Introduction

For the majority of children adopted from care in the UK, adoption confers legal security, loving relationships and a sense of belonging in the adoptive family. These benefits can help the child to recover from early adversity and provide lifelong reassurance and support. In most cases, however, adoption also means that the child must be moved from a trusted foster family that has provided a secure base, where attachment relationships will have formed, and where the child is feeling settled and secure. In addition, adoption often means that the child loses key relationships with birth family members, along with their identity as a member of their birth family community. Each of these losses can have a lifelong impact.

Contemporary adoption, therefore, should be underpinned by policy and practice that both support the parenting capacities of the adopters, *and* respect the child's previous relationships and identities, actively seeking to mitigate the inherent losses faced by adopted children and adults. With this principle in mind, this book focuses primarily on the practice associated with a key phase of the adoption process – that of supporting the child to move successfully from their foster home to their new adoptive family. Positive practice during the move will take into account how children of different ages experience and make sense of the move cognitively, and manage it emotionally, so that adults can offer the most appropriate help and support.

Most children are aged under five years when placed for adoption. They will usually have lived in foster care for 18 months or longer before moving to their new parents. In traditional adoption practice, children typically moved between 5 and 14 days (according to the age of the child) after meeting their new parents for the first time. After the move, children often did not see their foster carers again for a period of several weeks or months after placement, and for some there was no further contact, although some adopters chose to remain in touch. This model remains in use in some agencies, but in recent years, practice has been evolving in different ways across the UK. Current practice therefore reflects a range of timescales for the move to take place and a variety of plans for contact with the foster carer, both before the formal matching and after the placement day.

Research has highlighted the importance of the quality of the move for the well-being of the child and the future stability of the adoption (Selwyn *et al*, 2015; Neil, Young and Hartley, 2018; Neil *et al*, 2020). A substantial minority of adopters in these studies reported difficult

moves. Common difficulties included plans that were rushed or curtailed, stressful travel arrangements, and plans that were not child-focused and did not allow the child to come to terms with feelings of anxiety and loss. Both studies identified a statistically significant relationship between difficult moves and poorer adoption outcomes.

Additionally, there is professional uncertainty regarding whether or how contact with foster carers should be maintained after the move (Boswell and Cudmore, 2014; Meakings et al, 2018). Some agencies routinely plan a series of face-to-face and virtual contacts during the early days and weeks of the placement, diminishing in length and frequency. Others choose a more individualised approach, depending on the quality of the adult/child and adult/adult relationships. In some cases, a "clean break" with the foster family is felt to be necessary in order for the child to settle and build new attachments, although there is no research evidence to suggest that this is the case.

In summary, planning and supporting a successful move to adoption is a piece of social work practice that is recognised as vital for the future welfare of the adopted child. At the same time, there is professional uncertainty about how best to plan the move in a way that places the child's emotional needs at the centre, whilst also supporting the foster carers and the prospective adoptive parents.

In response to this situation, a practice development project took place between 2016 and 2018, at the Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia (UEA). This project was conducted by the authors and funded by the Sir Halley Stewart Trust (Neil, Beek and Schofield, 2018). Two local authorities (Norfolk County Council and the London Borough of Southwark) worked in partnership with the UEA research team to pilot an adapted approach to moving children to adoption, developed from published literature and stakeholder engagement. The research team examined the professionals' experiences of this adapted approach and gathered feedback from the foster carers and adopters involved in the project. This led to the development of the UEA Moving to Adoption model.

From the outset, the Secure Base model (Schofield and Beek, 2005, 2009, 2014a, 2014b) was seen as foundational to an area of practice that relies on an in-depth understanding of the impact of children's earlier adverse experiences on their emotional development and their difficulty in forming trusting relationships in foster and adoptive families. The Secure Base model is already well established in fostering and adoption practice, with a range of online materials available to support both training and practice development. However, the model had not previously been applied to moving to adoption practice, so this project was a valuable way of using a familiar attachment-based model of caregiving to support the development of the new UEA Moving to Adoption practice model.

During 2019 and 2020, members of the research team delivered face-to-face and online training on the model to a wide range of individual and regional adoption agencies (RAAs) across the UK. Some weeks after the training, the team offered a follow-up consultation with a key professional from each agency, and gathered feedback on issues that had arisen around the implementation of the model. This feedback helped the team to develop advice and guidance.

The UEA Moving to Adoption model builds on existing good practice for moving children to adoption. It is not prescriptive in determining specific timeframes or plans for these moves. Instead, the model is governed by a set of principles within which a range of practice might occur. This focus on practice led by underlying principles rather than fixed procedures means that the model is responsive to specific conditions (for example, where the foster family and the adoptive family live far apart) and the full range of placements (for example, children of all ages, ethnicities and abilities). The key principles of the model are also relevant to the variations in legislative frameworks, policies and procedures across England, Wales,[1] Scotland[2] and Northern Ireland.

Additionally, the key principles and much of the practice recommended by the UEA Moving to Adoption model may be helpful when planning other moves that children must make, for example, from short-term foster care to a long-term foster care or special guardianship family, kinship care in Scotland or to other family and friends settings.

This Good Practice Guide introduces and explains the UEA Moving to Adoption model. The guide begins by reviewing the key messages from relevant research. Chapter 2 explores the ways in which the UEA Moving to Adoption model is underpinned by the theoretical framework of the Secure Base model (Schofield and Beek, 2014a, b). Chapter 3 examines the social work practice associated with preparing the child, the foster carers and the adopters for the child's move to adoption. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 explain the three stages of the UEA Moving to Adoption model and provide examples of how it can be applied in a range of situations. The final chapter of the guide covers suggestions for implementing and sustaining the UEA Moving to Adoption model in social work practice. The chapter concludes by considering the support needs of professionals engaged in the complex task of moving a child to adoption.

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1   The UEA model is compatible with good practice guidance in Wales (see https://www.afacymru. org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Transitions-PG_E.pdf).

2   In recognition of the distinct elements of the Scottish legal system, advice for practitioners in Scotland is included throughout this guide. Appendix 3 provides additional information on practice within the Scottish legal system.

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this guide:

- The term 'adopters' will be used for approved prospective adopters, and may apply to either a single or a two-parent adoptive home.

- The terms 'foster carer' and 'foster carers' are used interchangeably, and may refer to a single carer or one carer from a two-parent household, or both carers from a two-parent household.

- The terms 'he', 'she' and 'they' are used interchangeably when referring to children.