoption agencies of their choice via its Agency Finder.
- The First4Adoption team, which includes adopter volunteers, provided 12 mystery shopper reviews for adoption agencies and has directly handled calls on behalf of 28 adoption agencies to support their recruitment campaigns as part of a bespoke service offered to adoption agencies.
- It has created free adoption information resources, which are available for all agencies to use, with more being published in 2014, such as new online adoption learning materials.
- It has carried out a number of highly successful media campaigns that were widely reported in the national, regional and specialist media, which have helped to raise awareness about adoption. For example, as a direct result of First4Adoption's own media campaigns during National Adoption Week 2013, 81.7 million people had the opportunity to read or hear positive messages about the urgent need for more adopters, about busting myths around who can adopt, and about First4Adoption.
- First4Adoption has developed new national partnerships with key sector organisations, such as Mumsnet and Home for Good (a national church-led campaign encouraging fostering and adoption) and attended key events such as the Alternative Parenting Show, with more national partnership initiatives in development. It has provided call-handling services for adoption documentaries broadcast on Channel 4 and the Islam TV channel, providing viewers interested in adopting with a direct route into the adoption system. It will also provide call handling-services for a major TV network series on adoption being broadcast later in 2014.

First4Adoption has commissioned further research to provide insight about potential adopters in order to help take forward a national recruitment programme in the coming year.

First4Adoption looks forward to continuing to provide a high-quality, customer-focused information service for potential and prospective adopters over the next year. It will build partnerships with and support adoption agencies further through national recruitment initiatives and by promoting national standards of customer service, to ensure that together we welcome as many prospective adopters as possible to meet the needs of the children we serve. I look forward to hearing from any agencies that are interested in finding out how First4Adoption can assist them with adopter recruitment through a package of tailored support, such as call handling, mystery shopping reviews and customer care training.

Gemma Gordon-Johnson  
First4adoption Customer Service Manager  
gemma@first4adoption.org.uk 020 7841 0511

# Contents

<b>Executive summary: what is First4Adoption and what has it achieved so far?</b>	<b>3</b>
Specification and need	
Key performance indicators	
<b>National information service for potential and prospective adopters</b>	<b>6</b>
Overview	6
Digital First – online resources for potential and prospective adopters	6
Agency Finder: connecting would-be adopters with adoption agencies	8
Digital learning tools for potential and prospective adopters	10
Telephone information Line: trends in calls and types of enquiries	10
Adopter feedback	15
Year one successes	17
Key learning	17
<b>Sector, policy and media communications</b>	<b>19</b>
Working with adopters and the adoption sector	19
Getting the message out about adoption	20
Adoption Passport	21
Adoption Maps	22
Results and learning	23
<b>Customer service: supporting the sector to meet the needs of would-be adopters</b>	<b>25</b>
Resources for agencies and would-be adopters	25
Customer Service Standards	26
Becoming an adopter - step by step	27
Supporting refinement of service - Mystery shopper and initial findings	28
Learning to improve service effectiveness	28
Further service development support	29
Call handling for campaign/agency support	29
<b>National recruitment development: rising to the challenge</b>	<b>30</b>
Market size, distribution and propensity (Kindred)	30
First4Adoption’s contribution to National Adoption Week	33
Segmentation	33
National marketing development and future plans	34



# National information service for potential and prospective adopters

## Overview

First4adoption is a sector-led initiative from the Adoption Expert Group established and commissioned by the Coalition Government to urgently review the operation of adoption, as part of its adoption reform programme. First4adoption was designed to help to broaden the types and increase the numbers of people coming forward to adopt. It is independent and impartial and provides a new approach to national co-ordination of adopter recruitment. Its steering group is the National Recruitment Forum, which comprises sector bodies and external advisers in the field of adoption.

First4Adoption is needed to help generate more enquiries leading to more approved adopters for children in care, by providing a single national access point for potential adopters to the highly-distributed, locally-based adoption system. It also aims to support the sector in driving forward consistent customer service standards.

First4Adoption's primary role is to welcome and encourage potential adopters to start their adoption journey, to address adoption myths and barriers and thereby help increase the number of people coming forward to adopt.

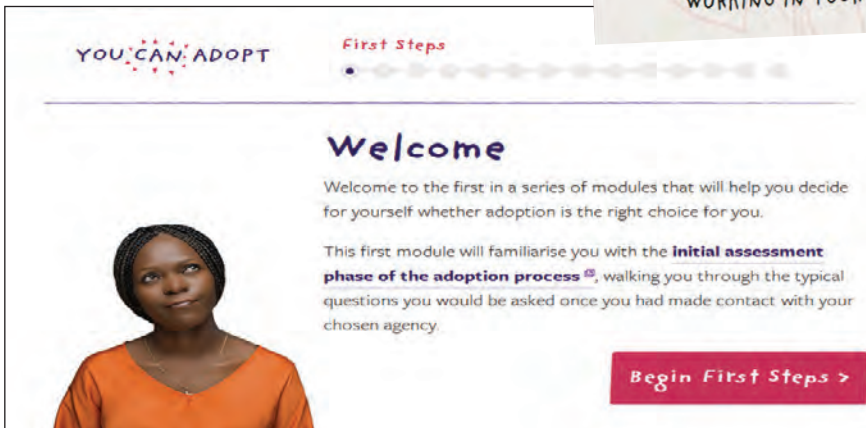
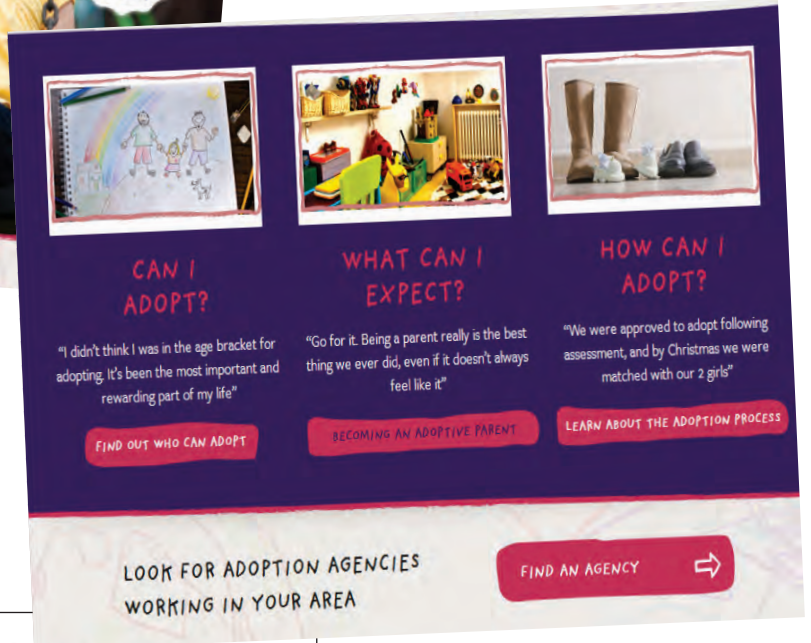
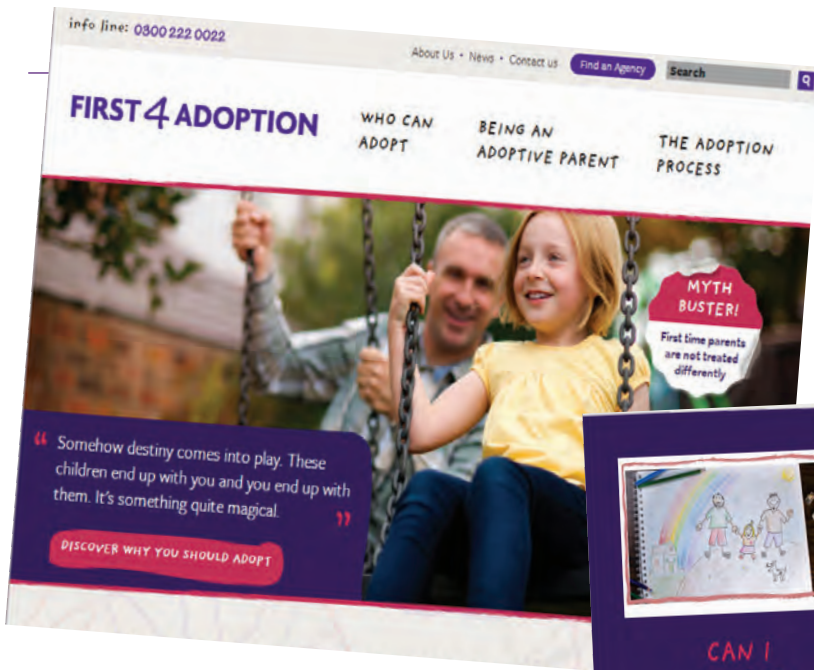
First4Adoption launched its new telephone information line in January 2013 and its online information service in April 2013. First4Adoption has supported 94,752 unique visitors online in the first nine months of operation and handled 2,196 calls to its telephone information service. Of those using the First4Adoption online service,

6,808 potential adopters (from 16th August to 31st December 2013) made onward enquiries to adoption agencies via the First4Adoption Agency Finder – a referral rate of over 15%, which is much higher than originally anticipated when the service was launched.

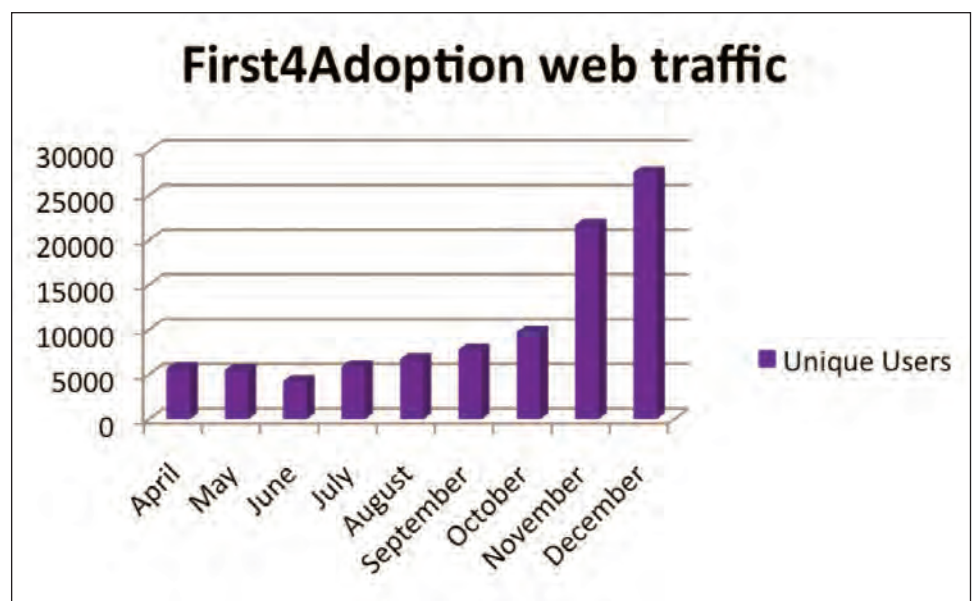
## Digital First – online resources for potential and prospective adopters

Many potential and prospective adopters are digital-first consumers of information, seeking to find out about adoption online at their own pace and in their own time. The First4Adoption website is designed to enable initial enquirers to become more informed before embarking on their adoption journey and to support their understanding at any point of that process, making them aware of the support available to them from First4Adoption. The content is also focussed on busting the myths around adoption, such as misconceptions about age and marital status being a barrier to adopting, so as to encourage more potential adopters to come forward.

Since the website was launched in April 2013, it has received much praise for its content and design from both adoption professionals and prospective adopters. One service user commented – *'it was welcoming, informative and even the font was inviting and the content was brilliant'*. Around a third of adoption agencies are using or signposting to the content on the site and refer people to it as a good reference source. One agency commented – 'We find it a really useful resource and regularly signpost would-be adopters to it'.



First4Adoption has seen the number of unique users visiting the site increase month on month since the website was launched in April 2013, with the highest number (27,563 unique users) coming to the site in December 2013 – an increase of 485%.



## Agency Finder: connecting would-be adopters with adoption agencies

First4Adoption began to contact all adoption agencies in April 2013 to ensure it had the correct contact details for each agency, which would be used for its Agency Finder on [www.first4adoption.org.uk](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk) and by advisers on its telephone information service. The bar chart below shows the number of agencies that responded and provided their contact details. At December 2013, seven adoption agencies had still not provided or confirmed their contact details, meaning that these agencies risk losing out on potential new referrals.

## Adoption Agencies' provision of information details since April 2013



## Agency Finder development

The Agency Finder has been refined and adapted since the site was launched in April 2013 on the basis of feedback from adoption agencies and service users and it now operates on the coverage of each adoption agency. It also displays the logo of each agency and results can be viewed on a map. When potential adopters search for an adoption agency, they are provided with the six agencies that most closely match their search location.

**FIND AN ADOPTION AGENCY**

Adoption agencies are there to help you discover if adoption is right for you.

They can be either voluntary organisations or part of a local authority, but they all exist to help people like you to prepare to be prospective adopters.

**CHOOSING AN ADOPTION AGENCY**

You don't have to choose your local adoption agency, you can contact as many as you like, and we would encourage you to contact several. It's important to find the agency that is right for you, which will take a few meetings. Use our finder tool below to find adoption agencies that cover your area.

Agency Type:

Enter Your Post Code:

Agency Name:

**SEARCH**

Of the 94,752 unique users of the First4Adoption website, 6,808 potential adopters have made direct onward enquiries to adoption agencies' own websites via the First4Adoption Agency Finder – a referral rate of 15%, which is well ahead of target.

This high referral rate indicates that users are finding the information they need about adoption from the First4Adoption website before taking the next steps of contacting adoption agencies to take their adoption journey further.

First4adoption is currently reviewing which geographical areas have seen the most activity online and which areas have seen the most onward referrals to adoption agencies from its website. As part of this review, it will examine how this data correlates with the profile and segmentation research that was carried out by Kindred<sup>2</sup> and commissioned by the Department for Education on potential adopters, to track the rate of reaching them.

The regional data we have so far examined shows that the users of the First4Adoption website broadly match the demographic distribution of potential adopters in England (as highlighted in the Kindred research) and is therefore benefitting all areas appropriately, with some areas being over-represented in terms of online enquiries to

<sup>1</sup>The research was conducted by Kindred and Work Research on behalf of the Department for Education. The research findings are based on the responses given in an online survey of 4,948 adults aged 20-64 years old and living in England that was carried out between 30th November and 5th December 2012, plus 18 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with adults aged 20-64 years old living in England that was carried out during November 2012.



the website. As more data becomes available, First4Adoption will be able to provide more detailed analysis to inform regions, consortia and agencies to assist them in their adopter recruitment approaches. The table below shows the regional distribution of those First4Adoption website users that go on to adoption agencies' websites via our Agency Finder.

Region	Number of unique users
South-East	769
Greater London	704
North-West	531
East	431
West Midlands	386
East Midlands	364
Yorkshire & Humber	346
South-West	336
North-East	211

The table below shows the number of unique users that have left the Agency Finder page and gone on to agencies split by local authority and voluntary adoption agencies via region.

Region	Local Authority unique visitors	Voluntary Agencies unique visitors
East	244	75
East Midlands	243	121
Greater London	333	371
North-East	137	74
North-West	259	272
South-East	454	315
West	188	148
West Midlands	220	166
Yorkshire & Humber	290	56

## Digital learning tools for potential and prospective adopters

In July, First4Adoption commenced the production of national e-learning resources for potential adopters and adoption agencies to use during Stage 1 of the adoption approvals process. This now forms part of a programme of development to support potential adopters in their preparation for adoption agency assessment. It supports adoption agencies by removing the need for them to develop and fund duplicate learning resources at a local level, and ensures consistent, customer-focused national standards.

First4Adoption has created an Adopter Eligibility Guide, as it was recognised that many potential adopters would come to the site at different stages of the adoption journey. This guide helps them at the initial stage to know if they are eligible to apply to adopt and to examine certain adopter criteria in more detail before embarking on more formal e-learning about the adoption process. This Eligibility Guide was published on First4Adoption's website at the end July 2013.

First4Adoption has been researching and determining what areas should be covered in the more formal modules of e-learning and developed a working group consisting of representatives from adoption agencies to assist with this process.

The e-learning package will be available in from 31st March 2014 and will cover the following areas:

- Attachment theory
- Managing behaviour
- Expectation of yourself and your child
- Background of children

The e-learning training will be reviewed in summer 2014 and further development undertaken with the working group support on an iterative basis where needed.

We invite adoption agencies to collaborate in this process with us, so that we can continue to produce high-quality learning materials for potential adopters for use by adoption agencies, enabling them to make cost and resource savings.

## Telephone information line: trends in calls and types of enquiries

The information line enables potential and prospective adopters to speak to a fully-trained volunteer adopter and/or specialist advisers on a one-to-one basis. The telephone information line is available 10am–6pm, Monday–Friday, with an on-out-of-hours call-back facility. First4Adoption has also provided call-handling services for local and national adopter recruitment campaigns as part of a bespoke service for adoption agencies. Agencies interested in our bespoke call handling services, are advised to get in touch with Gemma via [gemma@first4adoption.org.uk](mailto:gemma@first4adoption.org.uk).

The number of calls First4Adoption receives has risen steadily and in the period just after National Adoption Week (November 2013), the level of calls reached the expected mature level of 479 calls per month.

First4Adoption received a total of 2,196 calls in its first year of operation (January –December 2013), an average 180 calls a month. All calls received by First4Adoption are treated as confidential and as such callers do not have to provide us with their profile data. The pattern below is based on the data received.

## Breakdown of callers

Type of callers	Number
Prospective adopters (initial enquiry)	759
Prospective adopter working with an agency	216
Approved adopter	94
Adoption Other	109
Adoption Agencies	272

The types of enquiries received by First4Adoption have been varied, as indicated in the table below. The majority of enquiries were initial enquiries, initial enquiries from callers beginning their adoption journey, asking: how to the process; whether they were eligible; about the process; and how to find an adoption agency. These types of calls are directly in line with the objectives of First4Adoption's information service.

Type of enquiry	Number
Initial enquiry	660
Foster carers wanting to adopt	41
Step parent adoption	30
Concerns/difficulties with agency	20
Fertility issues	18
Birth children/adoption	13
Matching	13
Finding the right agency	10
Intercountry adoption	10
Housing	9



## Regional analysis

First4Adoption was able to identify the regions where callers enquired from of 572 calls received between January and December 2013. There are many reasons why we cannot establish where callers are enquiring from, for example when a caller does not want to provide information about themselves or chooses to remain anonymous.

As the table below shows, the highest number of calls received was from Greater London followed by the East and then the South-East.

Region	Number of unique users
East	86
East Midlands	41
Greater London	135
North-East	13
North-West	80
South-East	85
South-West	41
West Midlands	69
Yorkshire & Humber	22
Total	572

### East

The enquirers that rang First4Adoption from the East region were predominately female, 62 (72.1%) and 24 (27.9%) were male. Some 43 (50%) considered themselves to be heterosexual, and 3 (3.5%) were homosexual. Some 29 (33.7%) callers were married or in civil partnership, 8 (9.3%) were living with partner and 9 (10.5%) were single. In terms of age, 17 (19.8%) were aged 31-40 and 21 (24.4%) were aged 41-50. Some 39 (45.4%) callers were White British/Irish and 9 (10.5%) were from an Asian background. The most enquiries received were general initial enquiries, 16 (18.6%), followed by housing, 4 (4.7%), IVF, 2 (2.3%), birth children, 2 (2.3%) and age of children, 2 (2.3%).

### East Midlands

The number of callers who rang that were female was 31 (78.1%) and 9 (21.9%) were male. The enquiries received were about: initial enquiries about adoption, 9 (21.9%); finding the right agency, 5 (12.2%); adopting again, 2 (4.9%) and adoption register, 2 (4.9%). The age of callers was: 21-30 years, 6 (14.6%), 31-40 years, 11 (26.8%) and 41-50 years, 16 (39%). Some 30 (65.9%) callers were White British/Irish and 6 (14.6%) were Asian. Some 27 (65.9%) were married or in civil partnership, 4 (9.8%) single and 2 (4.9%) were divorced. Some 35 (85.4%) callers classified themselves as heterosexual.



## Greater London

The number of callers who were female were 109 (80.7%) and 26 (19.3%) were male. The most enquiries were initial enquiries about: adoption, 59 (43.7%); difficulty finding an agency, 10 (7.4%) and foster carers wanting to adopt, 3 (2.2%). Some 89 (65.9%) callers classified themselves as heterosexual and 11 (8.2%) homosexual. In terms of age of callers – 38 (28.2%) were aged 31-40, 21 (15.6%) were aged 41-50 and 10 (7.4%) were aged 50+. The ethnicity of callers was 55 (40.7%) White British/Irish, 19 (14.1%) Black British/Other, 26 (19.3%) Asian and 2 (1.5%) Mixed Ethnicity. Some 65 (48.2%) callers were married or in civil partnership and 26 (19.3%) were single.

## North-East

All the callers were female and 7 (53.9%) were heterosexual. The queries raised were: 4 (30.8%) initial enquiries about adoption, 1 (7.7%); depression and adoption, 1 (7.7%); intercountry adoption, and step-parent adoption, 1 (7.7%). Some 3 (23.1%) callers were aged 31-40 and 4 (30.8%) were aged 41-50. Some 7 (53.9%) callers identified themselves as White British/Irish. Some 3 (23.1%) were married or in civil partnership, 2 (14.4%) were single and 1 (7.7%) was living with a partner.

## North-West

Equal numbers of the callers were female, 40 (50%) and male, 40 (50%). The highest number of enquiries were about: initial adoption enquiries, 17 (21.3%); 5 (6.3%) foster carers wanting to adopt; IVF, 4 (5%) and deregistering from an agency, 3 (3.8%). Some 42 (52.5%) callers were heterosexual and 1 (1.3%) homosexual. The age of callers were 3 (3.8%) aged under 21, 17 (21.3%) aged 21-30, 22 (27.5%) aged 31-40 and 21 (26.3%) were aged 41-50. The majority of callers were White British/Irish, 52 (65%), 15 (18.8%) were Asian and 2 (2.5%) were Black British/Other. Some 49 (61.3%) callers were married or in civil partnership, 8 (10%) were single and 3 (3.8%) lived with partner.

## South-East

Three quarters of the callers were female, 63 (74.1%) and 22 (25.9%) were male. The enquiries received were about: initial adoption enquiries, 32 (37.7%); foster carers wanting to adopt, 4 (4.7%); eligibility, housing, 4 (4.7%); and birth children, 3 (3.5%). The majority of callers were heterosexual, 69 (81.2%) and 1 (1.2%) was homosexual. The age range of callers was: aged 21-30, 30 (35.3%) and aged 31-40, 30 (35.3%), aged 41-50, 22 (25.9%) and 4 (4.7%) aged 50+. Some 62 (72.9%) of callers were White British/Irish, 3 (3.5%) Asian and 3 (3.5%) White Other. Some 53 (62.4%) callers were married or in a civil partnership, 5 (5.9%) living with partner and 2 (2.3%) were single.

## South-West

There were 20 (24.4%) callers who were male and 48 (58.5%) were female. The enquiries received were about: 26 (31.7%) initial adoption enquiries; 6 (7.3%) finding an agency; and 3 (3.7%) birth children and adoption. Some 50 (60.9%) callers identified themselves as heterosexual and 1 (1.2%) was homosexual. The age of callers was 1 (1.2%) under 21, 4 (4.9%) aged 21-30, 8 (9.8%) aged 31-40, 21 (25.6%) aged 41-50 and 11 (13.4%) aged 50+. The ethnicity of callers was 51 (62.2%) were White British/ Irish, 2 (2.4%) Black British/Other, 2 (2.4%) White Other. Some 51 (62.2%) callers were married or in civil partnership, 5 (6.1%) living with partner and 3 (3.7%) were separated.

## West Midlands

The majority of callers were female 58 (84.1%) and 11 (15.9%) were male. The main enquiries were: general initial enquiries, 25 (36.2%); 8 (11.6%) concerns about agencies and 5 (7.2%) were about IVF and adoption. Some 48 (69.6%) of callers were heterosexual and 3 (4.3%) were homosexual. The age of callers were: 7 (10.1%) aged 21-30, 14 (20.3%) aged 31-40, 27 (39.1%) aged 41-50 and 6 (8.7%) were aged 50+. The ethnicity of callers were 45 (65.2%) White British/Irish, 3 (4.3%) Black

British/Other, 9 (13%) Asian and 4 (5.8%) were Mixed Ethnicity. Some 41 (59.4%) callers were married or in a civil partnership, 11 (15.9%) single and 6 (8.7%) were living with partner.

### Yorkshire and Humber

There were 22 (81.5%) callers who were female and 5 (18.5%) were male. The enquiries received were 14 (51.9%) initial enquiries about adoption and 2 (7.4%) problems with agencies. Some 22 (81.5%) callers were heterosexual and 1 (3.7%) homosexual. The ethnicity of callers were White British/Irish. Some 7 (25.9%) were married or in a civil partnership and 2 (7.4%) living with partner.



## Adopter feedback

First4Adoption undertook an evaluation of non-professional calls and emails during April to July 2013 to assess whether the service was meeting its objectives of making the adoption process easier for prospective adopters by providing clearer and accessible information about adoption. During 1st April – 31st July 2013, 348 individuals called First4Adoption and 143 consented to being contacted again.

Forty-eight individuals completed the survey, the majority were potential adopters (75%), 15% were prospective adopters working with an agency, 8% were adoptive parents and 2% were prospective foster carers. The survey highlighted that 93% of respondents found contacting First4Adoption useful and 87% would recommend the service to others.

Most often potential adopters had made the decision to seek to adopt before ringing First4Adoption and were contacting the service in order to move forward. Contact with First4Adoption gave prospective adopters practical advice to continue in the adoption process.

Prospective adopters reported that talking to first4Adoption helped them reach a clearer decision about adopting (79%), to feel more confident (81%) and prepared to proceed with adoption (80%).

Nearly half of respondents (40%) contacted First4Adoption as a result of a search engine find, other sources of referral included local authorities (11%), BAAF (9%), media coverage (9%) and AdoptionUK (9%).

First4Adoption is a service that is valued by its users and working well to suit their needs.

Some had seen advertising and commented:

*'I think the advert mentioned the relaxed rules – that if you're single you can adopt – it was just a bit more welcoming.'*

Some comments from respondents about First4Adoption:

*'It was an absolute godsend. I felt so confused and daunted I'd only been to local authorities before. It was very good to speak to someone who was so empathetic and supportive. It helped enormously and set me on the right direction. I just can't thank you enough, it's put us on the right path with another agency that has the time to deal with us and look at us.'*

*'I've had a really really good experience, information was easy to access, passed on to me easily and I could understand everything. The people on the phone really listen and then speak to you – they have a lovely calm nature to them when explaining things. The other thing (is that) they had both male and female advisers, which is good. You would definitely be my first port of call when I'm looking for information.'*

*'Everything you could have done you did. I was told someone would call me back and they did, I've been happy with everything.'*



Comments were made about agency services and the experience of contacting them:

*'Because I really struggled to get information, I'd tried a couple of agencies and no-one could give me info or I couldn't get through – you were excellent and called me back.'*

Any comments made about an individual agency or area trends are referred to the agency concerned and this proactive and timely feedback has been welcomed by agencies and consortia. For example, First4Adoption had been informed by an adoption agency that they had children with particular ethnic backgrounds looking for adopters. When

we subsequently received a call enquiring about adopting children of that particular ethnicity we gave the caller the details of the agency. Unfortunately, the caller called back and was informed by the agency she had to give lots of personal information before they would answer her question. First4Adoption contacted the agency to provide this feedback and ensured that further contact was made with the caller.

Nevertheless, First4Adoption is not a complaints channel for adopters. If adopters have a complaint about any adoption agency, they are referred to the agency complaints mechanism and Local Authority Ombudsman.





## Year one successes

While the service has been fully operational for just nine months it is already having a tangible impact. From a sample of 48 service users between April-July 2013 who indicated they were happy to be contacted by First4Adoption for a follow-up study, two callers have already been approved as adopters and are waiting to be matched. A further nine callers are now prospective adopters and have started the Stage Two adoption assessment process. In addition, 28 had contacted either a local authority or a voluntary adoption agency and 9 had attended an information session. Although the sample is small this suggests that the service is working in terms of directing serious potential adopters to agencies that are ready and waiting to accept them. First4Adoption will continue to survey its service users in the future and will report on future evaluations in due course.

## Key learning

### What have we learned from working with potential adopters and mystery shopping?

- Potential adopters calling our information line report that they are still turned away by adoption agencies. The key learning from this is that more can be done by some adoption agencies to provide a welcoming response to potential adopters at a local level.
- E-mail is becoming a more popular form of communication and some adoption agencies are less effective at responding using this medium at present.
- Potential adopters want to feel unique and that their concerns and questions are being addressed. Adoption agencies can give potential adopters a sense of being valued by addressing their specific questions.

- Prospective adopters want information about adoption and post-adoption support in a form convenient to them. For example, they welcomed the Adoption Passport.
- They want reassurance about the process and that what their agency is telling them is correct. They felt that First4Adoption is a useful independent resource and provides verification of this information for them.
- Adoption agencies benefit from ensuring that initial enquiry channels can cope with demand and are clearly signposted e.g. on their websites.
- For example, if adoption agencies are unable to handle existing levels of caller enquiries, they should address this before undertaking additional adopter recruitment activity or ask First4Adoption to handle the calls through its bespoke service. This dedicated telephone service has been used successfully by 28 adoption agencies over the past year.
- The sector can make more use of First4Adoption. For example, by using its Mystery Shopper and bespoke call-handling services on an on-going basis for to support specific recruitment campaigns.





# Sector, policy and media communications

## Working with adopters and the adoption sector

First4Adoption has been supported by, and equally has itself supported, the government's adoption reform programme by communicating key announcements to the sector and feeding into the work of the Adoption Implementation Group. These announcements have been strongly correlated with increased enquiries to the First4Adoption information service and use of our Agency Finder to refer enquiries onwards to adoption agencies. This has enabled us to provide an effective way of supporting the whole sector to benefit and support adoption policy and process reforms.

January 2013	First4Adoption launched national information line – 0300 222 0022 First4Adoption Twitter account launched
February/March 2013	First4Adoption attended and presented at all regional reform programme workshops, introducing the service and the recruitment challenge. Supported LGBT Adoption & Fostering Week.
April 2013	First4Adoption launches <a href="http://www.first4adoption.org.uk">www.first4adoption.org.uk</a>
May 2013	Adoption Passport launched
June 2013	First4Adoption Facebook page launched
July 2013	New Two Stage adoption approvals process introduced. National Customer Care standards launched by First4Adoption Digital Adopter Eligibility Guide launched
August	E-learning working group consisting of adoption agencies set up
September/October 2013	First4Adoption launched myth busting leaflets for agencies  Supported Infertility Week, attended Fertility Show and attended Alternative Parenting Show to reach audiences with a higher propensity to adopt (reference Kindred)
November 2013	First4Adoption supported National Adoption Week and its own media campaigns generated 81.7 million opportunities to see/hear positive messages about the need for more adopters. First4Adoption handled 165 calls and 5,038 individuals used our online services that week.
December 2013	Adoption map launched receiving much media coverage and an increase in enquiries to our online and telephone services <a href="http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/adoption-map">http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/adoption-map</a>

## Getting the message out about adoption

First4Adoption has carried out a number of very successful national media campaigns that were widely reported in the national and local media, raising awareness about adoption and generating enquiries to its telephone and online services. For example, First4Adoption received 9,286 unique visitors to its website on one day following its media campaign about the launch of the Adoption Maps in December 2013. Other of our leading media campaigns that have helped to raise awareness about adoption and to generate enquiries from potential/prospective adopters have included:

- 1 In 7 Would Adopt – new figures show (First4Adoption launch)
- Men More Likely To Adopt Than Women – new figures show (Father’s Day)
- Adoption Passport launched by First4Adoption
- Religious People More Likely To Adopt – new figures show (launch of First4Adoption/Home for Good partnership)
- Busting Myths About Who Can Adopt (National Adoption Week 2013)
- Which Regions Are Most Likely To Adopt – new figures (National Adoption Week 2013)
- Adoption Maps launched by First4Adoption

As well as busting adoption myths and raising awareness generally about the urgent need for more adopters via the mainstream media, First4Adoption’s media campaigns have also been targeted at prospective adopters with a higher propensity to adopt. For example, reaching LGBT, (single) parents and religious audiences, via targeted PR campaigns. During its first year, we have worked on campaigns to raise awareness and bust adoption myths with key partners able to reach these groups including: Mumsnet; New Family Social and LGBT media; Home for Good and faith media; infertility groups; and single parent websites. We have also worked closely with several adoption agencies that have provided us with adopter case studies so that we could secure positive media stories about adoption and mentions in the media of First4Adoption and the adoption agency concerned.

First4Adoption has a very active social media channel via Twitter and Facebook and uses these effectively to raise awareness about adoption, provide prospective adopters with up-to-date information and to publicise adoption activities carried out by other adoption organisations e.g. adoption information evenings, National Adoption Week and LGBT Adoption & Fostering Week. In the first year, nearly 800 people have become Twitter followers of First4Adoption and we receive regular posts on our Facebook site, including enquiries about adopting.



# The adoption passport: a support guide for adopters

Children adopted from care can have ongoing needs, and you and your child may benefit from support. This is the support adopters in England may be entitled to:

## For your child...

Children adopted from care have priority access to schools, which means that your child should be able to attend whichever school you think best meets their needs ([www.gov.uk/schools-admissions](http://www.gov.uk/schools-admissions)). From September 2014, they will also be entitled to free early education from the age of two ([tinyurl.com/first4early](http://tinyurl.com/first4early)).

If your child needs extra support, you can ask your local authority to assess their needs for adoption support services (see page 2). If you think your child may have special educational needs you can ask your local authority to assess these needs too.

## For you as an adopter...

Many adopters are entitled to adoption leave and pay when their child is placed with them ([www.gov.uk/adoption-pay-leave](http://www.gov.uk/adoption-pay-leave)). The law is changing to make this entitlement more similar to maternity and paternity leave pay, and it will include the right to take time off when you are meeting your child, before they move in with you.

Adopters may have priority for council housing ([www.gov.uk/council-housing](http://www.gov.uk/council-housing)). If you are living in council housing and claiming Housing Benefit or Universal Credit while waiting for a child to move in you can also apply for funding (Discretionary Housing Payments) so that you are not penalised financially while you have an empty spare room.

You are also entitled to a summary of your child's health from his or her local authority's medical adviser before he or she is placed with you, and to a life story book to help your child understand his or her early life.

## Adoption Support Services

Local authorities provide and fund a range of support services for children adopted from care. These support services can include:

- counselling, information and advice
- help with behavioural, attachment and other problems
- money e.g. to help with special care needs, or for former foster parents
- help with contact between an adopted child and his or her birth family
- meetings and events to enable groups of adopters and adoptive children to get together
- training to help adopters to meet the needs of their adoptive child
- short breaks for an adopted child with another carer
- help where an adoption breaks down.

Access to these services depends on your circumstances but you can ask for an assessment at any time, no matter how long after the adoption.

## Support Services Advice

Your local authority will have an Adoption Support Services Adviser to help you access adoption support and other specialist services, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. The NHS commissions health services to meet the needs of adopted children, and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence will produce new guidance so that your GP will understand the problems you may face. The Adoption Support Services Adviser's details should be available on the local authority's website.

Every adopter is entitled to an assessment of their adoption support needs, but local authorities do not have to provide support in response to an assessment. Which services you are able to access will depend on your circumstances. Future changes to the law will mean that local authorities must tell adopters about adoption support services and their right to an assessment, and will give those who receive support a choice about how that support is provided, either by a local authority or through a 'personal budget' to purchase services from a voluntary adoption agency or adoption support agency.

If you want advice on adoption support you can also contact one of the many adoption support organisations, such as Adoption UK ([www.adoptionuk.org.uk](http://www.adoptionuk.org.uk)) or the British Association for Adoption and Fostering ([www.baaf.org.uk](http://www.baaf.org.uk)), or read the e learning materials soon to be on the First4Adoption web site which will explore the effect of children's experiences on their development and the services available to help them.

## Which local authority?

The local authority that places the child with you is responsible for assessing your adoption support needs for three years after the adoption. After three years it becomes the responsibility of the local authority where you live (if different).

## Comments and complaints

If you are unhappy with the support provided by your local authority, or with the time taken to carry out an assessment, you can complain under the Local Authority Complaints Procedure. Thereafter if you are not satisfied you may be able to refer your complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman ([www.lgo.org.uk](http://www.lgo.org.uk)). You will also soon be able to raise general concerns with the new Champion for adopters, foster carers and special guardians.

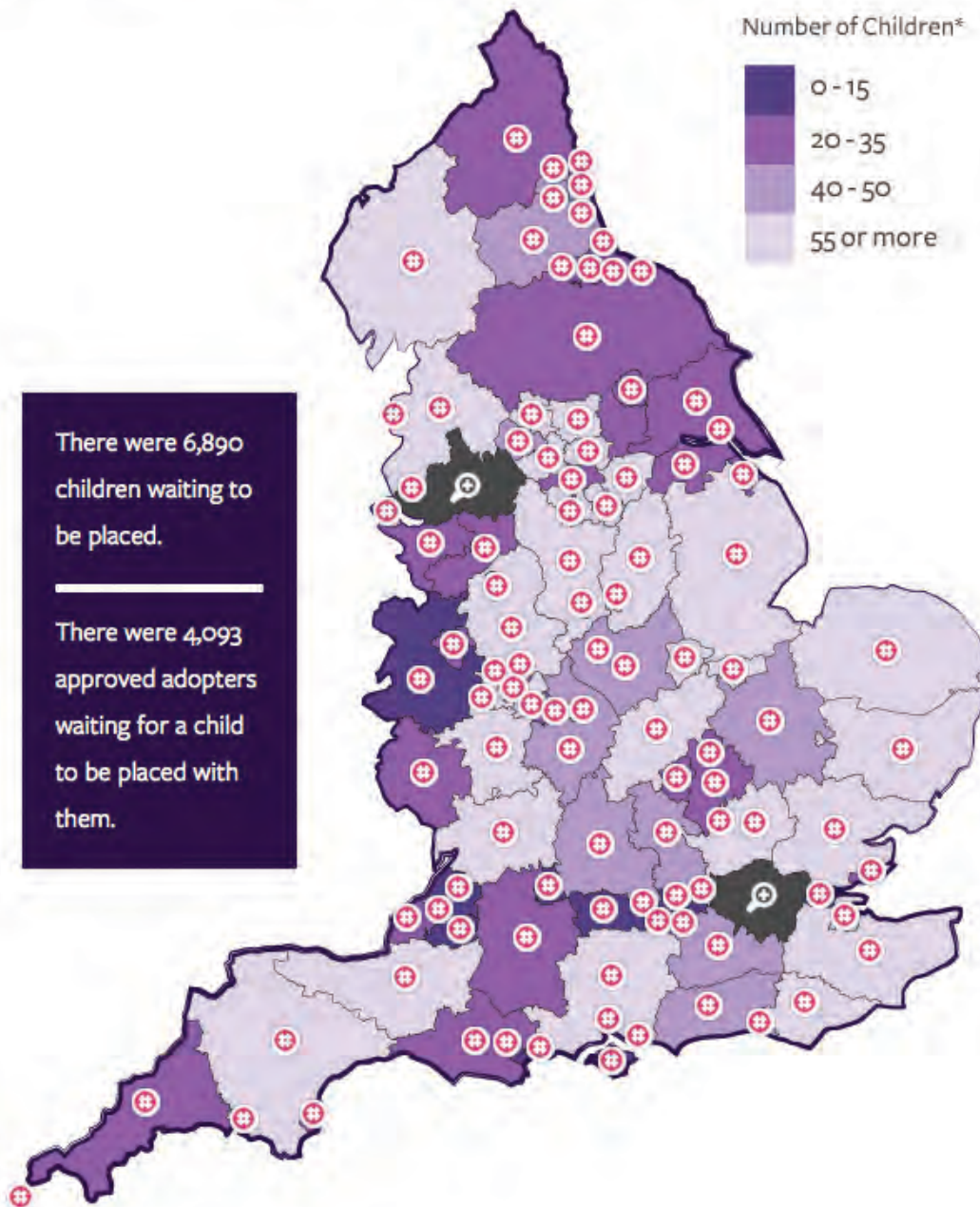
**FIRST 4 ADOPTION** is the dedicated information service for anyone interested in adopting a child in England. It is managed by Coram Children's Legal Centre, Coram and Adoption UK, and supported and funded by the Department for Education.

- Call First4Adoption: 0300 222 0022
- Visit our website: [first4adoption.org.uk](http://first4adoption.org.uk)
- Follow us on Twitter: @First4Adoption

Supported by



This interactive map shows the number of children waiting to be placed within each local authority adoption agency in England. Click on the icon in your area to find out more about your authority.



## Adoption Map

First4Adoption has helped create new infographics based on data from the Department of Education to enable adopters to gain a greater understanding of the distribution and levels of adoption need and delivery across the country.

## Results and learning

First4Adoption has provided a channel for announcing important changes or updates about the government's adoption reform programme and, as the national adoption information service, it is best placed for this role.

This work, along with co-ordinated communications it has carried out with the Department for Education, has benefitted all regions through increased referrals to adoption agencies via the First4Adoption agency finder. The Department's use of its Twitter account has provided particular benefit in raising issues beyond the immediate adoption sector. For example, the Department for Education's social media channels reached over 6 million Twitter accounts when it carried out a joint communications initiative with First4Adoption about the launch of the Adoption Maps in December 2013.

First4Adoption has focused on providing information in a format and style that is adopter-led. For example, it devised customer care standards for adoption agencies that would ensure a higher standard of care for potential adopters making enquiries, and provided this free for all adoption agencies.







## Customer service: supporting the sector to meet the needs of would-be adopters

A driving imperative to the formation of First4Adoption was the appreciation that adopters are a precious resource for the many children waiting. Previous research by Adoption UK has shown that up to a third of potential adopters experienced what they considered to be difficulty in entry into the system. First4Adoption is working to help ensure that everyone with the potential to adopt a child in England is fully supported to start the adoption journey so that many more complete it.

Adopters report that their experience when contacting agencies has been inconsistent and on occasion can be discouraging. Sometimes this is a factor of staff availability and other pressures on resources. Sometimes it is a case of lack of planning and anticipation of adopter need.

The National Customer Service standards were therefore developed and distributed by First4Adoption to support all agencies in ensuring that their service meets need and that the sector as a whole offers a consistent and effective service to all those who might be able to adopt.

It is a key priority for First4adoption to ensure that its service and resources support adopters and enable agencies to support adopters, and that all its resources are available free.



### Resources for agencies and would-be adopters

First4Adoption has developed a range of resources to support agencies, increase consistency of customer standards and prevent duplication of cost. All are available free to agencies. Examples of how our resources have supported adopters and agencies include:

- Presentations given at all Adoption Reform regional seminars and key conferences
- Agency information support on Two Stage Process Presentation at adopter recruitment workshops for adoption agencies
- Adopters' Step by Step Guide
- Handling initial enquiries guidance – see appendix 1

# FIRST 4 ADOPTION

## Customer Care Standards

The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), Adoption UK, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), and the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) consider that the following customer care and service standards represent good practice and encourage all agencies to observe them.

### Our aims:

- To ensure that there is a positive welcome for all who may be able to care for children in the care system.
- To increase the number of prospective adopters able to meet the needs of children in care.
- To speed up the process of adoption whilst ensuring that it is effective and supportive for children and adults.
- To embed best practice in customer service across the sector.



### Commitments:

- To respect and value you at all times
- To provide accurate and useful information
- To manage all information in line with the Data Protection Act
- To treat you with sensitivity and empathy
- To listen to you and take your feedback on board
- To be polite, courteous and professional
- To respond to your enquiries in a timely manner
- To provide responses to your enquiries which are clear, accurate and easy to understand
- To ensure all services are accessible and easy to use
- To apologise when we get things wrong and work with you to put them right
- To offer the opportunity for you to explore/share experiences with those who have successfully adopted.

These standards are endorsed by the Department for Education, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), Adoption UK, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), and the Consortium for Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

# Becoming an adopter: step by step

Finding out if adoption is right for you can be difficult so we've prepared the following guide to help you make those first steps. We will show you how to choose an adoption agency and give you ideas on what questions you might want to ask to help you make the right decisions along the way.

## Am I eligible?



### Take our interactive test to find out

Many more people can apply to adopt a child than you might realise. If you are single; unmarried; aged over 40; gay or straight; actively practising religion; unemployed; renting your home; married or in a civil partnership; or if you have a disability. You can adopt a child from a different ethnic background to your own. Take the test ([www.first4adoption.org.uk/first-steps-intro](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/first-steps-intro)) or call the First4Adoption information line (0300 222 0022) to find out if you can apply.

## Is Adoption Right For Me?

This can be the hardest thing to decide and to help you reach this decision we've compiled the following checklist.



### Talk to people

You'd be surprised how many people have adoption stories to share



### Read about Adopters real life experiences

It's a good idea to [read widely](http://bit.ly/13CogrI) (bit.ly/13CogrI) about adoption, especially about other people's experiences ([www.first4adoption.org.uk/who-can-adopt/success-stories](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/who-can-adopt/success-stories)), when starting to think about whether adoption is the right option for you. Many adopters blog about their day to day experiences sharing the ups and downs of being a parent and this can help you envisage how your situation might be.



### Find agencies in your area and attend information sessions

Agencies run adoption information sessions and we recommend that you attend a few. Find out which agencies operate in your area by calling us (0300 222 0022) or search our [online database](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/find-an-agency) ([www.first4adoption.org.uk/find-an-agency](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/find-an-agency)).

These events are friendly, informal events that are usually planned group sessions (but you can arrange a 1:1 with an agency if you wish). These sessions provide a great opportunity to find out more about how the agency operates and will begin to give you an idea of whether it's the type of agency for you. In addition you will probably get the chance to speak to adopters. Prospective adopters often find contact with people that have been through the process extremely valuable so we recommend that you prepare some questions in advance to help you build your own personal adoption picture and give you an idea of what to expect. Questions may include:

- What made you want to adopt?
- Did you know what age child you wanted to adopt?
- What made you think of adopting siblings/ Did you consider adopting siblings?
- What support have you needed? (wider family, friends, professional)
- What contact have you had with the birth family? Was this difficult?



### Find out about the children

You may want to find out more about the children that need adopting. More details about their backgrounds and statistics on the children in care can be found here ([www.first4adoption.org.uk/being-an-adoptive-parent/about-the-children](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/being-an-adoptive-parent/about-the-children)).

## Supporting refinement of service

First4Adoption provides free support to agencies in assessing and addressing their service delivery, complementing any local or national initiatives. For example, the network of recruitment champions, and the adopter recruitment training programme.

The services available this year are:

- Mystery shopper
- Digital/website reviews
- Call handling for campaign/agency support

## Mystery shopper: initial findings

Since April, First4Adoption has offered a mystery shopping service to all adoption agencies. The standard mystery shopping offer is where we review an agency's website to determine if it is accessible, informative and being utilised as a recruitment tool. First4Adoption also undertakes three mystery shopping telephone calls. The agency can stipulate when they want the mystery shopping to occur and can provide scenarios for the calls – equally the agency does not have to provide this data. First4Adoption plans when the mystery shopping assessment will take place and once completed will provide a full report detailing any learning and recommendations for the agency.

First4Adoption has received 26 requests for mystery shopping, 12 mystery shopping assessments were completed within 2013 with the remainder taking place over 2014.

The results showed that customer service was extremely varied across adoption agencies. First4Adoption undertook 33 mystery shopping calls, attended 5 information evenings and reviewed 11 websites for the 12 agencies. Two of the agencies were above average, 6 were average and 4 were below average. The mystery shopping exercises highlighted that there is a wide variation

in the level of customer service across the adoption sector and more work needs to be done to improve this across the board. This also highlights the potential waste in focusing on recruitment if agencies do not have their level of customer service right or are handling initial enquiries ineffectively.

The two agencies who were assessed as above average as part of the mystery shopping provided exemplary service on all occasions hence they achieved ratings 'above average'. They provided a warm, professional service tailored to the individual needs of each enquirer and their websites were engaging and a good useful resource for potential adopters.

First4Adoption are able to come and talk to agencies about how to deal with initial enquiries, improve customer service and how we can support your agency. First4Adoption worked with one local authority and provided a training session for their adoption team about First4Adoption and customer service standards and are helping them to review and develop a new website.

## Learning to improve service effectiveness

First4Adoption has had some very good mystery shopping experiences where agencies were welcoming, dealing with individual enquiries and providing the correct and informative advice. Consistent with previous research, the learning from the less positive mystery shopping assessments shows:

- If you advertise a phone number/email address, make sure there is someone to answer it or a clear message letting enquirers know what the alternatives are and particularly that callers can contact First4Adoption.
- Cherish each enquiry – recognise what a big step it can be for people to make their first phone call and don't put people off with



social work language or with presumptions; an enquiry is a service for a caller and not an assessment of them.

- Don't ask for lots of personal data immediately – listen first, understand what the enquirer needs. Through mystery shopping we've recognised how intrusive it feels to be asked your name, address, date of birth, ethnicity, etc. when you just want some basic information.
- If giving information to a caller, make sure it is correct. It is all right to say you don't know, and to pass the caller to a social worker or to First4Adoption which can answer more questions – enquirers to First4Adoption have repeated inaccurate information they have been given by agencies.
- Let people know they can make enquiries with different agencies before choosing to apply to just one.
- Offer other sources of information – remember to signpost to First4Adoption, and other adoption websites.
- Remember to offer the Adoption Passport and Customer Care Standards in information packs.
- If not currently able to recruit due to capacity issues, make sure enquirers get a clear message i.e. don't tell them to come back in a month if they are still not able to proceed. Signpost to First4Adoption (and do let us know).
- Before an agency embarks on a recruitment campaign ensure you have the facilities to deal with all initial enquiries – do not recruit if you do not have capacity to answer the phone or respond to emails – so as to ensure that no enquirer is turned away due to lack of availability of service.

## Further service development support

If you would like to book mystery shopping for your adoption agency or customer service/initial enquiries training please contact Gemma Gordon-Johnson – [gemma@first4adoption.org.uk](mailto:gemma@first4adoption.org.uk)

## Call handling for campaign/agency support

Since November 2013, First4Adoption has taken all initial enquiry calls for Lambeth, Yorkshire and Humber consortium of adoption agencies and West London Adoption and Permanence consortium of adoption agencies. Together, this means the service is supporting 28 adoption agencies.

First4Adoption can offer a dedicated telephone number for agencies, consortia or for any specific campaign, at a low cost with the added benefit that all staff answering calls are fully trained in handling adoption queries. A tailored response is offered that names the agencies on behalf of whom we are taking the call, and a detailed report provided to the agency on a regular basis. First4Adoption is a new resource for each agency or consortia that wish to use it.

# National recruitment development: rising to the challenge

## Market size, distribution and propensity to adopt (Kindred)

In order to support the development of First4Adoption and to contextualise the reform programme, the Department commissioned research by Kindred to verify the propensity to adopt among adults in England. This was published in March 2013 and showed that one in seven in the population would consider adopting. This varies by region.

The key findings from the research are:

- There could be up to 1.67 million people who say they are 'fairly likely', 'very likely' or 'certain to' consider adopting.
- There could be up to 4.6 million people who would say they are 'fairly likely', 'very likely' or 'certain to' consider adopting at some point in the future.
- A key audience has been identified as a priority target, totalling up to 3.6 million adults in England. The findings suggest that, within this group, 658,000 people feel they are very likely or certain to consider adopting at some point in the future.

- There is significant overlap between people's barriers and motivations to adopt, and their barriers and motivations to foster.
- Individuals are motivated to adopt or foster for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of children themselves and society as a whole.
- However, many people are being held back by their perception of:
  - The process of becoming an adopter
  - The experience of adoption itself and their ability to carry it out successfully
  - The effect an adopted or fostered child would have on their own life and that of any existing children they may have

First4Adoption used this to amplify messaging in support of adopter recruitment and new national channel development, including support to National Adoption Week. During National Adoption Week, First4Adoption publicised the regional data from the research gaining widespread local and national media coverage.

Region	Percentage	Number of local people
Greater London	7%	390,000
West Midlands	5%	154,900
North-West	5%	218,400
East Midlands	4%	116,600
North-East	4%	66,100
East	3%	103,600
South-East	3%	154,300
Yorkshire & Humber	3%	100,800
South-West	3%	90,300







### CHRISTIANS HELD BACK BY ADOPTION 'MYTHS'

People of faith are among the most likely to adopt or foster, but are being held back by adoption 'myths', according to new research carried out on behalf of the Department for Education.

#### People of faith should not fear discrimination

spokesperson Catherine Downley says: 'As part of the process, people have their support networks assessed - being part of a faith community can work in people's favour.'

Research found that more than half of those in England who say they are 'certain' or 'very likely' to adopt a child describe themselves as 'actively practising a religion'. However, many religious people don't come forward to adopt because of myths about who can adopt, claim national adoption information service, First4Adoption and the church-based campaign to promote adoption and fostering, Home for Good.

The two organisations say that actively religious people, while being more likely to consider adopting or fostering, conversely often wrongly believe that their faith will prevent them being approved.

'In general, that is a myth,' said adoptive parent and foster carer Knob Kandiak, executive director, churches and one of the leaders of the Home for Good campaign. 'We've met hundreds of people of faith who are adopting and fostering. With the Home for Good campaign, our door is being knocked down by local authorities - there's no conspiracy to keep Christians out.'



Talk Pregnancy Baby Child Education Life & Style Food Money

### Mumsnet Talk

Talk: Customise | Unanswered messages | Getting started | Acronyms | FAQs  
Threads: Active | I'm on | I'm watching | I started | Last 15 minutes | Last hour | Last Day

#### Topics > Mumsnet Q&As

Start new thread in this topic | Flip this thread | Refresh the display

➤ Add a message

This is page 1 of 1 (This thread has 76 messages.)

Please note: This topic is for Q&A discussions arranged by MNHQ. If you have questions about the site and how it runs, please do post in our Site Stuff topic. If you'd like to explore Q&A opportunities, please do feel free to mail us at sales@mumsnet.com.

#### Q&A about adoption with First4Adoption's Head of Service, Gemma Gordon-Johnson - ANSWERS BACK (76 Posts)

RachelMumsnet (MNHQ) Fri 12-Apr-13 16:24:59

Add message | Report | Message poster

We're running a Q&A this week with First4Adoption, the new information service for anyone interested in finding out more about adopting a child in England. If you have a question about your suitability to apply to be an adoptive parent, or if you want to know where to begin the adoption process, First4Adoption's Head of Service Gemma Gordon-Johnson will be on hand this week to give you the information that you need. Post your questions by lunchtime on Monday 22 April and we'll post the answers up on Monday 29 April.

There are more than 4000 children waiting to be adopted in England. Recent research shows that 1-in-7 people would consider adopting but they are held back by a lack of information and myths about who can adopt. First4Adoption is run by the charities Coram Children's Legal Centre, Coram and Adoption UK, and funded and supported by the Department for Education (DfE).

### Welcome to your preview of The Times

## Religious couples fear discrimination when they apply to adopt



Martin and Theresa said their faith was not an issue when they came to adopt

Ruth Goodall Religion Correspondent  
Published at 12:01 AM, November 13, 2013

Religious people are more likely to adopt a child than non-religious people, but many fail to come forward because they believe they will be discriminated against as a result of their faith, according to new research.

Cookies on the ITV website  
ITV websites use cookies. By continuing to browse the site you are agreeing to our use of cookies. For more details about cookies and how to manage them, see our cookie policy.

itv Player Shows Guide News Sport More

News Regions Topics Entertainment Meet the team Top news

- Back to news home
- Govt funding relief for A&Es
- Nuts rejects Co-op modesty bags
- May accused of report 'cover-up'
- Judge and lawyer investigated
- Mums 'feel work discrimination'
- Great Train Robbery 50 years on
- Adoption agencies cash boost
- Shoppers use app to buy in store
- BoE makes interest rates pledge
- Obama cancels Putin meeting

### 'Passports' to speed up adoption

A guide for would-be adopters listing benefits and support has been published by the Government amid concerns that hundreds of thousands are turned off by the process.

3:28 AM, FRI 03 MAY 2013

#### 4.6 million would consider adoption in the future

There could be up to 4.6 million people in England who say they would consider adopting at some point in the future, research has shown.

A study commissioned by the Government found that many people are being held back from adoption or fostering due to concerns about the process of being approved.

Under new plans to overhaul the adoption and fostering system:

- There will be a two-stage approval process for adopters, which the Government insists will make the system swifter and mean the majority of adopters are approved to within six months
- A "fast-track" system for previously approved foster carers and adopters
- Legal obligations on adoption agencies to refer would-be adopters to the Adoption Register within three months of approval
- The plans will aim to make sure that the information on children waiting to be adopted is kept up to date

UK - Adoption

## Guide for would-be adopters

Ministers published a new guide for would-be adopters today amid concerns that hundreds of thousands are turned off by the process. The Government said its "adoption passport" will set out the support available for those who want to adopt a child. The move is part of an ongoing bid by the Government to improve and speed up the adoption process due to concerns that children are waiting too long to find a home. Latest figures show children in England

are left in care for nearly 21 months on average before being adopted. In some areas, youngsters are forced to wait almost three years before moving in with an adoptive family. The new "passport" is expected to set out the help that adopters could be eligible for, including paid adoption leave, priority access to social housing, priority admission for school places and support services such as counselling. It will be available on the First4Adoption website.



waiting for too long  
at adopters could be eligible for, including paid g.  
website.  
- in many cases over two years - for the  
pters have been dissuaded from offering  
age more people to adopt, and making it



## First4Adoption's contribution to National Adoption Week

First4Adoption carried out a number of media campaigns for National Adoption Week with the intention of communicating the following messages:

- More people are needed to adopt one of the 4,600 children waiting
- We need to bust the myths that persist around who can adopt
- The adoption process is now quicker and easier
- First4Adoption is the go-to place for information about adopting
- Who are the people most likely to adopt by region

First4Adoption's media campaigns were widely covered by national, regional and faith media. This included an interview on ITV West News, numerous interviews with local radio stations across England, national newspaper coverage (The Times and The Telegraph) and coverage on prominent news websites (eg Yahoo News and The Huffington Post). As a result of the media campaigns carried out by First4Adoption and the positive media coverage it secured during National Adoption Week, over 81.7 million people had the opportunity to see or hear about First4Adoption and its campaign messages. First4Adoption's

Twitter activity reached 527,383 Twitter accounts and it gained 100 new followers, and our Facebook page posts reached 1,061 people.

There was a dramatic increase of 300% in the number of people contacting First4Adoption's information line – which received 165 calls during National Adoption Week (excluding calls to our two consortia's and Home4Good lines). This compares to 61 calls received in the previous week. First4Adoption website had 5,038 unique visits during National Adoption Week compared with 1,968 unique visits in the previous week.

## Segmentation

Further analysis also identified the segments of the population with the highest propensity to adopt and First4Adoption has therefore led the use of this material to achieve national focus and media coverage, and to develop specific new partnerships to support the sector in addressing these audiences. For example, by creating a partnership with the Church-led Home for Good campaign to encourage more religious people to consider adopting. We achieved widespread media coverage in the national and faith media about the launch of a joint telephone service for faith communities run by First4Adoption for Home for Good.

Segment	First4Adoption Development
<b>Religion</b>	Home4Good national partnership – official launch Adoption Sunday (year campaign)
<b>Gay</b>	Alternative Parenting Show, GScene, Pride Life, supporting LGBT Adoption & Fostering Week
<b>Infertility</b>	Fertility Show, presentation patient support group
<b>BME</b>	What's On Guide aimed at BME audiences
<b>Mums</b>	MumsNet Q & A
<b>Dads</b>	Dadzclub, Dad.Info

## National marketing development and future plans

These segments identified describe attributes and addressed barriers, but not motivations to adopt, in order to develop for more refined means to grow the 'market' of adopters. First4Adoption has therefore commissioned further insight research to drive forwards national recruitment of adopters. This is the focus of future plans which will support and be communicated to the adoption sector throughout 2014:

- Insight Research workshops – London 7th March, Birmingham 10th March and Manchester 14th March. To book your place contact Gemma Gordon-Johnson – [gemma@first4adoption.org.uk](mailto:gemma@first4adoption.org.uk)
- Full e-learning package – 31st March
- Recruitment Manager appointed to support agencies with adopter recruitment
- National TV series with call-handling by First4Adoption– April
- Resources section on website for adoption professional
- New creative and channel partnerships to support adopter recruitment: Summer 2014 and delivery of these in October







# Appendix 1:

## IMPROVING RESPONSES TO INITIAL ADOPTION ENQUIRIES

The aim of this paper is to consider existing good practice and make suggestions for improvements in adoption agency responses to initial adoption enquiries. This paper demonstrates and supports agencies in basic aspects of customer service that are the bedrock of any effective recruitment or marketing activity or campaign, it supports the need for agencies to improve their basic customer care to prospective adopters before encouraging more adopters to maximise conversion. Figures from AdoptionUK research showed that up to a third of approved adopters experienced what they considered to be difficulty in entering the 'system' and were turned away at their first call/contact. This paper is informed by recent research by the University of East Anglia, commissioned by BAAF Success factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social worker managers and marketing officers and experience of First4Adoption - National Adoption Gateway gained through feedback from enquirers to the service's information line, and as a result of 'mystery shopping' exercises.

First4Adoption has set out five practice points, with a tight focus on the customer experience on first contact, rather than on wider marketing messages and recruitment practice. However, it is important to note that handling initial enquiries is just one aspect of adoption agencies' overall marketing and recruitment processes and should not be considered completely in isolation.

We would recommend reading the University of East Anglia's research report (mentioned above) to put these practice points in context, while bearing in mind that there is limited feedback from potential adopters within it. A key message from the research is that marketing is not a 'bolt-on' function; recognise that the way initial enquiries are handled is an integral part of the overall marketing of an organisation.

While marketing activity is needed to highlight the need for adopters and encourage enquiries from potential adopters, the response they receive when they first make contact with an agency can also be influential in determining whether the potential adopter will feel encouraged, or discouraged, from pursuing their interest. First4Adoption has gained experience of this from direct communication with potential adopters who contact our information service, and through our mystery shopping exercises. Mystery shopping is carried out at the request of adoption agencies, and involves different individuals ('mystery shoppers') contacting adoption agencies to make enquiries as potential adopters. The mystery shoppers then provide feedback to First4Adoption which is shared with the agency that has requested the service.

## Practice point 1: Focus on customer care - recognise the enquirer's needs

*'I thought long and hard before calling them, but they just seemed so uninterested and I didn't know whether it was worth making another call. You've been friendly and encouraging, I feel so much better now'* (caller to F4A October 2013)

It seems obvious, that an initial enquiry should receive a polite and courteous response, and it is unlikely that any adoption agency would fail completely on this. However, adoption enquiries may need more than a standard courteous response. Making an initial enquiry, whether by phone, email or web, is a very big deal for the enquirer who is dealing with their own uncertainties and insecurities. They need an empathetic response that recognises this. Through mystery shopping carried out at agencies' request, First4Adoption has recognised how intrusive it feels to be asked for name, address, date of birth, ethnicity, sexual orientation and more, when wanting to find out about adoption. An empathetic response is particularly necessary where enquirers raise issues that place doubt on their readiness to proceed to assessment. Progress towards adoption may be a lengthy journey, and the enquirer's 'potential' as an adopter may initially be very uncertain. However the deeply personal and significant nature of the enquiry needs a careful response, and well-handled may result in an individual returning at some future point with better prospects of adoption, or pursuing adoption with a different agency, or in any case feeling less negative about adoption in general. Enquirers should never be 'put off' without offering alternative support and a listening ear – e.g. signposting to First4Adoption.

Key points from the recent research:

1. The agency needs to 'cherish the enquiry'.
2. The person responding to an initial enquiry should understand the significance of this for the enquirer, who may be on a 'gradual journey' towards adoption. Enquirers will typically have done much research and soul searching before approaching an agency. They often approach an agency with a sense of excitement and anxiety.
3. Listen first. Welcome enquirers warmly and answer their questions and concerns before questioning them or imparting information.
4. Consider training in customer care to help first line staff to understand and empathise with enquirer perspectives.

To which we would add:

5. Choose carefully the point at which you seek personal information, as this can feel very intrusive. If you must seek personal data during an initial enquiry, it is better to request this at the end.
6. Respond warmly and with empathy to all enquiries, regardless of whether the enquirer is likely to be ready to proceed to assessment. An 'unlikely' candidate may be approved by a different agency, may return in future better prepared, or if not, may need support to come to terms with the reasons – and can be signposted to First4Adoption..

*'I spoke to someone at ...(adoption agency)... they were very nice but they said they don't cover my area, and they suggested I give you a call... I'm glad they did'* (caller to F4A October 2013)

All enquiries are unique they have different motivators and different emotional drivers, for example someone approaching adoption after failed fertility treatment will be in a different position than someone who is approaching adoption for the second time – it is imperative we recognise this at their initial contact. Equally, those who are single or gay may approach adoption with some intrepidation because of their own circumstances. First4Adoption can conduct customer service training for your agency upon your request, this can be tailored to your specific agency and or needs.

## **Practice point 2: Accessibility – make access points clear and easy for potential adopters to contact you, and keep them up-to-date**

Marketing, advertising and recruitment activity may be wasted if it is not clear to potential enquirers how to make contact with an adoption agency or they have difficulty getting in touch. Many agencies encourage enquiries via their website and there are good examples of engaging and informative web pages.

*'Nice clear presentation of adoption information with good use of brand colours for navigation purposes.'* (Mystery shopper assessment, adoption agency website)

A range of access channels (website, phone, email) helps make the service accessible to a wide range of people whatever their preferred contact method. However, feedback from First4Adoption's mystery shopping highlights that some websites are confusing, with an array of different possible entry points to the adoption service, choice of telephone numbers and sometimes broken website links.

Key suggestions:

1. Recognise that potential adopters may attempt to make contact in a variety of ways. Check that websites have consistent contact details and that links to webpages and enquiry forms are working and connect to the correct web page. If email is a difficult channel for you to manage do not advertise an email address as a method of communication.
2. Try a variety of search terms, from the home page of your main 'corporate' website as well as internet search engines such as Google.
3. Offer clear information about options to make contact by phone, or via website or email. Include opening times and what to expect if making contact 'out of hours'.
4. Some agencies invite potential adopters to visit in person, if so be clear about when/where this is available.
5. Keep web enquiry forms simple, asking for the minimum of personal information necessary. Avoid multiple page forms.
6. Check that third parties who may circulate your details at events or support groups, have your correct details. In particular check that your listing with First4Adoption is correct and up-to-date at <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/find-an-adoption-agency/>

7. Include a link to First4Adoption as an external source of information for potential adopters who may leave your site still uncertain whether to make contact with you.
8. Add a link to your site which directs prospective adopters to take the check if they are eligible at <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/first-steps-intro/>

*There are a couple of issues around navigation, there is a little inconsistency in how the pages are presented in the left hand navigation in terms of knowing where you are on the site which in turn helps you find information again on revisiting the site. (Mystery shopper assessment, adoption agency)*

First4Adoption understands and appreciates the constraints that some adoption agencies face when amending, changing and updating their websites. First4Adoption would encourage you to include the following as a minimum; details of your information events, case studies from your adopters and contact details. In terms of general information about adoption you can always link to First4Adoption especially for information about the adoption process, busting myths, who can adopt and about being an adoptive parent. First4Adoption are happy to assist and or comment on any website reviews agencies are undertaking and happy to offer free mystery shopping service for adoption agencies – if you need assistance do contact [gemma@first4adoption.org.uk](mailto:gemma@first4adoption.org.uk)

### Practice point 3: Responsiveness – ensure that each enquiry receives a timely response

*'I fired off several emails last week – I've heard nothing back from any of the agencies I contacted' (caller to F4A Information Line, November 2013).*

This will seem an obvious point. However it is worth considering how responsive your service really is. If a call is made out of hours, at the evening or weekend, what response is provided? If an email is received, who responds to it and how long does this take? Mystery shopping feedback has shown a wide variation. These include emails that receive no response, telephone calls that are not returned, and voicemail recorded messages that appear to indicate that the enquirer has called the wrong number.

Following on from practice point 2, if an enquiry can reach the service at a number of potential access points, then each access point needs to provide a clear and consistent response. If there is a preferred method to access the service, then enquiries can be steered towards this, however if a range of enquiry channels is offered (phone, web, email) then each needs to be responded to.

Key suggestions:

1. Set up auto-responses, clear messages on telephone voicemails, emails and web forms, letting enquirers know that they have reached the service, whether they need to contact again during set times or, if a call back/ response is offered, the timescales to expect a response.
2. Provide signposting on voicemail and auto-responses, to other relevant sources of information eg your website and First4Adoption, so that enquirers with general



questions can get a response regardless of your capacity.

3. It may also be relevant to inform enquirers of alternative ways to reach the service and whether you have a preferred method or these would receive a quicker response (eg auto-replies can direct to website information, or a voicemail message can include 'if you would like to attend our information event this is on....'). However not all enquirers will be able to access every method, and any channel offered must be responded to.
4. If the front line call handlers pass information to social workers to request a call back, ensure your processes are efficient and that the call is returned.

It is imperative that adoption agencies offer responsive services; we all have a collective responsibility to ensure we are available to deal with all enquiries that are received. When we are unavailable an enquirer knows where they can go for information and when you will be able to handle the enquiry. First4Adoption received a call and the caller said 'I waited 6 months for a call back, they never called, I felt I was left in limbo with nowhere to go'. We must ensure our the initial enquiry is cherished and guided through the process.

### **Practice point 4: Informative – provide clear information that enables the enquirer to understand the process, their readiness to proceed and what the next steps are.**

It is important to recognise that enquirers will have different needs at initial enquiry stage, some want to ask a specific question, some are generally researching about adoption, some are ready to proceed and want to access the process as quickly as possible. Relevant information at an early stage can help enquirers to self-select their route to access the service, to judge whether they are able to apply to adopt, to better understand the process and know how to take the next steps.

Websites are important sources of information for initial enquirers, for general information about adoption and for an understanding of the local picture and process as well as links to national organisations and information.

Feedback from mystery shopping indicates that callers want a warm and empathetic response generally, and also want to reach knowledgeable staff who can respond to their questions with authority and professionalism. Lack of consistency and lack of accuracy of information was another issue highlighted.

There is a real art to providing information to prospective adopters that is realistic, for example about the needs and background of children, while remaining positive and encouraging. The best telephone responses in our mystery shopping exercises were from staff who were sensitive to the caller's needs, knowledgeable and honest in their replies and who also reinforced positive messages about adoption throughout the call.

This does not mean that all enquirers need to reach a social work 'expert' immediately, but that enquiry handlers are confident and familiar with processes, customer care and core information and able to recognise and arrange for a more expert response when needed. Being able to signpost enquirers to other sources of information is also invaluable – particularly First4Adoption who can answer all general initial enquiries.

#### Key suggestions:

1. Ensure that front line enquiry handlers can provide clear, accurate information and are knowledgeable about their service, the adoption process and timescales.
2. Know what your 'frequently asked questions' are and provide consistent responses - check that your website and information pack is consistent with current best practice and with the answers given to enquirers who contact your service by phone or email.
3. Avoid 'blanket bans' and ensure that your criteria for issues such as housing/bedroom space, age of children, length of time after fertility treatment, are consistent with best practice nationally to avoid creating new 'myths'.
4. Remember to include the adoption passport (available from First4Adoption's website) and local sources of help and support for adopters in information packs.
5. Consider training frontline staff in delivering information, focusing on customer care, clarity, and checking understanding. First4Adoption is happy to provide training on this.
6. Alternatively, signpost all enquirers to First4Adoption at an early stage so that initial questions, worries and any issues that may impact on their readiness to proceed can be discussed.

7. Recognise the value that a knowledgeable, sensitive and consistent expert response can provide and encourage social workers to devote time and skill to initial enquiries when needed.
8. Ensure that if you are not recruiting or the enquirer is outside your catchment area or doesn't meet your criteria, that they are signposted to First4Adoption.

Providing information to prospective adopters at the initial stage is fundamental, firstly to ensure they have the correct factual information about adoption but also to enable them to decide if adoption is right for them and when the right time is to proceed with their adoption journey. For example, during one mystery shopping call First4Adoption was informed the adoption process took 6 weeks, we need to ensure we are managing expectations of prospective adopters and giving clear, concise and realistic information.

### Practice point 5: follow-up

*'We thought we'd started a process with them, but then it all went quiet and nothing happened... now we're not sure where we stand' (caller to F4A Information Line, November 2013)*

It is important to recognise that enquirers may contact several adoption agencies, and in fact are encouraged to do so, at First4Adoption we ensure callers are given a number of agencies details, as part of their research into adoption and to find an agency that they are happy to apply to and that is ready to take their application. The disadvantage of this is that time and resources may be put into initial enquiries that don't result in applications to adopt. This is not a wasted effort, if it results in better informed prospective adopters

and improves the national recruitment picture. However agencies will want to consider how to balance their resources including following-up initial enquiries.

For some adopters, their journey towards adoption is a gradual one and they may seek information and choose not to proceed, and make a decision about adoption months or even years later. What matters to enquirers is that they receive the service promised and that if they are offered a follow-up, this happens; otherwise their confidence in the service can be damaged.

Feedback from First4Adoption's enquiry line and mystery shopping indicates that enquirers don't necessarily need to be proactively followed up, so long as the information provided to them is clear and spells out how to proceed to the next step and what is expected of them.

In practice, agencies generally make at least one follow-up contact after sending an information pack or attendance at information event. Agencies also make choices about whether to follow up 'dormant' enquiries, perhaps after several weeks or months.

Key suggestions:

1. Ensure that potential adopters, who have made contact with you, understand the next steps in the process and whose responsibility it is to initiate the next contact.
2. It is also OK not to follow-up proactively – as long as enquirers know that the next stage is in their hands, this part of the process is led by them. It is lack of clarity, or promised follow-up that doesn't happen, that causes uncertainty and confusion.

3. Consider whether to follow up 'dormant' enquiries. If these are followed up, ensure that this is done sensitively and with respect for enquirers' privacy, recognising that they may have decided against adoption for various reasons.

First4Adoption stress the importance of following up calls, we all know how frustrating it is when someone says they will call and they do not, this is an important part of providing customer service to anyone making an initial enquiry.

In conclusion, it is worth stating that efficient responses to initial enquiries should go hand in hand with the human element. The adoption agencies that have performed best to date in First4Adoption's mystery shopping exercises were easy to contact, responsive and informative – but this alone was not enough to generate the highest praise, which invariably went to agencies where individual members of staff had shown empathy and genuine efforts to respond to the needs of the enquirer.

*'I felt as if I was being processed. Adoption's not a product – it's about human beings' (F4A mystery shopper, December 2013)*

*'The whole call was an extremely 'positive experience', the information I was given was clear and informative, but with a sensitive delivery – the person I spoke with had a real sense of how I was feeling and my concerns. They provided me with lots of information that did not seem overwhelming; and there was no pressure to provide personal information – a really professional and informative conversation' (F4A mystery shopper, January 2014)*



First4Adoption would encourage agencies to ensure that they examine their services from a customer's perspective particularly at initial enquiry stage. If your calls are handled by duty, contact centre or individual social workers within adoption agencies – it is vital you know whether individuals get a good service when they first contact you. Some callers to First4Adoption comment on 'well I ended up going with the agency that picked up the phone and sent me the information I needed to further my enquiry', some also comment that they have waited considerable lengths of time for agencies to come back to them, this leads them to go elsewhere. If you do not have capacity to handle new enquiries then forward them to First4Adoption so they are not lost in the system – the adoption sector needs to ensure customer service is embedded into practice at initial enquiry stage.

First4Adoption is happy to review your initial enquiry process via mystery shopping to help improve and remove blockages for prospective adopters. First4Adoption can provide customer service training and guidance for your adoption agency – do get in touch we are here to help.

**FIRST 4 ADOPTION**  
0300 222 0022

49 Mecklenburgh Square, London WC1N 2QA

Telephone: 0300 222 0022  
Email: [helpdesk@first4adoption.org.uk](mailto:helpdesk@first4adoption.org.uk)  
Website: [www.first4adoption.org.uk](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk)