

## Adopted children need closer ties to their birth families, according to national enquiry

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Professor Brid Featherstone. Credit: University of Huddersfield

Research headed by a University of Huddersfield professor has caused an influential social work organisation to call for a major review of UK adoption law, so that children who have been adopted could retain much closer contact with their birth families.

In England, Scotland and Wales, direct contact - more commonly allowed in Northern Ireland - is rarely an option. But the standard alternative of "letterbox contact" is often poorly supported. Adopted children denied contact can experience serious identity issues and when they are free to seek out their birth families at age 18, adoptive parents can be ill-prepared for the emotional consequences.

These are among the factors that emerged during an enquiry titled *The role of the social worker in [adoption](#) - ethics and human rights*. It was commissioned by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and led by Brid Featherstone, who is Professor of Social Work at the University of Huddersfield, alongside Professor Anna Gupta of Royal Holloway University of London, with Sue Mills of Leeds University as research assistant.

After interviewing large numbers of social workers, birth family members, [adoptive parents](#) and adopted people plus lawyers and other professionals, the team issued a wide-ranging report, launched in London. Now, it is planned to hold similar events around the UK, so that interested parties throughout the country have a chance to hear and discuss the issues.

One of the events will be in Huddersfield, which provided many of the case studies that informed the 44-page report. The document makes five key recommendations, and these have all been accepted by the BASW in its published response.

One recommendation was that the current model of adoption should be reviewed, and the potential for a more open approach considered. This led the BASW to call for "a review of adoption law in all countries of the UK, into whether the assumptions about severance of connection to families of origin is ethical".

Also, it is questioned whether the "assumption of severance" is sustainable in the age of internet and social media, making it much easier for adopted children to trace birth families.

Professor Featherstone says that the debate about more open adoption is very important, but instead of legislative change her preference would be for a change in culture and a case-by-case approach involving social workers.

"You should start from the assumption that direct contact with birth parents ought to be considered," she said. "Usually, adopted children go searching when they get to 18 and it can store up trouble if they haven't had previous contact, enabling them to see their birth parents for good or ill.

"They can stop having fantasies about these wonderful parents that they were stolen away from, or equally that they were absolutely terrible people. It's about their identities. Adopted people told us that identity is a lifelong issue for them. Where do I come from? Who do I belong to?"

The background to the report and the BASW response is that adoption has been promoted strongly by governments across the UK, particularly in England, as a "gold standard" approach to children who are considered at risk within their families of origin and who have been taken into care.

Around 5,000 children are currently adopted annually from care across the UK and this nonconsensual adoption has sparked disagreements between judiciary and government, criticism from many birth parents whose [children](#) have been adopted against their wishes, and ethical debate within the [social work](#) profession itself.

Professors Featherstone and Gupta have made a series of recommendations - all of them accepted by the BASW - on topics such

as the part played by poverty and inequality in the use of adoption and they call for government to collect and publish data on the economic and social circumstances of families affected.

It is also urged that the role of social workers and the human rights and ethics surrounding adoption should be explored. In response, the BASW has called on local and national government to support "the ongoing development of professional autonomy, independence and confidence in social work practice and decision making" and to "support better ethical and [human rights](#) practice in improving the experience of all affected by adoption".

In addition to the launch of the BASW report, Professor Featherstone has joined her University of Huddersfield colleague Professor Paul Bywaters in giving evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Children, discussing research on the impact that cutbacks in local government expenditure have made on child protection services in deprived areas.

Provided by University of Huddersfield

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