

Scoping Study: Historic Forced Adoption

Introduction

Historic forced adoption refers to practices in the 1950s-1970s “which resulted in newborn babies being unnecessarily taken away from unmarried mothers and placed for adoption, without regard for the mothers' and children's needs or wishes”¹.

In January 2023, as part of a range of work on this theme, the Scottish Government commissioned The Lines Between (TLB) to conduct a scoping study to explore support services for people affected by historic forced adoption. The study aimed to:

- Identify existing support services in Scotland.
- Understand the guidelines and training materials for GPs and mental health professionals supporting people affected by historic forced adoption practices.
- Engage with people who have lived experience of historic forced adoption in Scotland and gather their views on what new or additional support services are needed.

This summary outlines the study findings, which are based on fieldwork with people affected by historic forced adoption (including mothers, adoptees and other family members) and stakeholders such as local authority representatives (the majority of whom were social work practitioners), post-adoption support services, academics and campaigners. A review of key literature was undertaken in the foundation stages of the research.

It is important to note that adoption policy and practice has changed since the 1950s-1970s, with more support and safeguards now in place for adoptees, parents whose children have been adopted, and adoptive parents.

This summary focuses on the findings about the support needs of people affected by historic forced adoption, specifically search and reunion, accessing records and the emotional and psychological impact of historic forced adoption. The full report covers wider findings about the lived experience of historic forced adoption.

¹ [Information about historic forced adoption](#). Scottish Government website. Accessed on 26/4/2023.

Search and reunion

People affected by historic forced adoption described the importance of searching for and reuniting with family members separated by forced adoption. Although this process can be traumatic for some people, tracing their child or family members is a positive experience for others. For parents, this can provide reassurance that the adopted person is happy and healthy. Adoptees told us that finding and meeting their parents, siblings and extended family members can improve their sense of identity and understanding of their origins.

However, this can be an emotional process, particularly if the other person cannot be found, has died, does not want to meet, or if the relationship does not develop as hoped.

Research participants identified support required throughout the process of searching for and contacting relatives, as summarised below:



Different aspects of support are available from various sources, and there was positive feedback about the existing public, private and third sector services. However, some research participants identified some inconsistencies, gaps and areas for improvement. They wish to have access to: clear guidance about searching for family members and the support available; enhanced emotional support during search and reunion activity; and support for people who access information through social media platforms and online commercial family-finding services to understand the information they find and decide what to do with it.

Access to records

Some interviewees explained that another motivation for accessing documents, besides search and reunion activity, is to help them understand the circumstances and events that led to the adoption. These include written records about the adoption, such as social work, NHS and court documents containing case notes and descriptions of meetings from the time of the adoption.

However, research participants identified various challenges in accessing records including: restricted access rights; records that have been lost, are illegible, incomplete or potentially inaccurate; and difficulties around legal jargon or stigmatising terminology.

Research participants identified gaps and improvements needed, including: practical help and guidance to find and understand records; enhanced emotional

support to help individuals process any upsetting information they find, and to deal with disappointment when records are unavailable or lacking detail; more time to review records; and ensuring people can photograph or photocopy records which contain information about them.

Emotional and psychological support

The severe emotional and psychological impact of historic forced adoption was emphasised by research participants.

For mothers, feelings of loss, guilt and shame have stayed with them throughout their lives. Themes in interviews with adoptees included difficulties with their sense of identity and belonging, and a profound emotional and psychological impact stemming from the experience of separation from their mother early in life. In some cases, individuals said their mental health had suffered with examples of anxiety, depression and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Research participants highlighted the need for more emotional support, advice and guidance, peer support, and creative and alternative therapies to help people deal with the emotional and psychological impact of historic forced adoption.

Emotional support, advice and guidance

Stakeholders identified a range of support needed to address the emotional and psychological impact of historic forced adoption, including:

- advice and guidance on the emotional impact of historic forced adoption; and
- intensive mental health treatments (such as talking therapies like counselling and psychotherapy) that deliver specialist treatment to support individuals with psychological or mental health issues. These services are delivered by counsellors, psychotherapists, psychiatrists or psychologists registered with a professional counselling body, such as COSCA (Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland), the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) or the British Psychological Society.

People with lived experience and stakeholders felt that both advice and guidance, and counselling and other therapies delivered by registered counsellors or therapists are important for people affected by historic forced adoption. We explore this issue further in our separate service delivery paper.

Interviewees who had accessed support from post-adoption support services and local authorities gave positive feedback, but some said they needed more intensive therapy or treatment.

More intensive counselling and therapies are available via NHS Scotland and private services. Some research participants had accessed this, but there were mixed reports about therapy experiences.

Participants noted that the quality of support depends on the understanding of historic forced adoption among GPs, psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists and counsellors. The consensus was that, in general, these professionals would benefit

from greater awareness of the impact of historic forced adoption. Crucially, we found no awareness among interviewees of any training or guidelines for GPs or mental health professionals related to supporting people affected by historic forced adoption.

Peer support

Peer support helps people build connections among those who are also dealing with the long-term impact of historic forced adoption and the emotional complexities of search and reunion attempts. It also provides vital advice, validation and acceptance.

We found no evidence of formal peer support groups in Scotland for parents and only a few formal groups for adoptees. However, the Scottish Government commissioned Health in Mind to develop a peer support service, launched in September 2023.

While few research participants had experience of formal peer support groups, many had joined or established informal groups and found these networks crucial. These include the Movement for an Adoption Apology, Scottish Adult Adoptee Movement and Group for Adopted People Scotland.

Creative and alternative therapies

A few research participants advocated for access to creative and alternative therapies, including art therapy, music therapy, drama therapy and hypnotherapy, to help mothers and adoptees address the emotional and psychological impact of historic forced adoption.

Research participants were unaware of creative or alternative therapies specifically for people affected by historic forced adoption, but a few said they accessed effective support through private therapists.

Other support needs

Some participants suggested other support needs and actions. These include:

- A memorial to the experiences of those affected by historic forced adoption and a commitment to ensure such cases never happen again.
- Education for people affected by historic forced adoption to help them understand and deal with the trauma it has caused.
- Introducing a 'tick box' in public services' systems and paperwork so professionals know when an individual may be affected by adoption-related trauma.

Barriers and challenges

Barriers and challenges to supporting people affected by historic forced adoption include:

- Ensuring services have the capacity and funding to support people affected by historic forced adoption.
- Costs associated with certain activities and services, such as fees related to accessing some documents required to trace family members, travel expenses to reunite with family members, and charges for private counselling and therapy services, which can be prohibitive.
- Reservations among some people about accessing support delivered by post-adoption support services, some of whom were involved in historic forced adoption.

Next steps

The next steps for the Scottish Government are to consider how to ensure the support needs of people affected by historic forced adoption are met. Key issues include:

- Ensuring that people have adequate support during search and reunion activities, especially emotional support.
- Supporting people to access and understand their records, again including emotional support.
- Enhancing the services available to help people with the emotional, psychological and mental health impact of historic forced adoption.
- Developing training for key professionals such as GPs and mental health workers to raise their understanding of the impact of historic forced adoption so they can support and signpost people more effectively.
- Monitoring and evaluating the peer support service recently launched by Health in Mind.

When considering next steps, the findings suggest it may be beneficial to engage with people who have lived experience of historic forced adoption to identify priorities and formulate action plans.



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