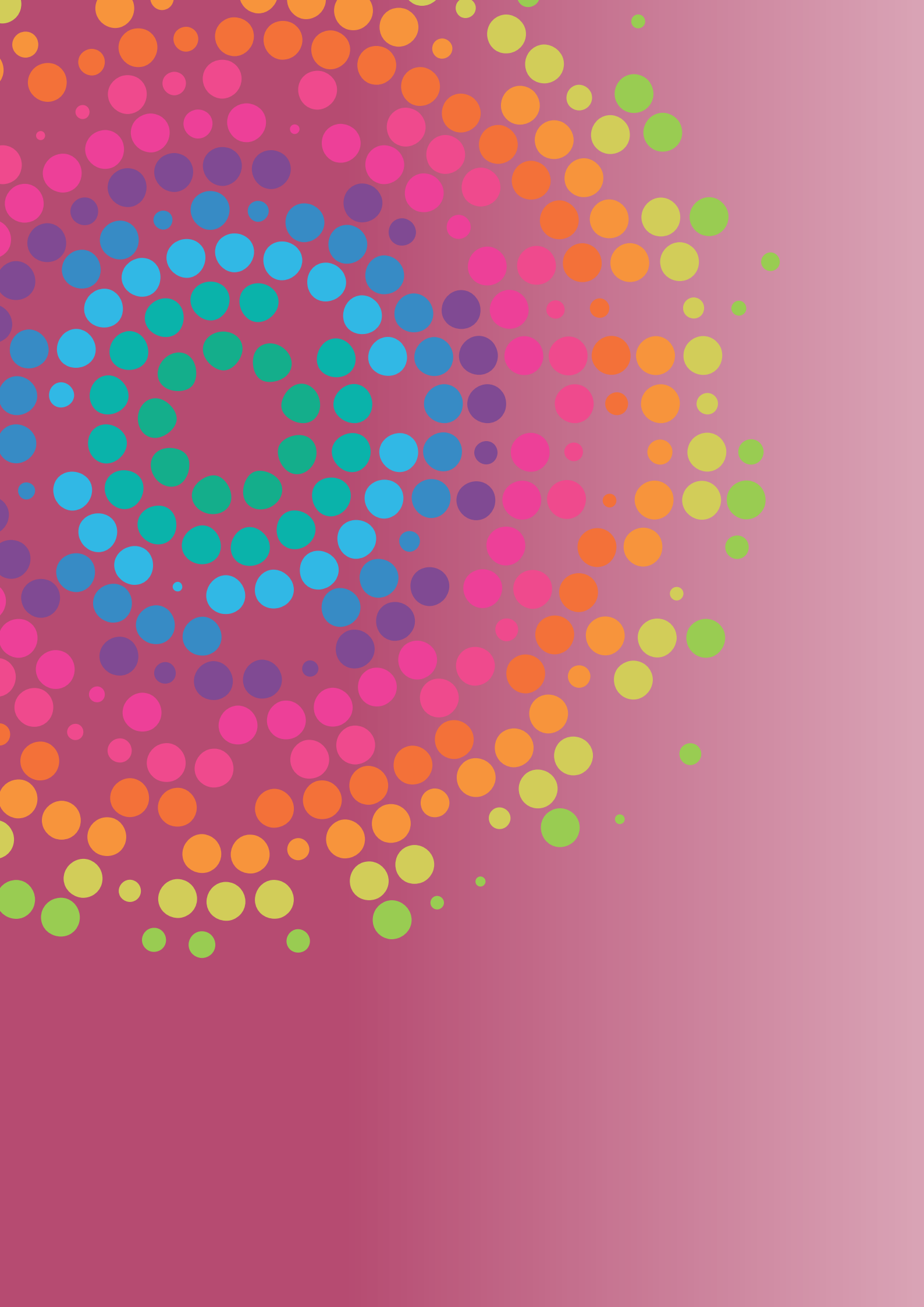




ÚDARÁS UCHTÁLA na hÉIREANN
THE ADOPTION AUTHORITY of IRELAND

Reflections on the
Irish Domestic
Adoption Process
1952 – 2022



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The Adoption Authority of Ireland wishes to thank each of the fourteen participants who contributed their time so generously to this study. We also warmly acknowledge the support of various adoption stakeholders and service providers who helped us to check facts and timelines while the report was being prepared. We take this opportunity to remember, with gratitude, Vivienne Darling, who was very supportive of this study and had expressed her interest in participating, prior to her death in 2020. Sincere thanks also to the family and colleagues of the late Christine Hennessey, who fully supported the inclusion of her voice in this report.



Foreword

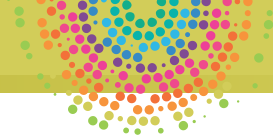
Adoption is a sensitive and complex process whereby a child not having been born to a parent or parents is incorporated into their family as if he or she had been born into it, severing all legal connections with his or her family of origin.

In Ireland, adoption has the very far-reaching effect of expunging all parental rights and duties of the natural parents in respect of the child. The adoptive parent or parents correspondingly become, for all legal purposes, the parent(s) of the child, with full rights and responsibilities invested in them. This “closed” or “clean break” type of adoption, however, is not universally favoured in that it may have negative implications for access to birth information and vindicating the right to identity. Secrecy is often regarded as an inevitable hallmark of “clean break” adoption. The complications that this causes, however, are manifold, especially for the adopted child wishing to learn more about his or her origins and meet his or her natural parents. The presence of such secrecy may, furthermore, serve simply to compound the stigma once thought to attach to non-marital births in Ireland. Society’s silence regarding an issue can, after all, so often imply social disapproval.

It is therefore not surprising that Irish adoption legislation has changed significantly since the Adoption Act 1952 commenced on 1 January 1953 by increasingly reflecting emerging best practice in respect of the adoption process. In this context, the importance of obtaining the perspectives of professionals/advocates and activists cannot be overstated. It is for this reason, amongst many others, that the significance of this report being conducted/published by the Adoption Authority of Ireland (“AAI”) is notable.

I would like to provide a very brief summary of the report and what the reader can expect. The report focuses on the views of a small selection of professionals/advocates and activists. It spans a 70-year period in Ireland’s legal adoption history. It provides a unique insight into how adoption has operated since its inception. Key findings include the persistent culture of secrecy; the salience of adoption-related information; and using personal agency to effect change.

The report highlights important legislative changes that impacted domestic adoption across the 70-year period. In particular, it evaluates the significance (from a legislative and practice point of view) of the Adoption Act 2010 (the “2010 Act”). The 2010 Act repealed all pre-existing legislation, overhauled the law relating to adoption and substantially modernised Ireland’s adoption process to reflect international best practice under the European Convention on Human Rights, the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption and the 2007 Revised European Convention on the Adoption of Children.

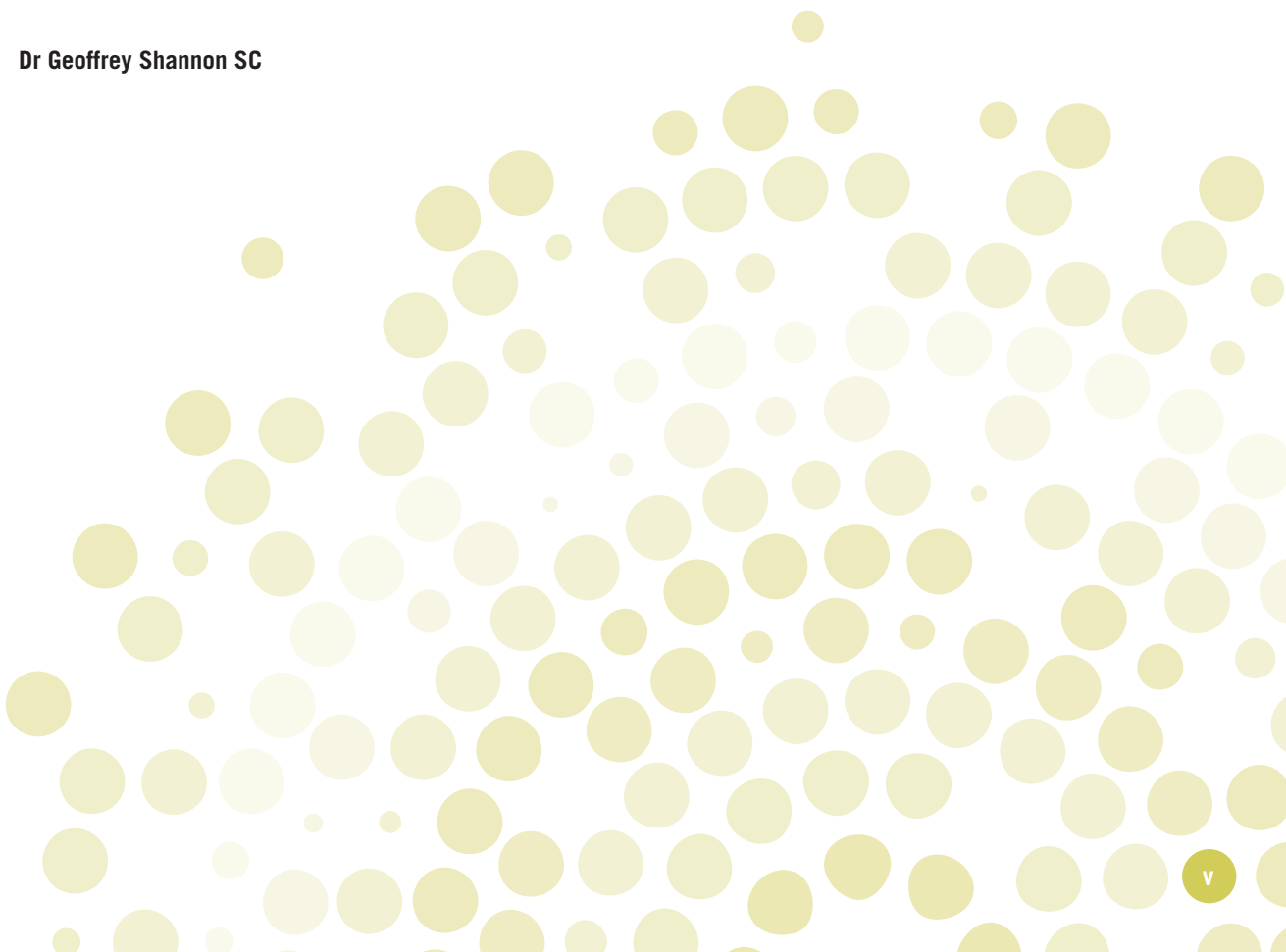


This report also provides an immensely helpful account of the efforts by multiple parties to introduce legislation providing for information and tracing. In 1983, the Adoption Board (the “Board”) highlighted, through its Annual Report, that it was receiving an increasing number of requests for birth information from adopted people. While, at the time, the Board sought to share what information it had, the information was typically scant. Demand for birth information continued to grow in the years that followed, the Board continued to highlight it as an issue, and in 2005 the Board established an Information and Tracing Unit and Register. The Register, known as the National Adoption Contact Preference Register (NACPR), was a voluntary initiative introduced by the Board and was a mechanism whereby parents of adopted children, their relations or people who were adopted could register their interest in making contact. It was limited, however, in that contact was subject to agreement by both parties. That said, while adoption itself was first legislated for in 1952, the legal situation regarding information and tracing in this jurisdiction remained static, despite changing public attitudes, increasing calls from activists and decades of debate until 2022 when the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022 (the “2022 Act”) was enacted.

Undoubtedly, the 2022 Act was a watershed moment in its provision of a legislative framework that facilitates robust information and tracing services. It is clear from this legislation that the right of a child to know the identity of his or her birth mother is now a statutory right which is not only protected by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, but which also enjoys constitutional status as one of the unenumerated rights guaranteed by Article 40.3 of the Constitution.

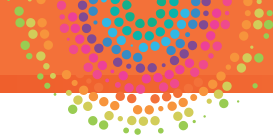
In the aftermath of significant recent legislation on adoption, we can look to the future with renewed hope in that we now have an adoption process which is clearly child-centred and increasingly rights-based.

Dr Geoffrey Shannon SC





Executive Summary



I. Background to the Report

This report explores the development of the Irish domestic adoption process over a 70-year period, from the perspective of 14 people who were involved in adoption, either voluntarily or professionally, for a prolonged time between the years 1952 and 2022. The purpose of this study was to gain nuanced insight from the reflections of different participants, all of whom had a long-term connection to domestic adoption in Ireland, on either a voluntary (through activism or advocacy) or a professional basis (service providers, social workers, solicitors, board members etc). Its main objective was to capture individual experiences of how adoption was facilitated, how it worked in practice, how decisions were made, and how it changed across that timeframe. The research for this report, including the participant interviews, took place between 2021 and 2022, prior to the enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act, 2022, which gave adopted people and birth relatives access to their birth information for the first time since 1952. As such, it captures a small number of personal reflections at a critical period in a complex history.

II. Method and Participants

The study set out to answer the following **research questions**:

1. What are the individual experiences of professionals and volunteers working in the area of domestic adoption in Ireland?
2. What were the main challenges of working in this field, and how did they change over time?
3. How did legislative and policy changes over the years impact the practice of domestic adoption?
4. How did these experiences differ pre- and post-the changes brought about by the Adoption Act 2010?
5. What issues do we need to consider in Irish domestic adoption going forward? What can we and other countries learn from Ireland's adoption history?

Each of the 14 participants took part in an in-depth individual interview, using a semi-structured interview schedule with a series of open-ended questions. The interviews were designed to

be flexible, to allow various issues raised by participants to be explored in detail. Participants were recruited via discussion with members of the AAI Board, current and retired executive, research subcommittee, and other research participants, and came from a wide variety of backgrounds. They included activists, allies, advocates, social workers, legal professionals, and Adoption Board members, many with careers spanning several decades. In most cases participants had multiple, differing roles across that timescale, and frequently added a number of relevant qualifications or extra areas of specialism as the years progressed. Four of the participants also had personal experience of adoption – two as adopted people, one as both a birth mother and an adopted person, and one as an adoptive father.

Participants could choose to be identified or de-identified. In the 12 “identified” cases, the raw interview transcript was subsequently edited and shaped into a narrative chapter, in an iterative, back and forth process between interviewer and participant. In the two de-identified cases, the data were not shaped into a narrative, but the raw transcript was reviewed and accepted by the participant. Raw interview data from all 14 participants were then analysed thematically using the framework set out by Braun and Clarke¹.

III. Report Structure

This report is in two parts. **Part 1** contains co-constructed² individual narratives. These are divided into 4 sections:

1. Getting started: the earliest days of legal adoption in Ireland
2. Shaping adoption practice: practical changes in a developing society
3. Demanding change: the era of allies, advocates, and activists
4. Looking to the future

Part 2 of the report contains two chapters. The first chapter details the findings of a reflexive thematic analysis which was conducted on the raw interview data from which the narratives were generated¹. The second chapter revisits the original research questions in light of the report's findings.

1. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).

2. For a detailed explanation of this process, a technical report is available.

IV. Key Findings

The findings of this report include 11³ narrative chapters which contribute personal accounts of the experience of domestic adoption from those who worked in the area on a professional or voluntary basis, a number of whom also had a personal connection to adoption.

The thematic analysis⁴ of interview data from 14 participants led to the generation of three themes, and a number of sub-themes, relating to domestic adoption in Ireland before the enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022⁵. They are set out below and are all conceptually connected with an overarching theme of control:

Theme 1: The All-pervading, Persistent Culture of Secrecy

From before its legal inception, a culture of **secrecy** was already a central tenet of domestic adoption in Ireland. As such, it permeated every aspect of adoption, and was deeply woven into the fabric of domestic adoption. Secrecy was highly valued in Irish society, and a network of people, institutions and organisations were involved in maintaining and perpetuating this culture.

Theme 2: Adoption-related Information is Power

Due to the legacy of secrecy, **information** about adoption became extremely hard to access, was strongly protected, and developed a high intrinsic value, which was consolidated by changing societal norms and legislation. From the moment the information was bestowed “secret” status, an imbalance of power was created between the party/parties who held the information and the party/parties who did not have access to it. Prior to the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022, the flow of adoption-related information was inconsistent, unpredictable and multi-directional, prompting some stakeholders to take steps to manage it, and re-route available information to those who needed it where possible.

Theme 3: Going the Extra Mile: Using Personal Agency to Drive Change

Working within this culture of secrecy and power imbalances at that time, it was notable that individuals invoked a sense of **personal agency to drive change** in Irish adoption. Participants frequently commented on how one individual, armed with progressive thought, sparked a change in practice. While activism in Irish adoption is not new, it was traditionally led by social workers, adoptive parents or other concerned parties. Since the early 1990s, however, the voice of the adoptee has come to the fore. Supported by advocates and allies, people personally affected by adoption in Ireland have been establishing their rightful position in the discourse around adoption, delineating their cohesive group via shared language, a kinship-style closeness and strong, strategic adoption activism.

In the last chapter of the report, the findings are discussed with reference to the initial research questions the report sought to answer. There has undoubtedly been significant change and progress in domestic adoption across this 70-year time frame. In terms of what can be learned from this study, it is clear that the culture of secrecy, endemic in domestic adoption from the start, must be acknowledged, and protected against in future. The Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022 represents a very positive step in this direction. The standardisation of documents, processes, and practices relating to adoption is essential, alongside the utilisation, by policymakers and legislators, of a pro-active, participatory approach when developing future domestic adoption processes and legislation.

3. Two participants elected to have a joint interview, and a joint narrative chapter. One additional chapter, related to Vivienne Darling, is based on a brief literature review rather than an interview. This was not included in the data or the thematic analysis.

4. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).

5. “Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.



Introduction

This study was conducted directly by the Research team, led by Dr Judy Lovett, at the Adoption Authority of Ireland. It contains co-constructed narratives, based on interviews with 14 people who worked voluntarily or professionally in the area of Irish domestic adoption between 1952 and 2022. It is divided into two sections:

I 11 chapters relating to 12⁶ individual participants

II Findings from a thematic analysis⁷ of the raw interview data; discussion of findings in relation to the original research questions.

I. Background to the Report

“Forgive me for saying so, but a cosy, comfortable book about the successes (of adoption) will represent an opportunity badly missed”.

“An adoptive parent”, quoted in “New Families: Your Questions on Fostering and Adoption Answered” by Charles Mollan and Laetitia Lefroy, 1984⁸.

The key principle underpinning adoption as it currently stands is that it is a service for children, not for adults. This principle is set out in Article 21 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption (1993)⁹, and in Irish adoption law and policy. At its core, the act of adoption involves a child being born to a set of biological parents, and then being raised by another parent or set of parents in a long-term, permanent arrangement. This is the reality of the phenomenon – this is what adoption is. The finer details of the adoption process – how it is implemented in practice, and what form it takes - vary hugely depending on when, where and how the adoption takes place. So too, does the wider meaning underpinning it. Adoption is strongly influenced by context – including the prevailing culture, policies and practices through which it is

implemented, and the time (historically) at which it takes place. By its very nature, adoption is sensitive. It can have many complexities. Globally, it has traditionally involved the movement of a child from a place of poverty or some other kind of (perceived) disadvantage to a place of proposed increased social, familial, personal or economic prosperity. Thus adoption is often born out of difficulty, or crisis, and proposed as a solution.

In recent decades, researchers have begun to seek a greater understanding of adoption and its impact on the child, birth parents and adoptive family. The study of adoption has been explored from myriad perspectives, underpinned by core theories from a variety of disciplines. Researchers have used qualitative and quantitative paradigms and a variety of research techniques in an effort to greater understand the phenomenon, all with the aim of improving future adoption legislation, practices and policies, to support those personally affected by it.

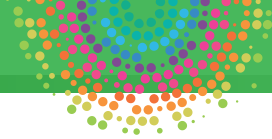
Two comprehensive reports concerning the history of domestic adoption provide essential background reading to the present report. Respectively they contain a detailed review of the policy and legislative changes in domestic adoption in Ireland, and an audit of the available Irish research on adoption. They were commissioned by the Adoption Authority of Ireland, conducted by Dr Valerie O’Brien &

6. Two participants elected to have a joint interview, and a joint narrative chapter. One additional chapter, related to Vivienne Darling, is based on a brief literature review rather than an interview. This was not included in the data or the thematic analysis.

7. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).

8. Lefroy, Laetitia, and Charles Mollan, *New Families: Your Questions on Fostering and Adoptions Answered* (Dublin: Turoe Press, 1984).

9. HCCH, *Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (The Netherlands, 1993). <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>.



Dr Sahana Mitra, and are available on the AAI's website (links below):

- “An Audit of Research on Adoption in Ireland 1952 – 2017” (O'Brien & Mitra, 2018)¹⁰
- “An Overview of Policy and Legislative Change in Ireland, 1952 – 2017” (O'Brien & Mitra, 2018)¹¹.

While the Adoption Act 1952¹² marked the start of legal adoption in Ireland, “adoption” of children had existed in practice in many forms beforehand. It was important that adoption was legislated for – in fact, legislation had been called for by many concerned parties in the years running up to 1952. Prior to this, the movement of children away from their families of birth in Ireland on a long-term basis was largely undocumented and informal. In addition to being informally “adopted” both within and outside of their families of birth, children were “boarded out”, fostered, or moved through various systems such as Mother and Baby homes, care homes and industrial schools. The legalisation of adoption in Ireland in 1952 sought to regularise and certify the adoption of children. Yet, as the legal domestic adoption process in Ireland began to develop, the society in which it was functioning, and which it was designed to serve, also underwent a period of rapid change.

II. Aims and Structure of this Report:

This report considers the Irish domestic adoption process between 1952 and 2022 from the perspective of a sample of individuals who worked in adoption during that time, either on a voluntary or professional basis. Its main objective was to capture individual experiences of how adoption was facilitated, how it worked in practice, how decisions were made, and how it changed across that timeframe¹³.

The sample consisted of 14 participants. Two of these participants chose to be de-identified, while 12 chose to be identified.

In all cases where the participant chose to be identified, once the initial interview had taken place,

the raw transcript of the interview was shaped into a narrative-style chapter. This took place via an iterative process (via repeated email, phone call or in-person conversations) between researcher and participant until a final draft was agreed upon. In the remaining two cases where participants chose to be de-identified, their raw transcripts were thematically analysed along with the rest of the interview data, and de-identified quotes were used in the explanation of these themes. These narrative chapters are presented in the next section, and they comprise the main body of this report. They are divided into 4 sections:

Section 1 “Getting started: the earliest days of legal adoption in Ireland”

differs from the other three sections in how it was developed. The first chapter looks at domestic adoption from the point of view of Anne Ronayne, a social worker who began working in the area in the mid-1950s. The second chapter in this section is a brief review of the work of Vivienne Darling (RIP) – the first person to publish research on adoption in Ireland from a social work and academic perspective.

Section 2 “Shaping Adoption Practice: Practical Changes in a Developing Society”

contains four narratives from Laetitia Lefroy, Kerry O'Halloran, Eileen Conway and Valerie O'Brien. While all four participants originally trained as social workers, the latter three subsequently specialised in different areas in later years. Taken together, all four provide unique perspectives on the experience of working in domestic adoption from the 1960s to the present day.

Section 3 “Demanding Change: the era of allies, advocates and activists”

covers a very unique period in Irish domestic adoption, from the 1990s to the present day. During this period, members of adoptee-led activist groups Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes and Martin Parfrey, and the allies and advocates supporting their cause, Katherine O'Donnell and Catriona Crowe, began to come to the fore and demand change in Irish adoption legislation from a human rights perspective.

10. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *Research on Adoption in Ireland 1952-2017* (Dublin, 2018). https://aai.gov.ie/images/Report_1_An_Audit_of_Research_on_Adoption_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.pdf

11. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *An Overview of Adoption Policy and Legislative Change in Ireland* (Dublin, 2018). https://aai.gov.ie/images/Report_2_An_Overview_of_Policy_and_Legislative_Change_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.pdf

12. “Adoption Act, 1952,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1952/act/25/enacted/en/print.html>.

13. A detailed account of the method, including recruitment, sampling, and development of the research instruments, is outlined in the technical report.

In **Section 4, “Looking to the Future”**, the first chapter is a joint interview with two social workers who had decades of experience in the Barnardos Post-Adoption Service¹⁴ at the time of the interview: Patricia White, and Christine Hennessey (RIP). The second narrative from the current Chair of the Adoption Authority, Orlaith Traynor, describes some of her personal experiences working in adoption to date, and her thoughts for the future of adoption in Ireland.

The narrative chapters, as outlined above, comprise the main body of the report, Part 1. They are followed by two further chapters, which comprise Part 2. The first chapter contains a thematic analysis¹⁵ of the raw interview data, while the second revisits the study’s original research questions.

It should be noted that, in the narrative chapters, the participants’ own choice of adoption-related language is prioritised. This has led to some differences in how particular people or agents in adoption are referred to. Examples include birth/biological/natural parent, adoption society/adoption agency, and use of the term “adoptee”. Furthermore, in some cases participants chose to use terms which may now be considered derogatory, in order to illustrate the feeling at the time. In these cases, such terms have been highlighted with italics or inverted commas, or are explained in the context of the particular paragraph.

All views contained in this study are the participants’ own, and do not reflect the views of the organisations for which they work/worked, or of their colleagues within those organisations

14. “Post Adoption Service,” Barnardos, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/post-adoption-service>.

15. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).

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Part

1

**Individual
Narratives**

Section 1:

Getting Started: The Earliest Days of Legal Adoption in Ireland

This section explores the earliest days of legal adoption in Ireland. The first narrative is from Anne Ronayne, a social worker who worked in an Irish adoption agency, Cúnamh, from the early 1950s until the 1990s.

The second piece is a brief overview of the published research of Vivienne Darling, former member of the Adoption Board. Having studied in TCD in the 1940s, Vivienne Darling pursued a career in social work and academia, and in the early 1970s she published the first known piece of research on adoption in Ireland from a social work and academic perspective. She was subsequently appointed to the Adoption Board.

Darling had agreed in principle to take part in this study, but sadly passed away in 2020, before fieldwork commenced. Therefore while all other participant chapters are based on interviews, Darling's chapter is a review of her publications already in the public domain.

Chapter
1

**Anne
Ronayne**

Anne Ronayne is a social worker who had over 40 years' experience working in Cúnamh, a large Catholic Irish Adoption Agency from the early 1950s until her retirement in the 1990s. Cúnamh was previously known as the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society of Ireland, or CPRSI.

1.1 Where It All Began: Early 1950s

Growing up in the 1930s and 1940s, I knew from an early age that I would like to do this type of work. I remember seeing files of children from an orphanage going out for walks. I was quite young at this stage, and I remember thinking it was terrible that these children had no family, and no parents.

There wasn't a degree for social work in the early 1950s. Instead, you did a two-year social science diploma course, and you had to be nineteen years old before you were considered eligible to start it. On that course, we had lectures from different people. During the course of the degree, I learned about the role of Irish adoption agencies in Ireland and the fact that legislation was expected. I knew quite well that I did not want to work in a hospital, which was one of the main routes for graduates of the course. Hospital work was so rushed. Adoption work was very different, it required a slower approach, and I felt it was more of a fit for me.

In those days "medical social workers"¹⁶ were called "hospital almoners"¹⁷. After my two-year Social Science Diploma, I applied to do the hospital almoners¹⁸ course - apart from it, there was very little else available to do. It took about fourteen months, and we did training in hospitals in both Ireland and the UK. At the end of that training, there was an assessment, after which they decided whether or not to award you the Institute of Almoners' Certificate or Diploma. Once you had qualified, you worked at a hospital with a white coat, and you had a little "Institute of Almoners" badge. The only place the almoners were employed were

hospitals, and almoners were considered a luxury. Eventually the name changed to "medical social worker"¹⁹.

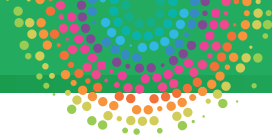
1.2 Adoption Work Post-1952

I started working in an adoption agency in the early 1950s, just after the first Adoption Act. I was delighted to get the job. I initially worked in foster placements, but soon my work became more about adoption. We now had the opportunity to review existing adoptions in light of the new legislation, as appropriate. That soon became my main function. The whole difficulty then, of course, was tracing birth mothers in a confidential way, so that nobody would know. At the time, I had the advantage that I would have been around their age. So, I could make an enquiry at their home address. I could say, *'oh I knew her somewhere, where is she now? I'd love to make contact with her again'*. It would look like we were contemporaries.

1.3 Social Stigma

The purpose of adoption was to give homes to children who otherwise would not have them. One could argue that birth mothers were forced by the attitude of society, so at that time they had very few choices outside of relinquishing their child. However, in my experience, we didn't sit the mothers down and say 'you have to sign these adoption papers'. From what I recall, many of them were so delighted that their children were getting what they believed to be "good" homes. We probably didn't give – and we hadn't time to give - consideration to this poor girl, who was effectively losing her baby through adoption. For many of the

-
16. For a detailed history of the development of the social work profession in Ireland, see Caroline Skehill, "Social work in the Republic of Ireland: A history of the present," *Journal of Social Work* 3, no. 2 (2003): 141-159. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173030032002>.
17. "The fundamental idea underlying almoner's work...[she is the person in hospital or health centre whose special care and duty it is to smooth the way of the patients and to give them any social help required to hasten their return to good health]" Tyrrell, Alma Brooke, "Almoners' Work in Ireland," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 41, no. 161 (1952): 33.
18. For more information on the work of Almoners, see Chris Nottingham and Rona Dougall, "A close and practical association with the medical profession: Scottish medical social workers and social medicine, 1940–1975," *Medical history* 51, no. 3 (2007): 309-336. doi: 10.1017/s0025727300001460. PMID: 17603656; PMCID: PMC1894864.
19. This happened in 1964. For more information, see Department of Health. *Committee on Social Work Report June 1985*. (Ireland. 1985). <http://hdl.handle.net/10147/246434>.



mothers - particularly girls who had gone to England when first pregnant, and then came back – their own parents would not have known they were pregnant. That was why they went to England in the first place - they did not want their families to know. At that time, the “higher up” the social scale you were considered to be, the greater the shame in having a baby outside marriage was. If a girl’s father was a professional, like a doctor or a solicitor, she absolutely would not want any of her family to know about it. Similarly, if, for example, a Garda got a girl pregnant, he’d be in terrible trouble with the Gardaí. If the girl worked somewhere like a bank, everybody around her would be very kind to her, and they would look after her, but she’d have to take a leave of absence for so long to conceal the pregnancy, and it wouldn’t be known why she had disappeared.

1.4 Working with the UK: “Pregnant From Ireland”

As an adoption agency, we did a lot of work with a number of the “Catholic Rescue Societies” in the UK. That’s how the referrals came to us. There was one Catholic Rescue Society in each UK diocese. The girls were called “PFI’s” – Pregnant from Ireland - and they were automatically assumed to be Catholic if they were Irish. I think the position was that if a “Pregnant from Ireland” girl presented to a hospital in the UK, the hospital staff felt the best outcome for her would be to return to Ireland through an Irish agency. All of these pregnant Irish girls were considered to be ‘extra’ in the UK, as they were putting additional pressure and strain on the UK system. So, the UK hospital staff were very pleased to ask these girls if they wanted to return to Ireland with the agency’s assistance. I imagine some of the girls didn’t want to come back to Ireland, but a lot of them agreed. For them, it was the best possibility of getting home quickly.

The birth mother would be offered total, complete and utter confidentiality. She would come back, and she would go through a Mother and Baby Home – usually whichever one was farthest away from her own home, for confidentiality. I have no other knowledge of Mother and Baby Homes, other than the girls we sent there. So a lot of them came home to Ireland prior to the birth, went to a Mother and Baby Home, and the arrangement was that we would try to place the baby for adoption within six weeks. From what I recall, the County Council paid for them – we would contact the Department of Justice and tell them where this girl was from, she would then have an arrangement with the county manager, and it was absolutely private. I recall that



At that time, the “higher up” the social scale you were considered to be, the greater the shame in having a baby outside marriage was. If a girl’s father was a professional, like a doctor or a solicitor, she absolutely would not want any of her family to know about it.



the mother’s care was paid for by the local authority in whichever Mother and Baby Home they chose. We gave the mothers a guarantee that we would get them out as close to six weeks after the birth as we could. So, typically, a mother would have gone to the Home two or three months before the birth, and then she would be out maybe six to eight weeks after the birth.

I think that the number who we supported to go to Mother and Baby Homes was probably very small, compared to all that went in. I remember that it was very important that the mother went into the home with a plan, such as placing the baby for adoption, if that was what she wanted to do. Naturally, I think the mothers hated parting with their babies. However, as I remember it they were also very relieved that the baby was getting a good home, and that nobody knew about their secret. I don’t think any of them went directly home to their families after the birth. I think they all went back to England, to institute a new life there.

I enjoyed my work and I found it fulfilling, but I didn’t analyse it in the moment. I had no time, none of us did. We just got on with it. There were so many babies, and we’d promised the mothers that we’d have them out in six weeks. It was extremely busy.

1.5 Adoptive Families, Birth Mothers, and Background Information

I had contact with the adoptive parents too. When prospective adopters approached the agency, I interviewed them a few times, then two of us would interview them separately - one social worker interviewed the father and one interviewed the mother - and we visited their home. Once the child

was placed, I visited about three times during the six month “probationary period”, as they called it. I visited the child within the first two or three weeks, I visited again halfway through the six months, and then I visited again around the end of the six months. So really, I was in touch with the adoptive families all the time.

I do not recall that there was anything like “seeking background information” about the baby in those days, probably because it was so early on in legal adoption. A lot of adoptive parents were very anxious about the baby’s background, and we didn’t tell them about the child’s or the mother’s history. Sometimes - not always, but sometimes - you would feel they were wondering ‘has the baby come from a “good” background?’ In many ways I think they didn’t want to know the details, and the birth mothers didn’t want to know about the adoptive family either. Sadly, I think perhaps they didn’t feel that they had the right to know.

We were required to keep in touch with the birth mothers. They could keep in touch with us for as long as they liked if they wanted to, but we had to contact them. First of all, they couldn’t give consent to have the child placed for adoption until the child was six weeks old, and we would try and place the child at this age. The child would be about six months in the adoptive home, and then after the six months we would contact the birth mother again to sign the final adoption papers. The adopters used to be really terrified that the child would be taken back by the birth mother during that time, before the papers were signed. It did happen sometimes. If a birth mother, at any stage during that six months, said that she wanted to take her child back, we did it, because that’s what the birth mother wanted, and that was set out in the legislation.

1.6 The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church gets an awful lot of negativity nowadays about their role in adoption. But I think, in their own way, they did what they could do. Having a baby out of wedlock was a terrible stigma at the time. People may say it was the Church that instigated that, and maybe it was, but that was the whole atmosphere in Ireland at that time - you weren’t supposed to have sex outside of marriage.

I think the Church is viewed very negatively, and for very good reasons in many ways. Yet, my experience was ok. When the girls first came back from England with us, prior to their babies being born, they were all interviewed as part of



I was conscious in the 70’s that there wasn’t the same secrecy, confidentiality, or shame associated with having a baby as there had been earlier.

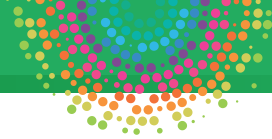


the process. If they went into a Mother and Baby Home, I’d go sometimes, or one of the other social workers, one of whom was a priest, would go and interview them there before the babies were born. Looking back now, I imagine those girls might have been terrified about being interviewed by a priest, but I never thought about that at the time. The girls always seemed to like him, he was very nice, and he was very good at his job. I liked him - everybody did - but we never thought of it - that it was effectively Church authority coming down on them.

Catholic adoption agencies were usually under the auspices of the Archbishop and received funding from the diocese, but beyond that I don’t recall having contact with any particular structures in the Church, or instructions from them. We were paid as social workers, and the agency didn’t charge for any services. There were quite a lot of adoption agencies at that time, and they all worked separately, although we all worked in close co-operation with the Adoption Board.

1.7 The 1980s: Changing Times in Domestic Adoption

My role just evolved, really, as times changed. The repatriation end of it – bringing expectant birth mothers home from the UK - would have ended in the ‘70’s. The numbers were dropping with regard to adoption, because, thankfully, having a baby wasn’t considered to be the same ‘disgrace’ as it had been in the past. I was conscious in the 70’s that there wasn’t the same secrecy, confidentiality, or shame associated with having a baby as there had been earlier. Eventually then, the numbers of children available for adoption dropped, and as the ‘80’s and ‘90’s went on, they dropped considerably. I progressed through the workplace and became more senior. There were social workers and clerical staff. It really wasn’t a nine-to-five job. You were there from nine-to-five, maybe, but in reality you



brought it with you all the time. I liked what I was doing - it had its moments of worry, but that would be natural in any job.

1.8 Search and Reunion

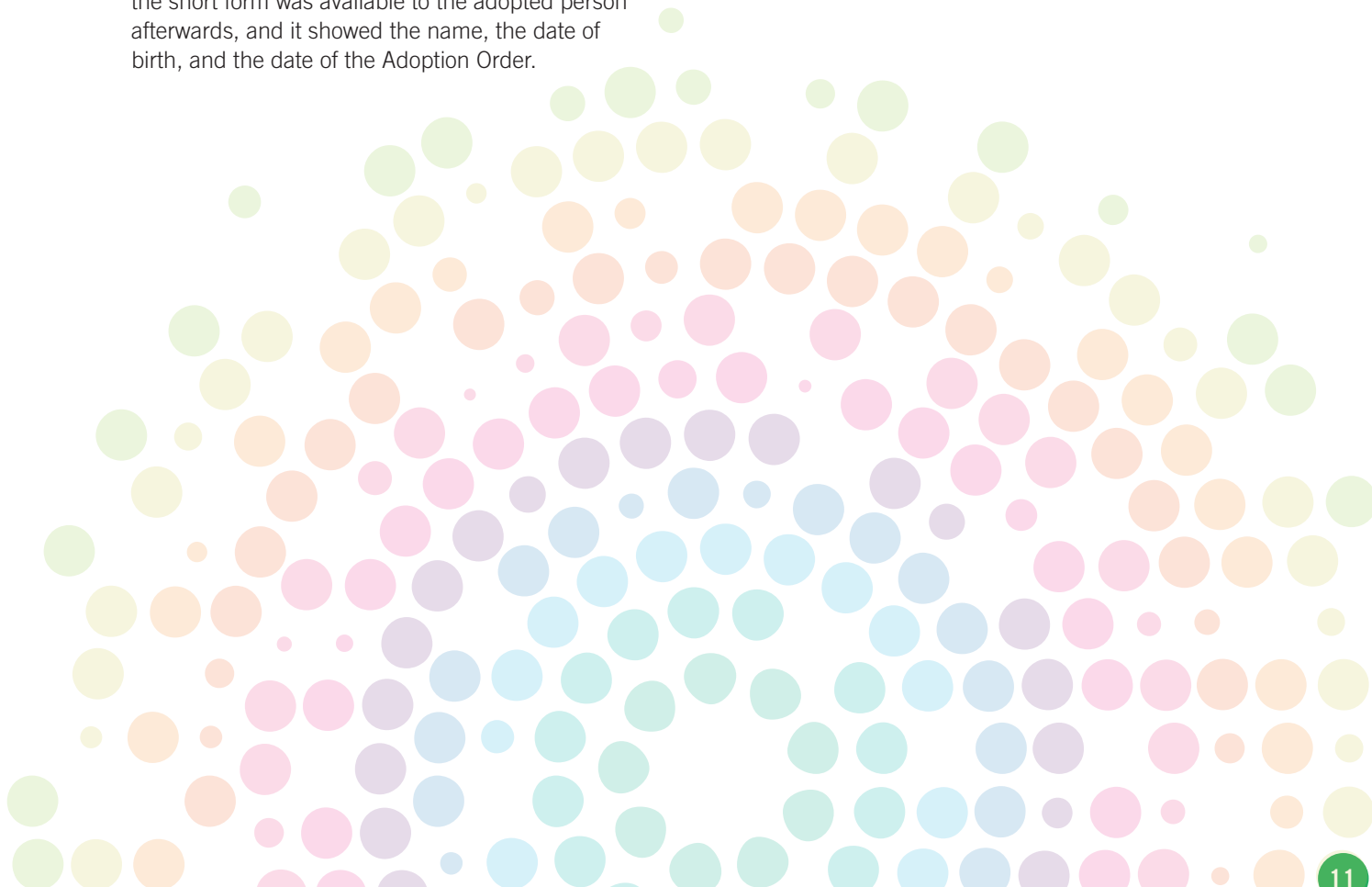
I did quite a bit of search and reunion work in the last few years of my career, which would have been the early 1990s. We needed to be very discreet about our reasons for looking for birth mothers, however, and I used to do a lot of personal calls. We wrote letters on plain paper where we would give the address of the agency, but there was no headed note paper. Occasionally I would call to a house, if I had the address. The old-fashioned telephone directory was marvellous, and the Thom's directories. Technology was just coming in when I retired.

1.9 Birth Fathers

I don't think I ever met a birth father. A lot of the birth parents would not have been in regular relationships, they were in casual relationships, and, in many cases the girls didn't want the fathers to know that they'd had their babies. Few, if any of the long birth certificates had fathers' names on them – it was generally just the mother's name. Then, when the child was legally adopted, there was a short form of birth certificate. As I remember it, only the short form was available to the adopted person afterwards, and it showed the name, the date of birth, and the date of the Adoption Order.

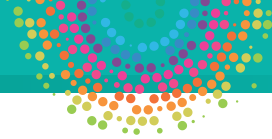
1.10 Best Interests of the Child

Our job was to find homes for children. Society was not prepared to accept single mothers, as such, at that time, and of course that has completely changed since. Yet it wasn't a perception that 'this birth mother wouldn't be suitable as a parent, therefore we'll have the baby adopted'. No, adoption was always because of the child - the child had been born out of wedlock. I always found it very sad when a couple married after the birth of their child, whom they had placed for adoption. We would have been told the name of the father, but we would not know that their relationship had continued, because, sometimes, they wouldn't tell us. I think sometimes parents would wait six months, until the adoption consent was finalised, and then they would get married afterwards. It happened in a small number of cases, and I felt it was a tragic situation for them all really. The biological tie between a mother and child was so important for the child – we were taught this in training. You did not want to cut the biological tie by placing a child for adoption if you didn't absolutely have to. If a couple married, the place for their biological child was with them. It would have been so wonderful for their baby. I always felt that the rightful place would be for the child to have been brought up by biological parents, if at all possible.



Chapter
2

**Vivienne
Darling**



Vivienne Darling served as a member of the Adoption Board from 1983 to 1997. A social commentator and academic, she had studied at Trinity College, Dublin in the 1940s, where she became Head of Social Studies from 1985 – 1992. Darling was one of the first researchers to write about adoption in Ireland, and her contribution continues to be relevant today. She was supportive of the present study and had agreed verbally to take part, however sadly she passed away in 2020 without having had the opportunity to be interviewed. In place of a narrative, the following is a brief summary of her published work.

2.1 Adoption in Ireland (1974)

Vivienne Darling published “the first professional social worker and academic perspective in relation to adoption service provision”²⁰ in Ireland in 1974²¹. Issued in booklet form by then advocacy group CARE (“Campaign for the Care of Deprived Children”), her study consisted of a survey of adoptive parents and key staff, exploring the adoption process.

In her analysis, Darling was critical of the standard of adoption practices in Ireland at that time, citing limited, inadequate training and expertise, ‘superficial’ assessment procedures of prospective adoptive parents, and unsatisfactory post-placement and supervisory procedures. She commented on a reticence among those who worked in adoption to apply modern adoption theories and research-based evidence to their practice. Furthermore, she wrote that the Adoption Board needed to be more pro-active in their work, shifting their focus towards the management and improvement of adoption, beyond their role of making adoption orders. She expressed concerns about third party adoptions, and wrote that, in her view, she found the Adoption Board to be unreceptive to suggestions and recommendations about improving the standard of adoption practice in Ireland. Furthermore, she advised that the Board needed the legal power to enforce any recommendations they did make about improving practice in adoption agencies. In short,

she felt that the Adoption Board needed to take on a more regulatory and critical role.

2.2 The Changing Face of Adoption (1999)²²

Having expressed these concerns in 1974²³, Darling was appointed to the Adoption Board in 1983 and served on it until 1997. Once her term was complete, she published a paper called “The Changing Face of Adoption”, outlining the changes that had taken place in the field of adoption during her time on the Board. While still critical of the restrictive and limited responsibility of Adoption Board members to enact change, Darling made several key observations and recommendations. She commented on the decrease in the number of babies being placed for adoption for example, the emergence of the birth father voice, the growing phenomenon of intercountry adoption, and the concept of open adoption. She also mentioned the increasing call for access to birth information, and the potential for the establishment of a national adoption contact preference register. As in her previous paper, she discussed the role of the Adoption Board and highlighted what she felt were some of the drawbacks of the administration system at the time.

Darling noted that adoption in Ireland had undergone dramatic change during the 1980s and 1990s and was now substantially different from the 1950s. Not only had the number of babies

20. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *Research on Adoption in Ireland 1952-2017* (Dublin: 2018), 76. https://aai.gov.ie/images/Report_1_An_Audit_of_Research_on_Adoption_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.pdf

21. Darling, Vivienne, “Adoption in Ireland,” *Dublin: CARE*, no. 1 (1974). [https://stella.catalogue.tcd.ie/iii/encore/record/C__Rb10239688__S\(adoption\)%20\(Irela%20nd\)__Orighresult%20U%20X6?lang=eng&suite=cobalt&ivts=9Kxq3CT8k4XKaOG3Muf1fw%3D%3D&casts=KmeFYR1eRMG-CoLOFaxFhkQ%3D%3D](https://stella.catalogue.tcd.ie/iii/encore/record/C__Rb10239688__S(adoption)%20(Irela%20nd)__Orighresult%20U%20X6?lang=eng&suite=cobalt&ivts=9Kxq3CT8k4XKaOG3Muf1fw%3D%3D&casts=KmeFYR1eRMG-CoLOFaxFhkQ%3D%3D).

22. Vivienne Darling, “The changing face of adoption.” *Irish Journal of Family Law* 2, no. 4 (1999): 2-6.

23. Darling, Vivienne, “Adoption in Ireland,” *Dublin: CARE*, no. 1 (1974), [https://stella.catalogue.tcd.ie/iii/encore/record/C__Rb10239688__S\(adoption\)%20\(Irela%20nd\)__Orighresult%20U%20X6?lang=eng&suite=cobalt&ivts=9Kxq3CT8k4XKaOG3Muf1fw%3D%3D&casts=KmeFYR1eRMG-CoLOFaxFhkQ%3D%3D](https://stella.catalogue.tcd.ie/iii/encore/record/C__Rb10239688__S(adoption)%20(Irela%20nd)__Orighresult%20U%20X6?lang=eng&suite=cobalt&ivts=9Kxq3CT8k4XKaOG3Muf1fw%3D%3D&casts=KmeFYR1eRMG-CoLOFaxFhkQ%3D%3D).

being placed for adoption dropped, but she also reported observing an increase in family adoptions whereby a woman (who had been widowed or divorced) adopted her child with her new spouse. Furthermore, she noted that private adoptions (i.e. private placement by a birth mother of a child for adoption with someone other than a relative) were becoming less prevalent²⁴.

Darling's time on the Adoption Board coincided with a landmark legal case concerning the birth father voice in adoption: *Keegan v Ireland* (1994)²⁵. In her research, Darling commented that some birth mothers were not comfortable with the new legal requirement to contact the birth father. She highlighted an increase, during the 1990s, in the number of pregnancies reportedly resulting from rape, casual contact and alcohol abuse, where birth mothers stated that they did not know the birth father's name or contact details. Through her work, Vivienne Darling repeatedly promoted the concept of an Irish adoption contact preference register. The National Adoption Contact Preference Register (NACPR) was launched in 2005, and by 2020 had over 13,800 registrants. With the enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act in 2022²⁶ a new Contact Preference Register was launched, this time with a legislative basis.

2.3 Social Work in Adoption

In 2005, Darling published a book chapter entitled "Social Work in Adoption"²⁷, in what would be her final publication on the topic. At this time, although adoption processes had changed again since she'd last published, she continued to utilise a critical approach, and specifically highlighted the closed and secret nature of the adoption system in Ireland, which she felt resulted in the potential for many abuses. She commented that adoption was perceived as a solution to two issues viewed in the past as societal "problems" - babies born outside of marriage, and infertility. The closed nature of the adoption system meant that privacy of the birth family was preserved, no matter the cost, and little, if any, contact or information was shared between the adoptive and birth family.

Darling's time on the Adoption Board coincided with a landmark legal case concerning the birth father voice in adoption: Keegan v Ireland (1994).

Darling argued that more post-adoption services were needed to support those involved in adoption, including adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive families. She attributed the growing number of peer-support groups to the gradual recognition that *'the effects of adoption did not end with the making of the order'*. Today, post-adoption services have grown to include peer-run support and discussion groups, advocacy groups, and services run by agencies accredited by the Adoption Authority of Ireland. Vivienne Darling died in 2020. In 2021, when she was due to be interviewed, many of the challenges she highlighted throughout her long career in adoption were still topics of discussion and debate in the Irish adoption arena.

24. Private adoptions were eventually outlawed in 1998.

25. European Court of Human Rights, *Case of Keegan v. Ireland* (Strasbourg, 1994). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57881>.

26. "Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022," Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

27. Vivienne Darling, "Social Work in Adoption: Vignette," In *Social work in Ireland: Historical perspectives*, ed. Noreen Kearney and Caroline Skehill (Dublin: Institute of public Administration, 2005).

Section 2:

Shaping Adoption Practice: Practical Changes in a Developing Society

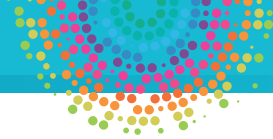
This section contains four narratives: Laetitia Lefroy, Kerry O'Halloran, Valerie O'Brien and Eileen Conway, covering the period from the 1960s up to the present day.

While all four participants began their careers in social work, they subsequently specialised in very different areas. Laetitia Lefroy worked in Barnardos, setting up their Adoption Advice Service and adapting it over time to meet changing demands. The other three completed PhDs during their social work careers. Eileen Conway worked as a lecturer, in addition to her social work role, teaching a module on adoption in TCD. Valerie O'Brien trained in family therapy, and continues to work in this area in addition to social work, while Kerry O'Halloran trained as a solicitor and became a prolific author and academic, writing several internationally recognised books on adoption.

Although naturally all reflecting on the adoption element of their careers, given their different specialist areas these four narratives bring a multi-dimensional perspective to the topic of adoption in Ireland, covering a time of widespread systemic and societal change.

Chapter
3

**Laetitia
Lefroy**



Laetitia Lefroy studied in Trinity College Dublin in the 1950s, and qualified as a professional social worker in the UK. She returned to Dublin in the early 1970s, and joined Barnardos²⁸ to review and develop new services, setting up the Barnardos Adoption Advice Service in 1977²⁹. She regularly reported on the Service's progress, and these reports are publicly available online³⁰. She was involved with, and eventually chaired, the organisation "Children First" which advocated for child-centred change in Irish child care practice and legislation during its ten year lifespan. In 1983 she was on the Review Committee on Adoption Services, which presented its report to Barry Desmond, then Minister for Health, in 1984. In that same year, she co-authored a book with Charles Mollan entitled "New Families: your questions on fostering and adoptions answered³¹", which covered a number of practical, conceptual and legislative issues about adoption in Ireland using a reader-friendly "question and answer" format. It also contained a comprehensive directory of Adoption Agencies in the Republic of Ireland. She retired in 1991.

3.1 Early Days: A Grounding in Social Work Practice

I started by doing the Social Services Diploma course in Trinity in the late 1950s. There was nothing on adoption in the course, but I did several brief placements, one of which happened to be in a Mother and Baby Home, and another in a residential nursery for small babies.

I graduated from Trinity in 1958. At that time, you had to be at least 24 to qualify as a professional social worker. That, in itself, involved a 2-year university course, so I needed to fill in a few years before I could apply for it. So, I went to England. I had a very formative two years as a residential supervisor, working for a county council, before moving to the Oxford County Council Child Care Department, where I worked as a Child Care Officer. I was only there for a year, but I got a great range of work. I then went to Birmingham University,

and graduated in 1961 with a "Certificate in Child Service", which was eventually recognised as a social work qualification.

My first job after graduation was as a Child Care Officer in Buckinghamshire. This role later became "general social worker". As with any statutory agency in England, I was dealing with family breakdowns, multi-problem families, and all the issues that go with that, as well as "on call" for mental health, geriatric and homeless issues. Adoption was a small part of it, dealt with by a separate section. I was only involved with an adoption if it affected one of my clients, which it did from time to time. In this respect, I often worked with women who had relinquished babies and children for adoption, sometimes many years previously. I stayed for 13 years, eventually becoming a team leader.

28. "Our Work," Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

29. Laetitia Lefroy, "The Adoption Advice Service-Dublin: The First Three Years May 1977-May 1980," (1980), <https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/items/f9823fa8-9dc0-4067-a81f-8db7a10c7f41>.

30. "Barnardos Reports," Barnardos, Accessed February 6, 2024. <https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/handle/20.500.13085/6>.

31. Lefroy, Laetitia, and Charles Mollan, *New Families: Your Questions on Fostering and Adoptions Answered* (Dublin: Turoe Press, 1984).

3.2 Developing a Deeper Understanding of Adoption

In the early 70s, the idea of adopted people having access to their files and information was under discussion in the UK. The law changed to allow access to original birth certificates in 1975³², and by the time it was enacted I had returned to Ireland. However, in the run up to the legislation, while I was still in the UK, it was something we all discussed informally among ourselves. There was a lot of anxiety among service providers about how it was going to be managed – how access would actually be provided on a practical level. Yet there was no public debate on it. I had a friend who was a social worker in the UK organisation “NORCAP” – the National Organisation for the Counselling of Adoptees and Parents. NORCAP was a voluntary organisation, and it was following up on the issue, but nobody else was. At that time, people generally kept quiet if they didn’t like something. Those personally affected by adoption were not as vocal then, even though I think a lot of them were privately worried. So there were no pressure groups calling for change, and there was no public input or discussion. We were all just waiting for the legislation.

By the mid-1970s I wanted to come back to Ireland. I started looking for a job, there was an advertisement for a role in Barnardos³³, I applied, it was fairly straightforward, and I got the job. It seemed to fit in with what I knew about.

3.3 A New Role: Identifying Gaps

Barnardos was a UK organisation at the time, with different divisions. The Irish division was based in Belfast, it had a sub-office in Dublin, and I was taking charge of that. Barnardos had recently given up its religious status – before then, it had always been known as a Protestant organisation. In the past, there had been an expectation that all the Protestant services would work together. As a result, while Barnardos was changing its focus, when I started, I was still automatically placed on the

boards of a Protestant Mother and Baby home, and of a Protestant Children’s Home.

My job title when I started was “Senior Social Worker”, and my task was to develop our services. I needed to expand the social services we were providing around the country, offering more help to more people, and to reduce services that were not making sense any more. The job was very wide in its range.

Back then, social work in Ireland had yet to develop into the field it is today, and there were a lot of unregulated voluntary groups in operation, often staffed by volunteers who had no formal training. Coming from the UK with experience under my belt, I think I used what I would now describe as a “critical but intuitive” approach to develop our work in Ireland. I didn’t shy away from the voluntary groups, I was cautious but open. I purposefully engaged with the groups if it was clear to me that they were doing something useful.

Being involved in so many things taught me much about the existing services, or lack thereof, for vulnerable people in Dublin. I learned how to do what I could with my own judgement and the resources available to me. In time, I set up a social work service specifically directed towards single parents, and I quite often worked with those considering adoption as part of that. As I became more experienced, I started applying that same critical, constructive approach to the field of adoption, considering what role Barnardos could play to provide support in this area.

3.4 Irish Adoption Societies³⁴ in the 1970s

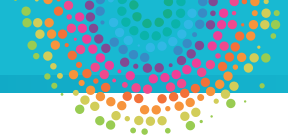
Adoption was very much a “hot topic” in Ireland in the mid to late 1970s. It was in public discussion, in the papers and on the radio, as there was a lot of questioning of social work resources³⁵. I think many people working in adoption societies began to feel under threat because of all the publicity and the call for change. At a human level, staff

32. In the UK, the Children Act 1975 inserted new provisions to the Adoption Act 1958 which gave people who were adopted the right to information that allowed them to apply to obtain a copy of their original birth certificate: “Children Act 1975,” Legislation.gov.uk. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/72/contents>.

33. “Our Work,” Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

34. An “adoption society” was the name given to a body, often run by a religious order, which carried out adoptions. This term is no longer used. These bodies are now known as Accredited Bodies or Agencies. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *Glossary of Terms* (Dublin. 2019). https://aai.gov.ie/images/PDFs/Glossary_of_Terms_Updated_2019.pdf.

35. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Final Report: Chapter 12* (Dublin. 2021). <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>.



The Catholic Societies had nuns, so that was seen as their “resource”, although on a practical level I felt many of the nuns had little or no formal training, or experience, with children or with parenting.



felt very threatened, emotionally and reputably. A lot of social work up to then was rooted in the social workers' own ways of working, and their own views on things. At the time, the various adoption organisations worked fairly well together, although it very much depended on the personnel involved – some were open to change, others less so. Similarly, some societies were open to questioning, and to questioning themselves – looking back and saying, “we didn't do that right” and perhaps, “isn't it extraordinary we did that? We would never do that now”. I am not sure that went with every society. The call for change by the public and society was causing the clients to be more assertive, to seek changes, or different ways of working, and I think that was difficult for a lot of social workers. Many services were not able to take the criticism. They just didn't deal with it, or they didn't address it in a helpful way.

At that time, the adoption societies were busy. Many of them simply did not have enough social workers to cover the volume of work they were doing. The Catholic Societies had nuns, so that was seen as their “resource”, although on a practical level I felt many of the nuns had little or no formal training, or experience, with children or with parenting. A few of the societies had lay staff. It was difficult to establish the criteria by which parenting ability for substitute parents was assessed. I got to know many of the societies well, and with some – though not all - I really feared that the difficulties which may be associated with an adoption were not addressed or understood. For many, I think confidentiality

and secrecy took precedence. The nuns were not necessarily selected for their ability to deal with the areas they were working in. I don't think adoption, or even childcare, was the only area that affected – it was everywhere. The Protestant adoption society, on the other hand, didn't have the “resource” of nuns to rely on, so they had to outsource some of their work. Barnardos staff, therefore, would sometimes do assessments of adopters for the Protestant society as needed. I already sat on that case committee. Eventually the society employed two social workers.

3.5 Statutory and Voluntary Organisations

In the UK, the social services were run by the statutory services and the county councils. There were some voluntary organisations running children's homes among other things, but they were *under or separate* to the statutory services. When I came back to Ireland from the UK in the early 1970s, it was the opposite here - most were run by voluntary organisations, and the statutory services were very few in comparison. Some local health boards had a good children's department³⁶, but the rest of the services usually dealt with people who were at the end of their tether - people seemed to go to the statutory services when they had nowhere else to go. Many of us felt that the 'State' wasn't qualified to do the inspections on the voluntary societies, as was being demanded by the public following various crises. I think that those of us in the voluntary services sometimes felt we needed to “save people” from ending up in the statutory services! There was a lot of hostility towards the State doing inspections³⁷ on voluntary services, for example. I don't know if this was conscious, but in my view the voluntary societies actively discouraged the statutory services from knowing what they were doing. I think, at that time, people working in the area felt that the statutory services actually needed to be helped as much as the voluntary societies did.

3.6 Secrecy and Consent in Adoption

Many of the societies had been in the area of adoption for a very, very long time. As a result, I think some were unimaginative - they had set ideas from the past. In the 1950s, 60s and even in the 1970s, the idea was quite prevalent that if she got

36. The Health Board system was established in 1971 following the 1970 Health Act, which saw the creation of eight Regional Health Boards. Each Health Board was responsible for the provision of healthcare services in their own regions: HSE, *Community Healthcare Organisations Report* (Ireland. 2014), 19-23. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/corporate/cho-chapter-3.pdf>.

37. For more detail on State inspections of some voluntary organisations, see: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Final Report: Chapter 11* (Dublin. 2021). <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>.

on with something else, a birth mother might even be able to forget that she had given birth to the child. It's difficult to imagine now, but that was the thinking at the time. Birth mothers were encouraged to make a new life for themselves, without having any help towards doing that, or with addressing their emotional and physical needs, after having had the baby. I was always worried about social workers giving the message, to birth mothers, that "nobody will ever know that you've had a baby". The idea of never being identified was not going to work in Ireland. Back then, if people wanted to find someone they would find a way, by trying different things – they would go around graveyards, they would look at people for different physical traits, they would listen to local gossip.

While at Barnardos, I was involved in a couple of court cases where adoption societies had made an informal arrangement with a birth mother that they wouldn't contact her because of secrecy. Then, when the time for birth mother's consent to the adoption came, the societies couldn't find her to get that consent, so the prospective adoptive parents were required to go to court to dispense with her consent. The birth mother was still the biological mother of the child. If the child was sick, needed treatment, and had not been formally adopted, the adoption society would have had to contact her, as she was still technically the child's next of kin. Similarly, GPs would not accept the consent of an adoption society or of the prospective adoptive parents in the birth mother's place. In order to protect against this, I felt that societies should have a contract with the birth mother that if they couldn't contact her, she must contact them every so often. Then, if she didn't do this, they would have the right to contact her. That was quite a novel suggestion, and some service providers disagreed with me on it. I had sympathy for the service providers involved, that they were still trying to promise secrecy to the birth mothers. Sometimes it just didn't work, and it had the potential to have very negative consequences for all involved.

3.7 Birth Fathers

In adoption generally, we were always talking about the child's birth mother. People tended to forget that those children had fathers too, whether they were officially "in the picture" or not. It was so important from a medical history point of view, to have birth father information that the adopted person could



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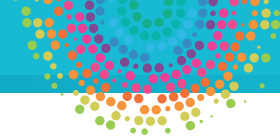


access, yet it was, and in my view still is, rarely mentioned in discussion. I had very little contact with birth fathers during my career. In those days, fathers did not have a distinct right to be heard. As time went on, fathers were rarely in the picture and were still not encouraged, socially, to be in the picture, but if they were, they were allowed to be heard. Allowed was probably the best word to use, because I don't think it was encouraged. If you make a fuss, you'll get heard.

3.8 Setting up the Adoption Advice Service

I started the Barnardos Adoption Advice Service³⁸ in 1977 because there was so little information available about adoption, and people needed to know more. The public were saying "we don't know what's going on, we don't know how to handle it, we want to adopt, but we don't know where to start. We want to have a child placed for adoption, but we don't know where to start. We've changed our minds and now don't want our child placed for adoption, but we don't know where to start". So I decided to start off an advice service that would actually allow people to express what they didn't know, and try and find the answer. We were looking for organisations, we were looking for agencies, we were finding out where that help was, but we weren't providing help directly ourselves, other than by listening, to help them find a plan. I think that listening, in itself, was important. Once I set it up, I stopped doing any assessments or being part of a case committee. It wasn't appropriate, and in addition to the Adoption Advice Service I was manager of a project team, so I was busy. Furthermore, by that time many of the societies were beginning to employ more, qualified social workers.

38. Laetitia Lefroy, "The Adoption Advice Service-Dublin: The First Three Years May 1977-May 1980," (1980), <https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/items/f9823fa8-9dc0-4067-a81f-8db7a10c7f41>.



Before we opened, I needed to find out what our potential service users should do in certain situations. I needed to have the information ready to go. So I contacted all the adoption agencies and others that might be involved and asked them how they handled different situations, and what information they could give me that would benefit people. I approached the agencies in an uncritical way. I was dealing with the status as it was. I was very careful to put diplomacy at the top of my list - out of kindness apart from anything else - but also, it works. Going at people, and implying that you're going to be critical, doesn't get a result.

At the time, there was some resistance from some of the Catholic adoption societies. There was only one Protestant establishment, and one society run by the Health Board. The Catholic and Protestant organisations were similar in how they handled the mothers, but the Protestant organisations did not have the religious authority over them, whereas all of the Catholic ones were looking to the priest and the bishop for authority and approval. That was normal in society at the time. So, the non-Catholic societies were in a slightly different position.

I sent out a survey with very basic questions: *"what age do you accept prospective adoptive parents at, what is your waiting list, do you have an area that you cover?"* Gaining trust took time. I had frequent conversations with staff in adoption agencies. They all needed to trust me. They had to be confident that I was not going to tell people anything negative, or advise against certain societies. I might have advised on the different expectations and roles of the different societies, but I was always very careful. I was honest with them, and with myself, and I think that, slowly, the societies began to realise that. At that time, because of the public discourse, they were all coming to terms with being in the public eye. They had got on with their work quite quietly, but suddenly people were making criticisms publicly and the press was involved. They were dealing with all of that at the time.

Some of the societies were a bit mystified about the Adoption Advice Service and how it was going to work. Their big concern was - how would I know that a person contacting the advice service was *genuinely in need*? And, of course, I didn't. I just took it that what they told me was true. If they said that they were pregnant, and that they were worried

about what they were going to do, I would answer them. The concern from societies was *"but you might have a journalist coming and pretending, to see what you'd say."* I said that I'd say the same thing to a journalist as I would to anyone. I think that was quite frightening to the societies. There was a great feeling of fear at that time, and I knew that. I was setting up this service to help that, to release that fear, and to deal with it. We just got on with it, and most of us were very co-operative. I like to think that I showed the anxious societies that it was possible to be informative and firm, without being obstructive. I hope also people just got to know me better, and realised they could trust me.

We started the Adoption Advice Service with me and one other part-time social worker. It was one five-hour session per week. Service users were to be assured of anonymity. They would not be asked their names or anything else. We had the time and the flexibility within that time slot, to talk to people about adoption, but when we started, those five hours were just non-stop. The phone was ringing constantly. Most of the people that were ringing in the first year³⁹ wanted to adopt and didn't know the criteria, or didn't approve of the criteria. Maybe they didn't think they'd fit the criteria, and didn't know where to start. Many obviously wanted to look at what led to them wanting/needing to adopt.

We advertised it with posters and in the papers. We put it out in the public arena. It was an interesting project from the journalists' point of view, and they took it up. I did quite a lot of radio and television work about it - the principles behind it, why we were there, and how it was all going. There was a lot of interest in it, and I encouraged that. At the time, there was a lot of negativity towards adoption services. People were criticising them, and there was lots of stigma. An awful lot of that criticism was right, but there were not many people saying *right, let's go and deal with it, let's address it calmly, without any aggression*. I think that our service got a lot of publicity because of that, and because it was new. So it was important that we promoted *positive* things.

3.9 Service Users: Adopted People, Adoptive Parents and Birth Parents

In the first year of operation, I would say 90% of the people using our service either wanted to adopt or had adopted. However, more and more

39. Laetitia Lefroy, "The Adoption Advice Service-Dublin: The First Three Years May 1977-May 1980," (1980), <https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/items/f9823fa8-9dc0-4067-a81f-8db7a10c7f41>.

we started getting people who were adopted, or who suspected that they were adopted, or who had been brought up in substitute care. I was really concerned about the number of people contacting us who had been brought up in industrial schools and similar institutions, who had no idea of their backgrounds (some suspected rightly – it transpired later – that they had siblings even in the same institution). I felt that the adopted people at least had an adoption society to focus on, in terms of looking for information. It may not have been any help to them, but at least they had a focal point. So we started to develop groups, groups for birth mothers and groups for adopted people to share their experiences, but these were in their infancy when I retired. Others - who had been brought up in industrial schools or in care and then “thrown out” into the world as adults - they had nowhere to go, and they didn’t know where to start.

Setting up the Adoption Advice Service was a good thing, I suppose, and it’s what I became known for. It gave people a safe starting place – it was an alternative to either externalising or internalising their concerns. The listening part of it was very important, and the acknowledgment. People would come to the service thinking that they must not admit certain things, so to reassure them about that – to tell them that they could say whatever was on their minds - was great.

3.10 Illegal Birth Registrations

Over my years of working I did encounter the consequences of what we now know are illegal birth registrations, in different ways⁴⁰. I think they were quite common before the Adoption Board was set up in 1952, and even afterwards for a while. Typically, a doctor or a friend or someone else would have known someone who wanted to adopt a child, and might also know a person who was expecting a child in difficult circumstances. They would introduce the two and make an arrangement. The problem was that they would do all of that without registering what they had done. There wasn’t the same regard for records at that time. From my experience in the Adoption Advice Service, I know one difficulty that sometimes arose out of these illegal birth registrations was the “adoptive” parents, who had been named as birth parents on the birth certificate, wondering what to tell their child about the circumstances of their birth registration as the child grew up. I don’t know that any of those women

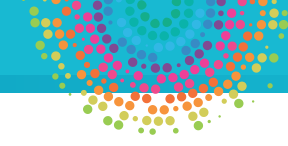
who contacted the service about this issue ever actually referenced the fact that the registering itself was illegal. They may not have known that it was. They believed that the child was theirs, officially, and nobody else knew any different. They certainly didn’t feel that they had taken a child. I don’t think there was any question of them feeling that, or that they should have felt that. We also heard from a number of people who were affected by this personally – who were told that they were adopted, but had no documentation or records of the adoption, and whose birth was registered as if they had been born to their “adoptive” parents. I do not think money passed hands in these arrangements and did not know that some agencies were also doing this on a more organised basis.

3.11 Adoption Record Keeping

In the 1970s, in that climate of public questioning, and the legislative changes in the UK, I think service providers became very aware of the potential future consequences of what they wrote down. They knew that the files could potentially be returned to at a later stage, even occasionally under subpoena. When making notes, people would often say “*you’d better not write that down*”. I think that had an impact on the quality of information in the files. On a practical level, typists had to type the files from the social worker notes, and the typists had a large volume of work to get through, so there was an emphasis on keeping the notes succinct. Sometimes in the early days, people kept files in shorthand, which really defeated the purpose of keeping them, or kept different files in different places. If someone accessed the file at a later date, it could be difficult to know what the shorthand meant, or to find and put together the different documents relating to one person.

Through running the Adoption Advice Service, I knew that a lot of the adopted people wanted to know what their mother looked like, “*was she bubbly, was she stern, was she quiet, was she keen on Bob Dylan?*” These are the sorts of things that make birth mothers real. Yet these things had become “*not something that you wrote down*”. Recording those sort of details was seen as “subjective”, not “professional”, and I can quite understand the problem with that. If the person liked the birth mother personally, it was probably easier to write a lot about her. Yet I was concerned that, because people feared putting those sorts of

40. The topic of illegal birth registrations is mentioned in: Laetitia Lefroy, “The Adoption Advice Service-Dublin: The First Three Years May 1977-May 1980,” (1980), <https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/items/f9823fa8-9dc0-4067-a81f-8db7a10c7f41>.



subjective things down, putting in all that detail, the mother was not a real person in the record. She had a date of birth, she had a job, possibly other children - siblings of the adopted child. That doesn't tell the adopted person what she's like, and it doesn't prepare you as a social worker for telling them about their background when they're an adult. Yes, they want to know the name, they want to know where they came from, but they also want a "feeling" and I am not sure how you get around that. Later, some societies were encouraging mothers to write a letter to be given to the child in adulthood. The letters were to express what she wanted to pass on to the child and I think they were often very helpful to both in different ways. I think there is a balance, of being able to have that person as a *person that you can present*. Who the person was in 1952, and who the person was in, say, 1972, when the child would be an adult looking for them, would be very different, and practically unrecognisable. So service providers keeping records had to get that balance right – giving enough information that made the birth mother real, but not so much that the adult adoptee would have a very specific expectation, that might have changed hugely over the years. I don't think, in Ireland, we ever got a handle on that – capturing who the birth mothers actually were in the records or any reference to fathers, even reference to medical information on them.

3.12 Adoptive Parents: Dealing With Adjustment and Loss

The criteria for adoptive parents was certainly changing by the late 1970s, but I felt it was not changing quickly enough. The emphasis still tended to be on parents who had the religious facilities and the money, education and so on - to keep the child. Relationships within the prospective adoptive family were not considered to the same extent as those practical things, yet they were so important.

There was very little acknowledgement of the fact that, for an adoptive mother, adoption means bringing up a child as her own. Yet she has not conceived that child, and she hasn't had a pregnancy. She is starting from a different point to a mother bringing up a child to whom she gave birth. The adoptive mother has missed out on that part, and that, inevitably, has to be made up somewhere. The adoptive father also has missed out on the development of the child and planning. For adoptive parents they may be waiting weeks, months or years, and then suddenly their whole life changes. Furthermore, the adopted child has already had a

Sometimes the adoptive parents thought “when we get a baby into the house, we will love it” - that the loving relationship would “just happen”. It does “just happen” to a certain extent, but equally, there are two adoptive parents in this situation. Their own relationship with each other is extremely important.

period of separation from a parent, and may have been in a nursery, or with several foster parents. All of these things matter.

Sometimes the adoptive parents thought “when we get a baby into the house, we will love it” - that the loving relationship would “just happen”. It does “just happen” to a certain extent, but equally, there are two adoptive parents in this situation. Their own relationship with each other is extremely important. A lot of these adopters will have been childless beforehand, and they have all the issues that go with that. They might have felt that there was a stigma towards infertility, and so they had an instinctive need to *not let people know* that they were in the process of adopting a child (this was a very sensitive subject for which the listening in the adoption phone in service was important). It was important to them that this child looked like them, was like their own and “passed” as their own. So the adoptive parents would say “we don't tell anyone”. That was an issue, then, that had to be overcome at some point. The adoptive parents themselves often had issues that needed to be acknowledged and addressed, and that was certainly not taken into account nearly enough within the Irish adoption system as it was then. A lot of adopted children were simply not told that they were adopted in the early days, and often they only found out when something forced it, such as when they got their birth certificates to get married, for example.

3.13 Openness in Adoption

Openness was such an issue in adoption. When I moved back to Ireland from the UK, England had just drafted legislation to give adopted people

access to their birth records, at the age of 18⁴¹. In Ireland a number of us started pressing for that, and supporting the idea that people needed to know about their backgrounds. I saw it through the Advice Service but also in ordinary life. When things become more open, you learn more about how people feel, and how they express those feelings. I knew a lot of people who had been adopted and who felt able to admit that they wished to know where they came from. That wish became a big need over time.

I was always worried about records. How and where they were kept, but more importantly, how accurate they were, and what was in them. Data protection, of course, is a big issue now, but we didn't have that when the Advice Service started in the late 1970s. People looking for information about their own adoptions were, at that stage, potentially dealing with records that had been written in the 50s and 60s, or even earlier. Back then, certainly, a rosy, socially acceptable picture of adopted children's birth backgrounds was usually painted, and I often wondered about that. It was common for adopted people to have been told that their birth parents were "a teacher and a doctor", for example. They would believe that their background was one way, and yet, when they went to find their birth parents years later, they found it to be quite different. That was a major problem.

Whenever I was in Mother and Baby homes, as a student on placement and later with Barnardos, I was surprised to find that the girls and women rarely talked to each other about their pregnancies, even though they were all pregnant. Many would have had a significant relationship with the father of the child, which was cut off when pregnancy was discovered. They might talk individually to a member of staff, but they got very little preparation for giving birth, for being treated, or for parting with the child afterwards. Most expectant mothers nowadays would talk about their experience of pregnancy. The expectant mothers that I knew in the Mother and Baby Home always talked about other things - things like music. I think pregnancy and relationships affected by it were topics deliberately avoided.

A lot of the mothers in the Homes did not know

how they got pregnant. In those days, that was not unusual. They had no sex education, even within their own families. They had been conditioned over time to psychologically and emotionally block things out. A lot of them were saying that the child "came out of their tummy", even after the birth. When I was on the board of that Mother and Baby Home, I arranged for someone from an agency to come in and have an informal chat with the girls. They started on where babies came from – how their bodies worked, how you came to have a baby in the first place. All of the things that they didn't know. Now that things are much more open and talked about, we forget that there was a time when life was very different.

Telling a child that he or she was adopted was quite a big thing in those days. A lot of children weren't told that they were adopted until they grew up and got married, and then there was typically a moment with their parent: *"now we must have a talk. I need to tell you that your birth certificate will be different, and you will see on it that it says you are an adopted child"*. That was a dreaded occasion for a lot of adoptive parents, and they contacted our service about it. When the adopted person had digested that information from their parent, they would then ask, *"well where did I come from?"* Often, I think, adoptive parents didn't know how to answer that question. These days, people are prepared by social workers and agencies for possible contact. Mothers are encouraged to write letters, or to give some information about themselves, and also to register whether they wanted to be contacted or not. Of course sometimes they register that they don't want to be contacted, or they don't register at all. Yet, at least now, with the National Adoption Contact Preference Register⁴², there is a system – a starting point. They might not get an answer, but it at least gives them a start. People are also finding out things privately, through at-home DNA testing, which I don't think anyone in my day would have ever thought of.

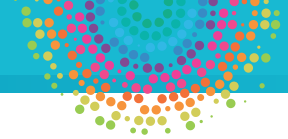
3.14 Adoption in a Changing Society

The Adoption Act 1952 stated that children had to be under the age of 7 to be eligible for adoption⁴³. Under the Adoption Act 1964, a child over the age of 7 could be adopted if their application had been made before their 9th birthday, and if their carers

41. "Children Act 1975," Legislation.gov.uk. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/72/contents>.

42. Refers to the NACPR which was established in 2005: the "Contact Preference Register" was later established under the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022.

43. "Adoption Act, 1952," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1952/act/25/enacted/en/print.html>.



I remember referring to it several times - how is it that widows are quite happy for the child to keep their original name, and single mothers are not? I felt that said a lot about Irish society at the time.



were married and one of them was a birth parent⁴⁴. This meant that in the 1970s, many children who had been long-term in care, or were in long-term placement, missed out on adoption. Adoption was seen by most people as a way of giving security, but many of us were arguing that perhaps adoption was not the right solution for those children. Children must have security, there's no question about that. Was adoption, with all its secrecy, the best route to give them?

Children of married parents could not be adopted, even if the marriage did not exist anymore. Furthermore, if a married woman had a child with someone else, that child was still legally her husband's, because she was married. So those children could not be adopted. Many single parents were single because their marriages had broken up, rather than because they were unmarried in the first place. We were arguing that there shouldn't be a discrimination between children of married parents and children of unmarried parents; they are all children, and they all have totally different backgrounds. There is no such thing as a "normal" family background.

In those days, having a different name to your parents was seen by many as a major crisis. We saw this with single mothers who kept their children and then married. A lot of single mothers, when they married, adopted their own child with their husband in order to give the child the same name as they had. That was terribly important, but it was also covering up certain things. If you had a different name you would be singled out in school. There

was a stigma to it if you were a single mother, yet it was OK if you were widowed and re-married, and had a different surname to your child as a result. I remember referring to it several times - *how is it that widows are quite happy for the child to keep their original name, and single mothers are not?* I felt that said a lot about Irish society at the time.

On a practical side, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, attitudes towards adoption changed. There was growing support for single mothers, and there were a lot of organisations supporting them. There was the Unmarried Mothers Allowance, although even then, a lot of them felt they could not have coped on their own. There was a feeling generally amongst the young people at that point that you do not give up your child for adoption, that it was "giving in". So, suddenly, there was a lot of discrimination against mothers who did give up their children for adoption – people would say that they were being unfair, unkind, or weak.

There was a turn *away* from adoption and being adopted in the early 1980s, and at the same time there was a growing number of people *wanting* to adopt. That caused enormous problems for adoption societies, as there were very few children available for adoption. They simply could not assess all the people that wanted to adopt, so they had to make new rules. People would criticise their criteria, saying "*it's not fair that you have to be that age to get on their list*", but, looking at it from a distance, they had to find ways to carve down their list. They could not assess everyone if they were only going to have five or six babies available in the year. Assessing people for adoption is very detailed work.

3.15 Reflecting on Ireland's Handling of Adoption

The way we handled adoption in Ireland was muddled. I think we had a problem drawing in all of the different controlling bodies, and all of the attitudes, which were very stuck in the past. I think they have loosened now, but the danger with these things loosening is that people can become "aggressively dismissive". I think we've got to live with what we have, and manage it, and move on. Organisations such as Children First⁴⁵, Care⁴⁶, and

44. "Adoption Act, 1964," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1964/act/2/enacted/en/print.html>.

45. A comprehensive collection of the minutes and related documents of "Children First" has been compiled and edited by Charles Mollan and lodged in the National Archives. This contains a copy of the letter, published by the Irish Times in 21st March 1974, in which adoptive parents Larry and Vera Stokes outlined their concerns about adoption legislation at the time. Following the response to this letter, a public meeting was held, and Children First was subsequently formed to advocate for Children's rights in adoption, calling on the government to address "glaring defects" in the Irish Adoption System.
Children First, *Book of minutes and documents relating to Children First* (Dublin: National Archives, 1974-[2014]), 1.

46. CARE: Campaign for the CARE of Deprived Children, was a voluntary organisation based in Dublin, which was established in the 1970s.

Cherish⁴⁷ were all fed into by interested people who wanted things in Ireland to change. Children First ran from 1974-1984. Its founders, Larry and Vera Stokes, who were adoptive parents, made a big contribution to adoption. After appearing on RTÉ television they wrote a letter to the Irish Times, calling for legal changes, and that started a huge amount of publicity. Charles Mollan was a great motivating force in Children First. He was an “interested person”, very intelligent and very good at fronting things. He did a lot for adoption in Ireland, and he won a People of the Year Award⁴⁸ in 1979 for his interest in the area. I was chairperson for a time at Children First, other people fronted the public advocacy side, but we were all feeding into it as various experienced stakeholders, and I think that was important.

In 1987, I published a report on the First ten years of the Adoption Advice Service⁴⁹. In it, I documented the trends and patterns that we had observed. Adoption had changed since it was first legislated for in 1952. It was clear from our experience of operating the service, that adopted people needed, psychologically, to have an understanding of their origins. While the secrecy and shame around being a single mother had abated somewhat, birth mothers who did place their children for adoption had to deal with feelings of loss, secrecy and guilt, and these feelings brought challenges of their own. The declining number of children available meant that many couples wanted to adopt, but were unable to. Furthermore, and this was less frequently discussed, while adoption was obviously a service for children, and not for parents, the adoptive parents had needs and expectations of their own - feelings of loss and grief around infertility, for example - and they needed a forum to discuss these honestly.

In that report, I also wrote about how I pictured the future, at that time. Firstly, it was clear that proposed legislative changes around the adoption of children of married couples, where the parents were unable to care for the child, would mean a change in profile of the children available for adoption.

It was likely that children were going to be older, and the adoption process was going to take longer to finalise. As such, prospective adoptive parents would need to be prepared to adopt older children, and deal with a lack of security around the adoption for a longer time. I knew that this change would be a challenge for some, and that the Adoption Advice service would need to be prepared for this. By 1987, I noted that there was more openness in adoption in Ireland. With traditional assumptions about adoption being challenged in the public discourse, those affected by adoption might feel more able to discuss sensitivities around their experience with friends and family. This could lead to challenging circumstances where those friends and family either had more traditional views, or did not have the skills to handle the situation sensitively. I noted the power of the media in the adoption discourse, how, if a topic was raised in the media, it yielded an increase in contact to our service about that particular issue. One issue that had emerged was the need for people who used our service - adopted people, birth parents and adoptive parents - to meet each other, and learn from each other's experiences.

After a car accident, I retired early in 1991. The funny thing is, adoption was only ever 20% of my work - one day a week. Yet it's what I was known for. A lot of people from the adoption arena were at my retirement party, and the speeches were all about adoption. When I retired, I was a very different person from when I first joined Barnardos. I certainly made mistakes along the way, but I hope I was able to acknowledge them. I think that's quite difficult sometimes. These days, the Adoption Advice Service⁵⁰ is enormous. It has groups, and it follows up on different issues. They are doing a lot more now, but it started, in 1977, with this. I am optimistic about the future of adoption where appropriate in Ireland. I think we have come a long way.

47. Cherish was founded in 1972. For more details, see “Our History – One Family Ireland,” Onefamily.ie, Accessed February 12, 2024. <https://onefamily.ie/about-us/our-history/>.

48. “List of Rehab People of the Year Award Winners,” Wikipedia, Last modified October 16, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Rehab_People_of_the_Year_Award_winners#1989.

49. Barnardos, *The Adoption Advice Service - Dublin: The First Ten Years May 1977 - May 1987* (Dublin, 1987), <https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/handle/20.500.13085/809>

50. Barnardos Post Adoption Service, as it is now known, offers a wide range of services, and continues to provide a dedicated helpline about adoption. For further information on the development of this service, see: Mandi MacDonald et al., “Barnardos Post Adoption Service Evaluation,” (2021) accessed February 23, 2024, https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/251271625/V5_Barnardos_PAS_REPORT.pdf.

Chapter
4

**Dr Kerry
O'Halloran**

Kerry O'Halloran is a prolific academic writer, having authored 32 books in total to date. Some of these deal specifically with the topic of adoption, while many of the others, with a different key focus, mention adoption from a wider contextual perspective (e.g. child protection, family law etc). A former social worker, he subsequently qualified as a barrister and was attached as Adjunct Professor to QUT in Brisbane for 13 years until retirement in 2019. He frequently writes about the legal aspects of adoption in Ireland and the UK, often from an international perspective. He writes the legal notes (NI) section of the quarterly journal Adoption and Fostering (for the British Association of Adoption and Fostering).

4.1 Early Days: Getting Started in Adoption Work

In the early 1970s, I started out as a social worker. I worked for Barnardos⁵¹ for three years in Dublin, and had a generic caseload. There were a lot of poverty issues in the city. Some areas were very derelict then, though probably beautiful now. At the time, Barnardos was a denominational agency, staffed by and working with Protestants. My memory of my work in certain areas of the city was of the sheer poverty and, in one housing estate, of open sewers. It was bad then. A lot of my work was negotiating with the council, getting them to fit doors and windows, getting finances to people who needed it. I liked helping people, trying to make a slight difference to their lives.

I also worked in two rural areas, one in the South the other in the West of Ireland. I used to drive out to the appointments with a tent. Barnardos paid expenses for staff working away from home: hotels being chosen in order to preserve anonymity for staff and to preserve confidentiality for clients, but I often preferred to camp. As part of my caseload at that time, I worked with adopters, and with single mothers. The fact that Barnardos were helping quite a few single women with babies to stay at home interested me. We were considering how we could more effectively intervene to keep them together, rather than going down the adoption road. There was a single mum I used to visit infrequently, and Barnardos were providing support for her child to go

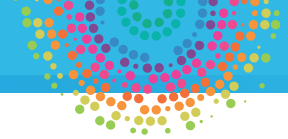
to boarding school, which was one way of achieving that objective. The Protestant education facilities were then inadequate to meet the needs of many such families in isolated areas who were unable to pay the fees necessary for their children to attend boarding schools, so Barnardos channelled financial assistance to facilitate that option. This was a very poor mum in an isolated area, typical of quite a few families we supported. We were not subsidising boarding school opportunities for middle-class families.

By my second year working in Barnardos, I was also studying law, and working with FLAC⁵² one or two evenings a week. I became interested in the process of taking test cases that would alter the law; one such adoption-related case went to the Supreme Court. I got to know barristers, and to know a bit more about the adoption process from a legal perspective while working with them. I also got a broader understanding, from my social work caseloads, of what adoption was all about.

I worked with a middle-aged couple who both had mental disabilities. They had a teenager, who had been adopted by relatives. I was surprised to learn that older children could be adopted within the family. I often worked directly with birth mothers, but never with adoptive families. I felt that adoption was frequently a forced option for women who would have chosen to have kept the child, if that had been possible. At that time, the stigma felt by single mums and their families was enormous,

51. "Our Work," Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

52. FLAC (Free Legal Advice Centre) is an independent voluntary organisation, dedicated to promoting equality of access to legal advice and support. "Home," FLAC - Promoting Access to Justice, Last modified January 30, 2003. <https://www.flac.ie/>.



The big difference between the adoption systems in the North and the South of Ireland, as I then saw it, was the children's different pathways into adoption.



and they often went to great lengths to hide their pregnancies. In 1973, when the unmarried mothers' allowance came in to play, it really did transform the situation. I think that was an enormously positive thing for women. The legal changes around contraception obviously impacted things hugely, as did the policy of prioritising housing allocation for single mums. The social situation changed quite dramatically towards the end of the seventies, and eighties, which also had implications for adoption. Birth fathers were definitely missing from the picture at that time. They did not feature in my work at all. If a mum was not going to identify the father, that was it. There was no obligation to seek him out. It was not until I started working in Northern Ireland, when there was an obligation to engage with the birth father, that I realised we hadn't been doing it in the South.

4.2 Changing Practices: 1970s and 1980s

I was still working for Barnardos at this time and felt that Barnardos⁵³ should be more open to working where the poverty was - with Catholics, and taking referrals from FLAC. So my manager and I wrote to the head office in the UK, looking for permission to extend the service. I felt very impertinent about writing to head office but was lucky with my manager - she was really very supportive. I was given permission to try it, to see if it would work. So, for the first time in Ireland, working with Catholics became formally a part of Barnardos policy, and it transformed the work it was doing. There was so much that needed to be done - nine tenths of the population in Dublin with social needs were Catholic. I really enjoyed the actual work, it was an innovative time in social work in Ireland, at least in Barnardos. They were having difficulty finding a rightful niche for themselves. They were open to

change, they had the resources, the willingness and the backing from their headquarters in England, so they were able to do things that other agencies in Dublin could not do. For example, they introduced a 'Playbus' - a red double decker bus the interior of which was converted into a crèche with play materials and Montessori trained staff who engaged in constructive play activities with mothers and children - in areas such as Sherriff Street and Fatima Mansions.

4.3 Adoption Practice North and South of the Border

I went to Northern Ireland to do a Masters, which was a professional qualification in Social Work. It was a one-year course, and I stayed on afterwards, leaving Barnardos even though they had paid for my course. My manager in the South felt that as far as Barnardos were concerned, if they had paid for another professional social worker to be in the field, it really didn't matter terribly much whether I was doing it for Barnardos or not.

I was working in adoption up there. The big difference between the adoption systems in the North and the South of Ireland, as I then saw it, was the children's different pathways into adoption. In addition to voluntary parental relinquishment, children were also adopted out of the care system in the North. The child protection system was such that a parent who abused or neglected their child to the point where a care order was granted, could lose that child into the care system, and then possibly lose him or her permanently through adoption. This made it difficult for social workers to offer support to parents, as parents were afraid that such involvement could lead to children being removed from their care. On the other hand, professional foster parents were a very positive resource in the North - providing a family care setting for children unable to remain with their parents - unlike the alternative of nursing homes for babies and young children that were such a feature of child care provision in the South during the 1960s and 70s.

My experience in the South had been solely of voluntary relinquishment, and people feeling bereft. In the North, there was indignation and protest - people felt, rightly, that their child had been taken from them. In the South, clients were very pleased to see you, but in the North, there was a stigma.

53. "Our Work," Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

The last thing people wanted up there was to have a social worker “*banging on their door*”. That was the difference between preventative work - being genuinely useful - and doing child protection work. In the South, it was preventative. In the North, at that time, the social worker was most often associated with traditional welfare officer work.

I worked for several years on an adoption panel up in Northern Ireland, which meant that I was reviewing social work decisions regarding the approval of prospective adopters and the matching of adopters with children. In the North, similar to the South, adoption at that time was denominational. Catholics to Catholics, and Protestants to Protestants. There was then little possibility of placing a Catholic child with Protestant adoptive parents and vice versa. On the adoption panel, we had the responsibility of determining whether adoption applicants were suitable. We could approve them or not - we didn't always - and they were matched with particular children. It was quite stressful. While on principle I would try not to obstruct someone motivated to do a good thing, nonetheless where there was clear evidence that applicants were unsuitable - perhaps unable to manage, had difficulty in appreciating children's developmental needs or unlikely to work co-operatively with social workers - then I would be unlikely to favour their approval.

4.4 Personal Connection to Adoption

My wife and I adopted two children and were also foster parents for about four years. So I really feel an interest in the whole area of adoption, not just academically, and professionally, but as an adoptive parent. On becoming the subject of the adoption process, I paid more attention to it. That brought it home, and made it more personal for me. Eventually, some years later, my wife said, “*Now you've got to write a book on adoption*”. So I did, and then I wrote a few more. I am curious about things, and I like to explore. That's what I do with writing. I have written on lots of different areas over the years, but I never really left adoption behind. I never disengaged from it – it's been pretty much a constant in my life.

4.5 International Best Practice

It is so important to look at adoption from a global perspective. There are other ways of doing this. Adoption is very different in different countries. In some European countries, they have specialist residential facilities that provide models of care to enable families to stay united in a way that isn't the

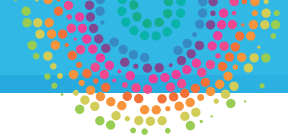
case in the UK, or in America. In the Scandinavian countries - Finland and Sweden - they employ professionals like psychiatrists, and psychologists in a residential setting with families to help them, to show them how to cope. They have specialist units, where mums are taught how to look after their children, and given positive role reinforcement. That helps keep families together and prevents the need for adoption. The actual amount of money it takes to keep families together in that way is colossal really, in relative terms. For some time I have felt that, in Ireland, we should be thinking more along the Scandinavian lines. That kind of consensual state intervention here in Ireland, adequately resourced, would provide an alternative to adoption for many parents.

Other countries such as Canada and Germany and France have adoption for adults, which is a perfectly sensible idea, and particularly relevant for disabled children getting older. In Japan most adoptions are of 25-30 year old men, generally for reasons of property ownership and kinship. So adoption varies in social usage, according to the culture of the society. I don't think we're “there” yet, with adoption in Ireland. We're getting there, in terms of considering making more children left in long term care available for adoption, but at present this only applies to those fostered on a long-term basis, who tend to be in their late teens when adopted.

4.6 Changes in Irish Practice

Obviously the purpose of adoption has changed greatly: from the early days of domestic adoption until the swing towards ICA. Children, in recent years, were no longer being voluntarily relinquished in Ireland, and those that might have been were held back by parental veto. There simply weren't children available for domestic adoption, so Ireland looked outside for adoptees. Now I feel Ireland is changing, following the American and the UK models, making those children who have been failed by their parents available for adoption. The big block for many years has been the fact that if a child came from a marital family, then they were unavailable, but that block has now been removed.

There are many instances when, for children coming into care, adoption is a perfectly viable option, it is genuinely in their best interests. It does seem strange, for example, that throughout Europe there are many children in long term institutional care and yet the same countries are bringing in children through intercountry adoption while ignoring the adoption needs of so many of their



own. That correlation is a troubling one. Look at the Hague Convention⁵⁴. The number of adoptions in America has fallen precipitously, because Hague has distinct standards about fraud, and standards of work, and it prohibits any practices that facilitate the commodification of children. All of which is extremely good, but the net effect is that very many children who could perhaps benefit from adoption, don't get that opportunity.

In recent years there have been some real changes. The legal and social acceptance of adoption by same sex couples, for example, has changed things hugely. Ireland would also seem to be on track to consider making more children who have been abused, or neglected, available for adoption. I think surrogacy will bring additional changes. There are now hundreds of surrogate parents in Ireland and in future quite a few prospective adopters, if they can afford it, will look towards surrogacy as an alternative to adoption. It is an attractive option for some parents as it provides a genetic link to the child and, as time goes on, some form of genetic editing may come into play. So I suspect we're drifting towards a more customised form of adoption practice.

4.7 Past Practice Shaping Future Trends

Adoption in Ireland has a short history. Prior to the Adoption Act 1952⁵⁵, and even in the first few decades after the Act, adoption practice was limited in many ways, some of which were attributable to the standing of the Catholic Church and the marital family under the Constitution. It has certainly improved since then.

Since the seventies and eighties, except for the embargo on children from marital families and the legal complications governing disclosure of origins information, adoption practice in Ireland would seem to have been increasing in professionalism, if decreasing in volume. Prior to the seventies it was a different thing altogether. So many children were sent off to America and other places, because we couldn't provide a proper service here in Ireland, by processes that were sometimes questionable. I think what we're doing now is good professional practice, and it compares favourably with anywhere else.

Adoption happens in a social context, and as that context changed in Ireland, so too did adoption.



In recent years there have been some real changes. The legal and social acceptance of adoption by same sex couples, for example, has changed things hugely.



It was reshaped by all those outside influences - changes to family law, socio-economic benefits, and contraception. People still imagine adoption in Ireland to be by third parties or 'strangers', but in fact it has always very largely been step-parent and kinship in nature. It's shrinking considerably everywhere now. As things stand, we have really got to ask ourselves, "are we allowing adoption to address the welfare needs of the children who are going to be otherwise left vulnerable?" There should be a better fit between adoption and the children who need it. Throughout Europe, there are too many children left in institutional care and in uncertain foster care, or being shunted between foster homes, when they deserve and should have a permanent family home. I think we need to look at how we correlate the use of ICA, surrogacy and the other routes people will take to find parenting. We need to look at that correlation alongside the children who are left in State care, and find better ways of adjusting it.

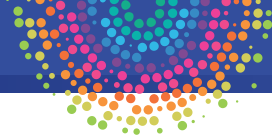
I am happy enough with what I did in adoption. We owe it to our children, whether they are adopted or not, to ensure that they fully understand their history and are able to have the choices that they should have in terms of being in touch with their kith and kin. I have had to live all that, so it has kept it alive for me.

54. HCCH, *Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (The Netherlands. 1993). <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>.

55. "Adoption Act, 1952," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1952/act/25/enacted/en/print.html>

Chapter
5

**Dr Eileen
Conway**



Having completed a postgraduate course in UCD, Eileen Conway qualified as a social worker in 1976. As a social worker she worked for the Eastern Health Board and later for R.G.A.S. (Rotunda Girl's Aid Society). In the 1990s she worked part time in fostering in the Eastern Health Board (later to become the Health Service Executive) while also working as the Senior Counsellor in the H.A.R.I. unit of the Rotunda Hospital counselling couples on an I.V.F programme. She also undertook occasional adoption assessments for the Protestant adoption society, *Pact* From 1996 to 2000 she was a part time lecturer in T.C.D. teaching an adoption module to social studies undergraduates, and postgraduate Social Work students. She completed her PhD in 2000, entitled "Adoption Policy and Practice in Ireland in the 1980s"⁵⁶. In the same year her work in HSE, later Tusla, moved from fostering to a Search and Reunion team. She continued to lecture and work until her retirement in 2020.

When I taught an adoption module in Trinity College, one of my favourite quotes was the following:

Adoption has never been an entirely rational process. Much feeling, fantasy, denial, projection and displacement are involved in the highly charged experiences of giving up a child, or not bearing a child and subsequently taking a child who was born to other parents. Adoption therefore, is bound to be a highly subjective emotional experience. (Andrews, 1979, p17.)⁵⁷

I liked it because it summed up the complexity for all parties to the adoption.

When I started part-time teaching, I was giving a course on social work methods (hard to make interesting) but later moved to presenting a module called The Adoption Triangle (easy to make interesting). The course comprised research findings with examples (anonymised) of my work on an information and tracing team in the HSE, later Tusla. What struck me each year was that there were several people who would come up to me after class to say that they were adopted, or a sister had given up a baby for adoption or maybe

an elderly female relative might have given up a child, and what advice did I have. These questions drove home how universal adoption is in society, and very often hidden. One year, a student (who was adopted), answering my exam question, railed against me for posing the question "Adoption is structured out of loss. Discuss"⁵⁸. This student had never spoken in class, but must have found it hard to hear about loss as well as gains in the adoption story.

An abiding theme of the module was identifying those losses and gains for the three parties to the adoption. The students had no trouble listing off the losses for the birth mother and the adopted person but had difficulty in understanding the huge loss involved for the adoptive parents, their infertility constituting a life crisis. This was probably due to their youthful status and they listened with empathy to the details of the long and gruelling road of IVF and other fertility treatments. Before moving on, I need to retrace my own steps from being a student myself in UCD to working in social work.

5.1 Early Beginnings: Mid 1970s – 1980s

I'd been working for the Health Board for two years before I went back to do the postgrad in social

56. Eileen Conway, "Adoption Policy and Practice in Ireland in the 1980s," PhD diss., University College Dublin, 2000.

57. Roberta G. Andrews, "A clinical appraisal of searching," *Public Welfare* 37, no. 3 (1979): 15-21.

58. This question was based on work by J. W. Small, "Working with adoptive families." *Public Welfare* 45, no. 3 (1987): 33-41.

work. It was a one-year postgrad in a university, you had to have a degree in social science, and then you had to get some experience in the workplace before you could apply. So, for experience, I spent two years working out in the community. Working with families, taking children into care, organising home help - it was a really mixed area. I worked in two separate parts of one city. One area was very underprivileged, but in the second area, while I worked with families with problems, there were a lot of other supports in the community that I could draw on. So as part of that I was aware of people working with children in foster care, and that led me onto thinking that I would like to do something in adoption.

When I got onto the postgrad course, I asked for a placement in adoption. It was quite hard to get - it was seen as a specialised area. I was very lucky, I got a placement in Barnardos⁵⁹ with the then manager, and she was a real pioneer in the field of adoption in Ireland. That particular placement was to do with assessments, and I got really good supervision from the manager, so it was a huge learning experience.

5.2 Assessments and Placements (1980s)

When I went back after the postgrad, I started working for the Health Board, and I signalled that I wanted to work in adoption and fostering. There was plenty of work, there were a lot of babies for placement. I was working with very different clients. The prospective adoptive parents were not coming to us because they had a problem. They did have a problem if they could not have a baby, but the work we did with them was not problem-centred. We were looking for them to tell us about their strengths - the “*problem*” we were trying to solve was whether these applicants were going to be able to meet the needs of a child. So, it was a very positive area, and it was child-centred. We had to be really able to present in our report at the end that this child’s needs could be met. We talked to prospective parents about the kind of child that they could parent, and the kind of difficulties that they might be able to work with. At the end of all that, there would be a clear idea about this couple.

I was sometimes uncovering things that I knew meant I could not recommend a couple to the local adoption committee. However, with most people, I was usually putting in a positive recommendation.



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5.3 Developing Personal Professionalism

I remember my first placement, introducing myself very formally to the adoptive applicants. The couple introduced themselves much more informally, and it was a wonderful learning curve for me because they were setting the tone. “*We’re here, but we’re not here because we’ve a problem, we’re all on a level playing field*”. That was very good for me to see. Obviously I was having good supervision, so I was able to discuss and reflect on all of those areas. I quickly learned that, while I was bringing some professional expertise to it, I had to be on my toes.

In those days, boundaries were different. At one point, part of the area I was covering was near my home, and I would not choose to do that again. People knew where I lived, they would ring me at home or ask questions if I bumped into them locally. Most people were very respectful, but I had a few who were chasing me up. That was difficult - there was very little between you and the people you were working with.

5.4 Adoption in the Health Boards

The Health Boards were empowered to place children for adoption in their own rights by the 1952 Act⁶⁰, but a number of them also chose to register as an Adoption Society with a different name. They had their own case committees in the Health Board. Voluntary adoption agencies often had case committees drawn from a multitude of backgrounds, whereas the Health Boards tended to have mostly social workers on the committee, alongside some admin people who might be chairing it.

59. “Our Work,” Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

60. “Adoption Act, 1952,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1952/act/25/enacted/en/print.html>



Other countries had adoption law before we did - in Ireland, we were behind. Yet the same human issues were at play.



In the early years, many agencies were working independently. The Adoption Board, as it was then, would go out and visit the agencies, but while they could make recommendations, and they had ultimate powers about registering agencies, one visit every six months might not have given them a real picture of practice.

5.5 Adoptions from Mother and Baby Homes

If you went to a placement meeting in one of the Mother and Baby homes, you would already have your adoptive family approved, and you would be told to come on a certain day, and present your report. Then there would be a list of babies available. The job, for the committee, was to see which baby they would place with which family. There were pages of babies, and the younger babies were always placed first, which meant some children on the list began to get older without being adopted. Doctors had to sign the babies off with the phrase “*fit for adoption*”, using certain criteria. So, if the birth mother had a psychiatric condition for example, they might have delayed that child being adopted. None of us approved of that. As the child got older, they became less “*adoptable*”.

There was a cohort of children in that particular home who were three and four, who just could not be placed. Some of them had medical conditions, which did not preclude adoption, but they had not been selected for adoption yet. If a couple could have a two-month-old baby with no medical problems, it was unlikely that they were going to opt to have an older child with more demanding needs. But one particular nun up there was great. When the actual placement committee meeting was over, she’d always drag me out and say “*come on, come up to the nursery*”. She’d bring me up, and she’d point out these different children, and she’d say “*now I want you to find a home for him, so when*

you’re doing your next assessment, I want you to really concentrate on him”.

After the Home, if children were not placed for fostering or adoption by the age of 4, they went to an orphanage that was run by the same order, and then sometimes they would be placed from there. I had known that, in previous years before my time, if they were not placed from the orphanage, they then went to these industrial schools. That was a terrible fate for children. By the time I was working, I was not aware of children going to industrial schools.

5.6 Stigma, Secrecy and Shame – the International Context

We were not specifically trained in what was happening in other countries, in terms of adoption. It was only when I did my own research, and started doing a literature review, that the pieces fitted into place, and even then I only really had access to the literature on English speaking countries. Other countries had adoption law before we did – in Ireland, we were behind. Yet the same human issues were at play. It would have been so helpful, as a social worker, to have been aware of those studies when you were counselling birth mothers for instance.

A big study done in Australia⁶¹ looked at women who had given up their babies maybe thirty years before. What they found, of course, was that the grief did not really go away. There used to be the notion that for these women “*it’s a new start, she’ll make a new life*”. But that Australian study found that, for a lot of women, it just got worse over the years - the grief, each milestone, each birthday, and so on. That study gave direct quotes, as well as the statistics. Years later, when I was doing the tracing work, I would sit there, and a birth mother that I would have located would be using the same phrases that the Australian women had said. Things like “*I came home having had the baby, and my mother said ‘now we’ll never talk about this again’.*” Or “*your father must never hear about this*”. It was word-for-word. So all these kind of phrases that meant that the grief was not explored in any way. The women had this grief that had to go under - that had to be suppressed.

America had the first adoption law back in Massachusetts in 1851. So they were ahead of us in many ways, but then they had some similar

61. Robin Winkler and Margaret Van Keppel, *Relinquishing Mothers in Adoption: Their Long-Term Adjustment* (Melbourne, Institute of Family Studies, 1984).

religious influences. Here in Ireland in the early days, there was a fear of proselytism⁶² - that a Catholic child would go to a Protestant family. In the USA, Charles Loring Brace founded the Children Aid Society and began the Orphan Train movement. It was literally trailers - this was before motorised vehicles - crossing and placing children with rural families in America. They were mostly babies of Catholic families who were being placed with Protestant farming families, and in that situation there was quite an anti-Catholic bias that emerged when you read about it. We think we are very unique in Ireland, but the sad history was that across all these countries, unwed motherhood was a stigma. A moral element forced women to give up their babies.

In America, because they had earlier adoption laws, they also had earlier trained social workers than we did. Unwed mothers were seen as morally corrupt, they were “*bad*”, but then later there was a psychoanalytic⁶³ view of it, and then the woman who had a baby outside marriage was seen as “*mad*”. There was an argument that this was some unconscious desire to be angry with her parents or with society. There was also a racist element to that train of thought - the white mothers giving birth were seen as working out some unconscious issues, whereas women in the black population, they were seen as lazy or “*morally corrupt*”, that’s the phrase they used. I am glad we did not go down that route in Ireland. It passed us by, but we’re still playing catch up in other ways.

5.7 Innovation and Developing Practice: Group meetings for Prospective Adoptive Parents

There were influential social workers who had trained in England earlier in their careers before returning to Ireland. There was one wonderful social worker who had come back to work in the Health Board, in Children’s Section. She influenced a whole generation of social workers of my age, because, from my perspective, she brought a depth. There was a lot of learning going on, we would go into Children’s Section and we would have meetings, and that is how some of those ideas got passed down.

I was also really influenced by Barnardos⁶⁴, and by the manager there at the time. They were very

progressive in my view. They worked alongside Church of Ireland social services who offered birth mothers the opportunity of meeting the adoptive parents prior to the placement. That was unheard of - it took a long while for other agencies to catch up with that. I think Barnardos also started the idea of having group meetings for prospective adoptive parents. Among other things, it was practical. It was a good way to reassure people on the waiting list that we would get to them, and in the meantime it gave them things to consider. A colleague and I tried to bring in a couple of changes to streamline things in our own workplace - to prepare people - so we started similar group meetings. The applicants did not have to talk about themselves, but they were able to hear, in a group setting, what was coming - what we would be talking about in the assessment, and the reasons we would be talking about them. They began to see it as a preparation for meeting a child. We started to have those meetings every few months.

Sometimes, when people heard what was involved, they withdrew their application. Some people might not have been prepared to talk about their infertility, or it was just too hard for them and they did not want to go there, so they withdrew. I only dealt with the adoptive parents at that stage. I think it was felt to be better practise - the birth mother had her own social worker, who was not conflicted in any way with the needs of the adoptive parents.

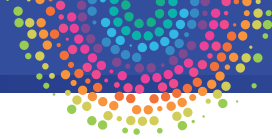
5.8 Working with Birth Mothers

I worked in a number of different agencies in the 1980s, and often did sessional work. One very old agency I worked for at that time had been set up in the last century to meet the needs of unmarried Catholic women giving birth in the Rotunda Hospital, a traditionally Protestant hospital. While I still did assessments, I also worked with young pregnant women there. By that time, they were typically either living in flats or at home. They came in to see me on their lunch break, sometimes with their mother or sister. Things had loosened up and we were doing much more talking then, about ways they could keep their child. Looking back now, though, there was still the stigma at that time. They were still saying “*oh no I can’t, I really can’t bring up this child*”. Of course, we were only meeting those women who had already more or less decided

62. Proselytism refers to the policy of attempting to convert people’s religious or political beliefs, in this case, religious

63. Leontine Young, *Out of Wedlock: A Study of the Problems of the Unmarried Mother and her Child* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954).

64. “Our Work,” Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.



to have their baby adopted. There were lots of young women who were keeping their children, but we weren't seeing them.

5.9 Varying Supervision

Supervision was a challenge sometimes. If they were working for what was essentially a religious organisation, a social worker's only supervision might be with a priest or nun who was not qualified to provide proper social work supervision. At times like that, it's important to rely on colleagues. I had informal peer supervision with one of my colleagues, which was great. If I had a difficult case, I could sit with her and talk things out. In another agency I worked for, there was a cultural difference, a different religious ethos, a very rich one. I got very good supervision in that setting with a social worker, and whenever I went to the committee, they were very supportive.

5.10 Obtaining Birth Mother Consent

The main pressure as a social worker in adoption was the expectation that you would keep the waiting list moving. We accepted our job, it was just the way it was. And it was only later that I reflected on how hard that work was, particularly bringing a mother along to do the consent for adoption. At the time, it was just part of it. The literature says that, in the giving of consent for adoption, the social worker was the designated agent to accept that consent, to conduct that piece of work. We went into the solicitor's office with the birth mother, and she had to put her hand on the bible and literally swear away her child's life, so to speak – to promise that she would not be involved again with the child. That was really difficult, emotionally, for everyone involved.

In the 1980s, a lot of these young women had jobs, they were living in a flat or living at home, there were much more supports for them. The Unmarried Mothers' Allowance had come in by then. Yet, I think they still didn't feel that they could bring a child home. Some of their families knew they were pregnant. So, for people now, it is very hard to fully understand why they did not keep their child, and how long that stigma held. That in turn is difficult for adopted people, particularly younger adopted people. For older adults it was easier, but if someone younger came back to get their information and heard that their mother was working full-time, they might wonder why she did not keep them. So that was another role for the

social worker to play. If you were talking to younger people, you were trying to explain that it was a different era.

I think the nature of adoption at that time was weighted slightly more towards the adoptive parents than the birth mothers, in terms of responding to their needs. Some agencies were dealing with too many birth mothers for the number of staff they had, and they were only seen once or twice before they gave birth, and maybe once afterwards, if at all⁶⁵. Looking back, in my view that was not good enough really, for birth mothers. The various agencies had different approaches. I thought that every agency worked the same way – being upfront, and telling people things, but I found that no, it was not always like that. In my view, due to the numbers of babies they were trying to place, I think they may have felt that they had to present the babies as “acceptable” in order for them to be adopted.

In the day-to-day counselling, I was saying to birth mothers *“look can we please go through what might change? When your baby is born you might feel differently, so can we think about that?”* I was trying, at that level, to bring up the possibility of changes once the baby came. At the micro level, I would be trying to help individual women explore those possibilities. So often, once the baby was born, they did feel differently. However, in a broader scope, we had to go along with the fact that this mother has indicated that she wants her baby placed, and a family will be selected. It is very strange looking back now – why would anybody have to give up a child? So much has changed since 1952. As social workers, we went with the system as it was.

5.11 Birth Fathers

I really did not have any contact with birth fathers. I might have met one or two - obviously if a woman wanted to bring in her boyfriend or partner, yes of course, you would be glad to see them. From what I recall, we did not seek them out really, and I believe that is consistent with the literature from other countries about that time. The father was usually “PF” - the putative father - one writer⁶⁶ said that in most cases, the father was considered more “*fugitive*” than “*putative*”. Now, I am sure that changed over the years, but in the early days from what I recall a lot of these birth mothers got pregnant on the first time of meeting, and

65. Eileen Farrelly Conway, “Adoption Policy and Practice in Ireland in the 1980s” (PhD diss., University College Dublin, 2000).

66. Michael Humphrey, *The Hostage Seekers* (London: Longmans, 1969).



Part of it dealt with the situation where a married woman gave birth to a child who was not the biological child of her husband. They were called “extramarital cases”, and they were very hard.



they almost did not know, sometimes, what was happening. There could be thousands of men out there who have children they do not know about. In the 1994 Keegan⁶⁷ case, which went to the European Court, the birth father’s rights were deemed not to have been taken into account. After that case, social workers were obliged to seek out the father’s opinion, whether he wanted to apply for guardianship and so on. He had to be informed, so that obviously did change practice, and we had to get training after it.

5.12 Changing Adoption Legislation

One element of the 1974 Adoption Act⁶⁸ said that if a birth mother was delaying her decision, the Order could be brought forward, if it was deemed to be reasonable. I do not remember it ever going to court, but I certainly would have had situations where a mother was really unable to do the final consent. That was obviously very stressful for the adoptive parents, because the child might have been there for 6 months or more, and the social worker’s job was to try and support them through a very uncertain period. That was one reason why the birth mother had her *own* social worker. You weren’t pressuring her. You were able to be there for the adoptive parents’ uncertainty and worry, without in any way influencing what the birth mother was going to do.

I remember the McL⁶⁹ case too. The birth parents were able to prove that the birth mother had not been informed of her right to withdraw her consent

up to the making of the Adoption Order so the order was null and void. That called into question the validity of all other Adoption Orders. As a result of that, the Adoptive Parents Association was founded in 1976, and that was to have the rights of adopted children placed on a legal footing with other children. After the Adoption Act 1976⁷⁰, an absolute sheaf of new forms came out to us all, because now there had to be very specific questions put to the birth mother when she was signing the Order. She had to be told that she could be heard by the Board, and that she could be informed by the Board when the Order was to be made. So as a social worker you had to do much more paperwork, but it was obviously going to cover every aspect, and that was absolutely correct.

The Status of Children Act⁷¹ in 1987 was important to adoption. Part of it dealt with the situation where a married woman gave birth to a child who was not the biological child of her husband. They were called “*extramarital cases*”, and they were very hard. You had to prove that her husband was not the father of the child before the Order could be made. So you had to find adoptive parents who were going to be able to hold out for quite a while without an Order. In the meantime, the birth mother had to go and swear affidavits with corroborating witnesses that her husband had not been with her during that period. I think some Adoption Societies may have been sending those cases up to Northern Ireland to be dealt with which, if this was the case, was not good practice. So that was a problem in our system, and the Status of Children Act dealt with it. We knew that various governments were trying to bring in different bills over the years, but a lot of those lapsed. Eventually, the Adoption Act of 1988⁷² dealt with the big issue of adoption of a child of a married couple, making it possible under certain circumstances.

The years following the 1952 Act were characterised by stigma attached to single parenthood. There was a lot of secrecy, and a large number of babies were waiting for a home. There were far more babies than there were families. By the end of the 1980s, the number of baby adoptions had declined

67. European Court of Human Rights, *Case of Keegan v. Ireland* (Strasbourg, 1994). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57881>.

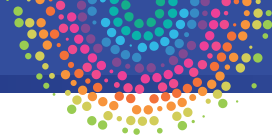
68. “Adoption Act, 1974: Section 3,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1974/act/24/section/3/enacted/en/html>.

69. M. and M. V An Bord Uchtala and the AG (1977) I.R.287 (referred to as the McL case), see: Department of Health, *Adoption: report of review committee on adoption services* (Dublin, 1984), 3-4, <https://www.lenus.ie/handle/10147/45641>.

70. “Adoption Act, 1976,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed April 23, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1976/act/29/enacted/en/html>

71. “Status of Children Act, 1987,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1987/act/26/section/46/enacted/en/html>.

72. “Adoption Act, 1988,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed April 23, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1988/act/30/enacted/en/html>



When you did a search on behalf of a birth mother, and the adopted person was sitting there saying “well actually my parents split up when I was a child” - that had repercussions on what you were going to be telling the birth mother.



considerably, and by the 1990s there were very few domestic adoptions.

5.13 Adoption Research (1980's)

I became interested in how different adoption agencies worked. I wondered if adoptive applicants could be turned down by one agency and later be accepted by another. What policies underpinned social work practice? What was the decision making process in adoption agencies? These questions led me to undertake an empirical study of the policies and practices of Irish adoption agencies. The source of the data was the nineteen registered adoption agencies who were concerned with the majority of adoptions. The study took place in 1983-1984. Major themes were the development of Irish adoption legislation, the administration and staffing of the agencies, eligibility and suitability criteria which applicants had to meet, the decision making process, procedures for placement of a baby with the adoptive parents and agency service to birth parents. The study resulted in a Ph.D. dissertation: *Adoption Policy and Practice in Ireland in the 1980's*.⁷³

5.14 Search and Reunion Work (2000's)

I spent a lot of time working in the Fostering Resource Group, but as time went by, adoptions dwindled, and we were doing fostering assessments. Eventually, the Fostering Resource Group was disbanded, and the staff went to different areas of work. Some of us became a Search and Reunion team in the HSE. By that stage there was a huge backlog, but it was a different sort of backlog. It was a backlog of people coming back, looking to find their families. There was an

emerging number of birth mothers - it was very slow, but it built up - birth mothers who suddenly realised that they could come back. Over the years, birth mothers did write in and enquired about their children. The policy was that they would be written to, and we'd say *“thank you it's great to have your new address, if your child ever comes looking, we'll be in touch with you”*. There was nothing active undertaken on behalf of the birth mother however. Then that began to change. I think in some ways we wrote a lot of our own rules. There weren't very specific rules in place, and by that stage, there was a good bit of contact with other agencies through the Central Council of Irish Adoption Agencies. There were training days, and we were hitting ideas off each other, in terms of good practice.

In Search and Reunion work, you saw the full circle of the adoption story. When you were doing an assessment, it was only a little snapshot of this family, and you did not know what they were going to be like a few more years down the road, for example. When you did a search on behalf of a birth mother, and the adopted person was sitting there saying *“well actually my parents split up when I was a child”* - that had repercussions on what you were going to be telling the birth mother. She might have parted with her child in an era where she was told *“your child will be better with two parents”*. And now, you're going back, and you have to tell her this. When I lectured, I used to always say to the students *“now, just think - what kind of anger might that bring up?”* Things like, *“I could have done that as well myself”*, or *“society made me believe I wouldn't be good enough on my own, but in fact my child didn't have two parents”*. Most of the people we dealt with had good adoptive experiences, but not everybody had a good outcome. With the birth mother there was the moment when she was parting with her child, again a snapshot moment for you as a social worker. But then, when you came to do a search and you either found her, or she wanted you to find her child, then you were looking at her whole lifetime. She was going back over her whole life, telling you about the whole process of parting with her child, and what happened. People usually had very complicated stories. It was not a rosy picture.

We also ran groups to help people who were interested in searching. They didn't have to share their stories at all, but we did a couple of one-day

73. Eileen Farrelly Conway, *“Adoption Policy and Practice in Ireland in the 1980s”* (PhD diss., University College Dublin, 2000).

groups, just to help people envisage what might be ahead. We often had adoptions where there were other siblings placed, which people would never think of. So we'd have a discussion in the group where we'd put the question, "do you think you might have other siblings?" Mostly people said "oh yeah, I'm sure my mother got married, I'm sure there are" and then you might have to say "have you ever thought that your mother might have placed more than one child for adoption?" People would be so taken aback at that idea, and that was important to have those discussions because there could be quite a lot of judgmental attitudes. People would say "how could you give up more than one baby?" But, in reality, you could have multiple family members placed by different agencies. So it was complex, but it was very good to air the topic.

Somewhere in the 2000's, Search and Reunion began to be referred to as Information and Tracing. I found the change of name interesting. I wondered if the concepts of searching and reunion were too emotional for some. Information and Tracing had a very pragmatic ring to it which I felt did not echo the expectations, fears, and joys of those looking for their birth relatives.

There was a rising growth of movement from adopted people saying "we need to have access to our records". People were becoming more vocal about that. As social workers, we were in favour of that too, although it might not have seemed that way. It might have seemed like we were preventing people from having information.

I was asked to give a paper at the Central Council of Irish Adoption Agencies meeting on 19th January 1990, on the subject of the adoption triangle⁷⁴. I remember standing and saying to all my fellow social workers, "we need to be ahead of this, we need to be making our policies, not waiting for the sort of pressure that will be coming. We need to be proactive". I referred to the American experience. American adoption law was different, it was much older than ours, and people were writing about the experience of being adopted. The adoption records were sealed State-by-State, so an adoptee would have to go to the courts if they wanted information, and it was very rarely released. Adopted people did not want social workers involved in the process, and they were moving towards self-help groups. I remember saying at that meeting "look, we don't

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I remember saying at that meeting "look, we don't want that to be our role, we have something to offer here. While we can't give out identifying names, we can work with people".

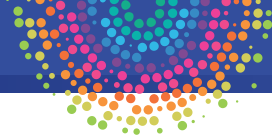
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want that to be our role, we have something to offer here. While we can't give out identifying names, we can work with people". Afterwards, I got the opportunity to turn that into an occasional paper for an Irish university. I was very pleased to be asked. It just looked like a tiny little book, but it was really setting out a case for each of the parties responding to the adoption triangle.

There were pockets of social workers who felt the same way as I did. The Council of Irish Adoption Agencies were becoming increasingly involved, providing training days as a way of bringing us together. Sometimes people were working on their own with little opportunity for supervision, so that was how we kept in touch. The Adoption Board and Authority did it too - they were doing training days, and they invited me to do one of those alongside a few other speakers. The Authority called all the agencies working in the area of tracing to come in, and we had a whole day in there with the opportunity to discuss our ideas. I think we felt the freedom to welcome people back, first of all, who may have previously made an attempt to search, and might not have been met with that kind of welcome. I think that, in the past, in some adoption societies, they might have turned away people who were looking.

When you were doing assessments or placements, it was a short moment in time. However, by the time somebody was coming back to look for their child, or an adult adopted person was looking for their birth parent, you were seeing a whole lifetime. You were seeing how the adoption had worked out, what information people had shared, what information they were willing to share. Information and tracing changed hugely over time. In the beginning,

74. Arthur D. Sorosky, Annette Baran, and Reuben Pannor, *The adoption triangle: the effects of the sealed record on adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents* (Massachusetts: Anchor Press, 1978).



adoptive parents were not given very much information. Then, certainly in the Health Board, increasingly detailed information was provided, so that the parents could help their growing child have the sense of who their birth parents were. The information was usually just about the birth mother, there was very little available about birth fathers.

The tracing work was broad and very varied. We had a number of files belonging to an old, former adoption society for example. They had been placing children with families before there was legal adoption. They were fostering situations, but they were permanent, so they were really de-facto adoptions. The individuals had their own name, and they had all their own information. They would come back to us as older people looking for information, and from that society we had big ledgers from the time when they had been fostered. Yet, some of the records were kept in Latin. So as part of that information and tracing work, I was trying to decipher Latin, trying to understand what had been written about a particular birth mother, for example. The ledger typically had very sparse details: the mother's name and address, her age, where the child went, and any donations, such as *"pram provided"* or *"ten shillings given towards"* something or other. They were financial records, because these people got some financial help for fostering the children, so that was different to what we dealt with in adoption tracing.

5.15 Approach to Clients in Information and Tracing

When adopted people came in to do a search, they were often very apologetic. They maybe had not told anybody they were doing this search, they might be feeling guilty towards their parents. From the very start in the information and tracing service, we said we would draw on what we knew from worldwide research. The literature showed that adopted people had a need to know about their origins. So, straight away, you were able to say *"you're very welcome here, we'd be very glad to go on this journey with you and it's a very normal thing to do."* We would also explain that we knew, from research in other countries, that searching for information was a very usual thing for adopted people to want to do. So people were enormously relieved. That was the starting point, but that was an important starting point, because people often felt that they did not have a right to come back. Sometimes they felt guilty. We were often dealing with people who had been back to other agencies prior to us, and had

not got a warm reception. Where they did not get past the front door, and maybe they were told *"Why do you want to do this? Why do you want to go looking? Haven't you had a good life?"* A lot of people had not told their adoptive parents they were searching, and they felt a tug of loyalty about doing it. Some said that they would not have searched for information while their adoptive parents were alive, and only commenced the process after they had died. So, there was a certain amount of guilt engendered in other places. We were starting with a much more free approach. We were very much welcoming people back.

For me, information and tracing was the most satisfying part of any adoption work I did. Even when things did not work out well, there was still huge positivity about it. You actually felt you were making a difference, and in a lot of areas of social work, you do not feel that.

Initially we would just ask clients about how their adoption had been. We would ask what kind of information they already had, because sometimes it was different from the information we had. Now and then, I think adoption agencies either left out some of the background information when talking to adoptive parents, or they would possibly inflate the information a little bit. So the adopted person might say, for example that their birth mother had been a nurse. We would have the record card, saying that while she did work in a hospital, her occupation was domestic work, not nursing. At times, we knew we would be sharing difficult information. We were trying to gauge when to say it. We would say *"is there information that I might have, that you'd find very difficult to hear?"* and we would work from there. We did not hold things back, we did share any information we had.

You were building a working relationship with people, and you were acknowledging that there was a power imbalance in that relationship, because you were the one with the information. I would say *"I'm sitting here with information you don't have, and that must be difficult"* so you would acknowledge that straight away. When you told an adopted person the name their birth mother had given them, they got very emotional. Sometimes they said *"oh I'd hate to have been called that"*, but names are hugely significant, and there are usually stories about how you got your name in the family. So finding that out can be very powerful. Then we would tell them the mother's name, unless she had a very unusual first name.



Photos were always a good talking point. We would suggest that they might bring some photographs of themselves at a younger age.



When you had shared what you could, you would usually know whether they wanted you to go looking for their birth mother. Now you might have already started checking records, but you would not actually have approached anybody. So you would say *“I’m going to start now”*. You would say *“I’ve given you a certain amount of information, will you leave it with me now to do the next piece?”*, and the majority would say yes.

5.16 Group Sessions in Information and Tracing

We started running preparation groups for people who were on the waiting lists for information and tracing. They were just one-day sessions. From time to time, people would say that they did not know anybody else who was adopted, or who would understand why they wanted to look for information. It was not a therapeutic group, people weren’t expected to talk about themselves. Instead, we discussed topics. We also did role plays between us, where a social worker would act in the role of the client. That released tension – the group members were able to have a laugh with us - but it was also a great way to bring up difficult topics. For example, you might have one birth mother who had placed two or three children. Nobody ever really expected that. At one stage, we were aware that everybody in the group had a sibling, so we did a role play about that scenario, to try and prepare them for it. They would not ever think that there had been another child – a sibling - placed for adoption. That was often quite a hard thing to take in, because in their minds people may have decided something like *“oh, my mother made one mistake.”* It was difficult for them to consider that she might have placed more than one child. When we were working with those birth mothers directly, we would be trying to get some sense of their lives, to understand how it had happened.

5.17 Reunions

Reunions were a humbling experience. They were

unpredictable. As a social worker, you thought you had set things up a particular way, and then on the actual day people just did exactly the opposite of what you’d thought they would do. To prime them, you would say *“this is going to be very delicate”* and you would suggest that maybe for the first day they would keep to general topics. I used to say to them *“it’s like being on a first date, you don’t need to tell them everything straight away”*.

We would have worked with both sides prior to the meeting, so you might have met with people three or four times beforehand, to talk about their expectations. That was the big thing. If the reunion meeting did not go well, it was generally because of mismatched expectations. A birth mother might have been hoping to walk into this room and start a mother-daughter relationship, or a mother-son relationship, as if nothing had happened. Then the adopted person might be saying to you, as a social worker, that they only wanted to meet her once, just to get their medical history. So you were trying to talk to people and prepare them. You would be trying to give some idea, on either side, of what was hoped for.

Photos were always a good talking point. We would suggest that they might bring some photographs of themselves at a younger age. That was often a light-hearted moment, because when they discussed it, you might have a birth mother saying *“look at all my fashion mistakes over the years”* and they’d both look at photographs and then the birth mother might say *“oh my goodness, that was you as a baby, you look just like so-and-so in the family”*.

Reunions generally took place in our office. People were coming from all over the country and they were willing to travel, but you had a better sense of being able to control it in our office, rather than the alternative, which was meeting in a hotel. That was much more difficult, and it could go off on a tangent. In the office we had a nice designated room that was only for these meetings. We tried to create a comfortable setup, because people are terribly sensitive to the environment. People would say that in certain settings, even the smell of a place would bring them back to an unpleasant memory. The smell of a convent hallway to a birth mother, for example. So we tried to make it comfortable, to avoid that kind of trigger.

If you had a reunion in the office, you could time it so that people would not arrive together. You might have the more vulnerable person arriving earlier, and you would have talked to them about things



Occasionally at the meeting, the birth mother would call their adult child by the name they had given them as a baby. A lot of women could not remember details, and that could be upsetting for the adopted person.



that could break the ice. It was better for you, as the social worker to acknowledge it all. To say “this is a strange thing, I’m actually introducing you”. Once they had met, we would get a bit of a chat going around the photos, and then we would leave and we would make them coffee or tea. If they were feeling comfortable we would say “look I’m going to leave you now and I’ll be around”. Sometimes people would say to you in advance “*don’t leave me on my own, I won’t know what to say*”. Then often when the meetings started they’d kind of nod to you to say “*it’s fine, I’m fine, I’ll be fine*”. You would come back then to wrap up the meeting, sometimes giving a little nudge by asking if they had swapped phone numbers. At that stage, they would just know first names, but sometimes you would come back to the meeting and they would have told each other everything. If that was their decision, that was fine. We tried to keep the meetings to about an hour. That was about as much as people really could take on the first day. People felt safe when you explained it all to them – that you would be there at the beginning, and wrap it up at the end, that you would walk one party out to the lift first and so on. Often people did not know how to part from each other.

Occasionally at the meeting, the birth mother would call their adult child by the name they had given them as a baby. A lot of women could not remember details, and that could be upsetting for the adopted person. They had often blanked out so much detail because it was just so painful giving up their child. So when you met them first, before the reunion, they often didn’t remember a lot. It was often the first time they had told their story. Then over time with meetings, and letting them retell the

story, you were listening at length with empathy and that began to take some of the toxic element out of it. Of course, it also brought back all the previous emotions - anger towards society, anger towards their parents, sometimes anger towards themselves. The women would sometimes wonder, in retrospect, why they had not done something different to keep the child. In those cases, at times I would read from their records what the social worker had recorded at the time, which often showed how or why the mother had done what she did. This could bring them huge relief. She would have been looking back with the strength she presently had, not thinking of how she was as a young woman who felt she did not have a choice. There was as much work after the reunion as there was before, because you would try to give people support for at least a couple of months afterwards, if they wanted it. Sometimes people had a very pragmatic approach – that they had got what they wanted from the meeting, and that was fine. If there were siblings you were sometimes contacting other agencies who had placed the sibling. That was very positive interagency cooperation, you would be preparing your own client and they’d be preparing theirs.

5.18 Tracing Birth Relatives

I was very much influenced by the people I was working with. Everyone had different strengths. One member of the team was wonderful with older birth mothers, and I would just listen to her on the phone. There was somebody else who was really brave about going out “doorstepping” people. We did not do that often, but sometimes you would have to, there was no other way. You would have to write and say that you were going to be in the area for the day, and would like to call in on them. It was not easy to arrive at a birth mother’s doorstep, often she was long deceased. I was greatly taken with how generous people were. At that time, an adopted person who was searching at sixty or sixty- five would have been adopted very early on after the first Adoption Act (1952)⁷⁵. Their mothers often went to their graves without anybody knowing that they had given up a child for adoption. So you would have to gradually make contact with her family, and go and see them, and sit down with maybe five or six siblings or half siblings, and tell them that their mother had another child. Often they really opened their arms to the adopted person, and they opened their arms to me as well. When the mother was deceased it brought back a lot of sad memories for

75. “Adoption Act, 1952,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1952/act/25/enacted/en/print.html>.

people, because it explained certain behaviours of that mother as she got older.

5.19 Search and Reunion in the Internet Age

People on the waiting list, especially young people, often went to use social media to search. With almost no information, they could find their families. It did not always work out, so we would ask people if possible not to go online to do a search, because it would often come as a shock. In some ways, though, we were using the internet ourselves as a way of finding people. We would subscribe to different registries in the UK - births, marriages and deaths – we would have an account with them, so that we could search their records. Eventually we were able to look at some street in some small town in England and actually look at the houses that the person was living in. That would sometimes give you an idea of what you were facing into. You might see fairly poor housing conditions, but then the information we had dated back so many years that things might have changed for them in the meantime, and we would say that to the adopted person.

Occasionally a birth mother might have written in and left new addresses or left new information, but it was rare. I would often say to the adopted person that life might not have been kind to her, and that when we did find her, she might have mental health issues, or addiction issues. In other cases, she might be doing fine but she might never have told her family. You would be trying to cover a huge range of possibilities in preparing the adopted person, so we ourselves used social media, as it sometimes helped us in the searching piece. When we started, all we had was Thom's Street Directory.

Those last fifteen years of doing the information and tracing, that was what made my job for me. I was completely in the flow - whatever was going on in my life, once I walked in the door and picked up the phone, that was it. It was so good to be in that position - there was a feeling of maybe undoing some of the sadness. You brought people together, and there was something very powerful about that, of having the privilege of doing that. People would share their stories with you and would gradually over time tell you more and more, and remember more and more.

5.20 Resources

The frustrations for me were solely about resources. Our waiting list got very long. It was three years long at one point, and it was getting longer all the time. We were promised additional help, from what I recall we had very concrete promises about numbers of staff, and we never got it. There was great support within the team, but at that time there were more resources still going into intercountry adoption. I felt it was uneven. The people we were trying to provide a service for needed good support, and at the time there were really very few babies coming in. Intercountry adoption was less busy than it had been. We were expecting staff to be moved from intercountry to support us, but it never happened.

Our manager was on leave, and I was temporarily acting up in the role. People were coming onto the list and they needed to be prioritised. If a birth mother applied, and she was of considerable age, I had to move her up the list. Then I would have to tell people that their wait would be longer than I had previously stated. It was particularly hard if you did the search for an adopted person, and their birth mother had died a year before, while they were still on the waiting list. People were heartbroken about that, and justifiably angry.

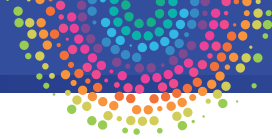
5.21 The Adoption Act 2010⁷⁶

The 2010 Act did not really affect us. We were a small team, and we were just doing tracing. We had a lot of interaction with adoption agencies, though. So I remember the ones that had to re-register after the Act, and in re-registering they had to decide which area of work they would go with – placement or tracing. One society had to re-register as two separate agencies in order to do both. I remember talking to colleagues who were struggling, in other agencies, with the changes the Act brought about, but I do not remember it affecting us. It did not change anything in terms of our work at the time.

5.22 Retirement

When I was coming up on my last year of work, I would be onto government departments, you know, different people we would be onto for information. People you'd get to know over time, you would have a contact here and there. I would be saying *'look I'm retiring in January and I won't be onto you again'*. Yet they would have a different attitude to

76. "Adoption Act, 2010," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.

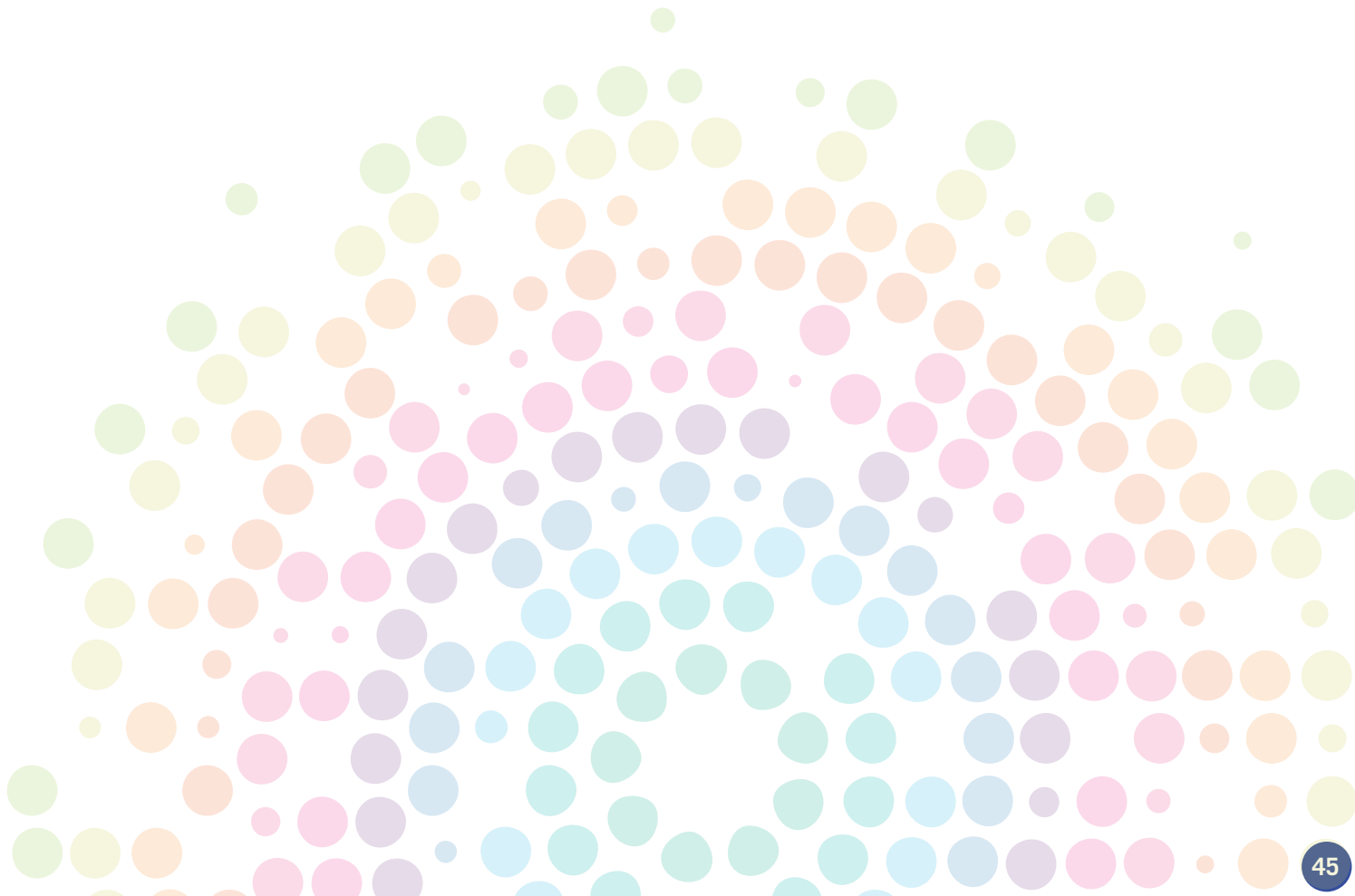


their own retirement; so many said things like *"I'm counting down the days, I've another fifteen years to go, I can't wait to be out of this job"*. So you see I am so glad, I am so lucky that I did not feel that way. I was not counting down the days.

In the years since I retired, things seemed to change very quickly, especially with GDPR. I could not have worked under that, I would have resigned. One of the perennial questions that would come up for ourselves, and would come up on training days, was understanding what constituted non-identifying information. Any information can become identifying if pieced together with something else. After the Adoption Order went through, the adoptive parents got a letter setting out this non-identifying information. It was quite thorough, and the idea was that adoptive parents could give their children a developing sense of who their birth mother was from it. I think the practise came out of placement committee meetings with some of those more senior social workers who had a lot of experience. It was good practise. However, at the same time, many agencies did not do that. Now, with GDPR, I do not

know how you could sit across from somebody and say *"you have no right to know any of this"*. Looking back, I would say that most social workers I worked with believed that people really had a need to their identity, so we gave people a lot of information. We told people the first names that their birth mother had given them, and we gave them her first name, unless it was something very unusual. We told them the area she came from and whether or not she had siblings. We did not give out identifying surnames or addresses - we were always very ethical - but we also trusted people.

There were all those moments where you were frustrated or upset or worried, all those things, but overall it was really the people who sat down and told you their story or who said *'I am so glad'*. Even when things did not work out, they would say *'I am so glad I had a chance to meet...'*. That was what made it for me. I do not feel any kind of connection to adoption now, as it is today. I worked until I was sixty-five and I loved it - I loved finishing on a good note. But now, I love not working. I feel like it is a different part of my life now.



Chapter
6

**Dr Valerie
O'Brien**



Dr. Valerie O'Brien served on the Adoption Board from 1998 – 2010. Having graduated from University College Dublin (UCD) with a degree in Social Science, she went to the UK, where she completed her Masters in Social Work and Social Policy and received her CQSW from the London School of Economics. She returned to Dublin in the mid-1980s, where she completed her Diploma in Family Therapy at the Mater hospital, and later completed a supervisor training in family therapy (1993). She worked first in Community Care with the Western Health Board, moving to a similar role with the Eastern Health Board where she worked as part of a team of extraordinary social workers who were involved in the development of foster care. She began working in UCD's School of Social Work and Social Policy in 1995, completing her PhD in 1997⁷⁷, and later held the roles of Director of Teaching and Learning, and Director of Postgraduate Studies. Moving to the UCD School of Medicine in 2018, she was appointed Programme Director of the Systemic Psychotherapy Programme, a role she still holds. She also continues to work as a lecturer, social worker, family therapist and supervisor, researcher and policy analyst.

Dr. O'Brien has published and presented widely on the subject of adoption. She was an academic advisor to the HSE Implementation Group for Alternative Care in 2013, and has served on numerous boards and committees, including the Board of the Irish Foster Care Association, the Irish Association of Social Workers' "Social Workers in Foster Care" sub-committee, Family Therapy Association of Ireland, Irish Council for Psychotherapy, and the European Family Therapy Association. In 2018, Dr. O'Brien co-authored "An Audit of Research on Adoption in Ireland, 1952 - 2017"⁷⁸ and "An Overview of Policy and Legislative Change in Ireland" (O'Brien & Mitra, 2018)⁷⁹, both of which were commissioned by the AAI.

77. Valerie O'Brien, "Fostering the Family: A New Systematic Approach to Evolving Networks of Relative Care" (PhD diss., University College Dublin, 1997).

78. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *Research on Adoption in Ireland 1952-2017* (Dublin, 2018). https://aai.gov.ie/images/Report_1_An_Audit_of_Research_on_Adoption_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.

79. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *An Overview of Adoption Policy and Legislative Change in Ireland* (Dublin, 2018), https://aai.gov.ie/images/Report_2_An_Overview_of_Policy_and_Legislative_Change_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.pdf.

6.1 “Formation”: Immersion in a Social Conscience

My mother was an incredible social historian, through her lived experience. I grew up in a small town in the 1960s, and within half an hour’s drive were three places, all connected to adoption: a Mother and Baby Home, a Magdalene Laundry, and Shannon Airport, where the planes departed for America.

My mother described seeing fathers putting their daughters on the bus for the Mother and Baby Homes, talked openly and kindly about the women who worked in the Laundry, and she was very aware of the phenomena of sending babies to the States. When the stories of Mother and Baby Homes and the adoption of children to the USA came out in the news in the late 1990s⁸⁰, I was surprised at the general reaction to it, because I thought everybody knew about it. Such was the power of my mother’s ability to talk about social contexts and to name the unspeakable.

My family home had been my paternal grandmother’s house, and my grandmother (through her first marriage) had some other relatives who worked in Mother and Baby homes in Ireland and the UK. I was a granddaughter through her second marriage. So, through my grandmother and mother, I grew up with stories of these places, all of which were connected to adoption. They were the stories of my childhood, yet my mother did not use these stories towards me, her daughter, to invoke shame in terms of sexuality and out-of-marriage pregnancy. She was, however, vehement in her anger against the Institutional infrastructure and injustice, and that certainly had an influence on me from an early age. I had a lot less opportunity to hear the stories of my grandmother. These stories were shared with me later, when I was in my twenties.

6.2 Stigma and Shame in the 1970s

I was in my late teens in the late 1970s. I knew young women who became pregnant, and were unmarried. It was a very formative experience for me, seeing how their pregnancies played out, and how the women involved were treated by others. There was a lot of secrecy and stigma, particularly for anyone who came from a small town. Despite this, sometimes, support came from unexpected



Friendships were so important to these young women - they relied on and trusted their friends to help them navigate their situations with as much privacy as possible.



places – service providers of a different religion, or parents for example. In other cases, however, there was no support, just an increased focus on secrecy, in an effort to avoid the inevitable stigma and shame, particularly for those of a Catholic denomination. Friendships were so important to these young women – they relied on and trusted their friends to help them navigate their situations with as much privacy as possible. I was so honoured that I could be such a friend, and that together we were able to navigate situations of great difficulty.

6.3 Early Days in Social Work (1980s)

My school was one of the first in Ireland to pilot a transition year in 1975, which is when I took part in it. Throughout the year, I helped in a preschool two mornings a week. It had been set up by a nun who was a social worker. She was really influential in me becoming a social worker, because I saw what could be done when people had good ideas for interventions – at individual, couple, family and community levels. So I did a social science degree, and within it I chose the social work track. While I was at college, Gemma Rowley - Chairperson of Ally, and a founding member of Treoir⁸¹ who actively campaigned on behalf of unmarried, pregnant women - came in to give us a talk about her work with unmarried mothers. She was very passionate. For me, my antenna was up. I was interested. I was already totally politicised at that point, and very feminist.

After graduating with a social science degree in 1982, where I specialised in social work, I spent some time working in social services in the town where I grew up. When you are 22, you think you are going to change the world. Looking back, I think the director of social services knew what

80. An RTE documentary and subsequent book highlighted the issue of Irish children being adopted to the USA. Mike Milotte, *Banished Babies* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997).

81. “About Treoir.” Treoir: Informing Unmarried Parents. Accessed February 12, 2024. <https://www.treoir.ie/>.



he was doing in bringing in a young graduate and employing me for a year. He really gave me an opportunity to shake up a lot of things in the organisation. For example, there was a mother's club, originally aimed at domestic and home education, and I started to bring in people to talk about barring orders and contraception and so on. This was a group of very disadvantaged women, and I believed they needed this advice and education. Not all staff agreed with my change - some people complained to my manager about it - but he supported me to do it. It was a great start.

I qualified as a professional social worker in the mid-1980s, through the London School of Education, and my first social work job involved working with families in the west of Ireland. I was faced with very complex situations, and I knew that I did not have enough skills to deal with them. When I came across a "family therapy" course, I thought *"this is in fact a way of helping me understand better. This is a way of providing improved skills"*. So I did it, and I qualified as a family therapist a few years later in Dublin. To this day, I hold a dual professional identity: I am a social worker, and I am also a family therapist.

6.4 The Challenges of Adoption Work for Social Workers

The area of adoption is very sensitive. Every Health Board was an adoption agency in the 1970s and 1980s⁸². If, in those days, a client contacted a duty social worker in a Health Board, asking about adoption, the duty social worker would often have limited or no expertise in adoption, and so might encourage the client to go to one of the voluntary adoption agencies instead. The social workers in the Health boards also carried high caseloads and welcomed the opportunity to refer cases to other agencies. I think sometimes, the voluntary agencies referred the really complicated or difficult cases back to the Health Board. Yet the social workers in the Health Boards managed adoption as just *one* element of a larger general caseload. As someone who was inexperienced in the role,



The limited focus on adoption in social work education, and the dwindling number of adoption cases dealt with in statutory agencies, had an impact on the adoption system.



there were a number of social workers who had a lot of experience with whom you could get in touch to ask for assistance. There was also an amazing administrator in the Eastern Health Board, Mary Rice, who kept us all on our toes, and she taught many of us about the legal complexities of adoption.

The limited focus on adoption in social work education, and the dwindling number of adoption cases dealt with in statutory agencies, had an impact on the adoption system. This was most pronounced when intercountry adoption started in the early 1990's, and especially after the 1991 legislation was enacted. Adoption law was complex. For social workers conducting assessments, it was so important, for example, to know the distinction between eligibility and suitability. Eligibility has a very specific meaning in law⁸³ – you are either eligible, or you are not. Suitability is a different issue, and social worker ethics really came into play in assessing parental suitability. The phrase is "eligibility and suitability". Not eligibility or suitability, or eligibility 'slash' suitability. That was perhaps one of the greatest learnings for me over the years.

A second ethical issue for social workers was ensuring that the prospective adopters were being assessed for a *hypothetical* child rather than a specific child. To somehow appraise somebody's suitability for a hypothetical child, at a future date,

82. Lefroy and Mollan compiled a comprehensive directory of adoption agencies, including health boards and voluntary adoption societies, in their book: Lefroy, Laetitia, and Charles Mollan, *New Families: Your Questions on Fostering and Adoptions Answered* (Dublin: Turoe Press, 1984). Adoptive Parents Association of Ireland, *Adoption handbook: a directory of adoption related services* (Dublin. 1995).

83. The terms "eligibility" and "suitability" were set out and defined in the 1952 Adoption Act, and have been consistently used in Irish Adoption legislation and practice ever since. For a review, see Adoption Authority of Ireland, *An Overview of Adoption Policy and Legislative Change in Ireland* (Dublin. 2018). https://aai.gov.ie/images/Report_2_An_Overview_of_Policy_and_Legislative_Change_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.pdf For information on how the rules of Eligibility and Suitability are currently applied, visit <https://aai.gov.ie/images/Rules---Eligibility-and-Suitability.pdf> .

was a challenge for some social workers. This challenge was often replicated in decision-making at placement committees. I think people's own values were often challenged by this type of work. It was a difficult thing to do.

For social workers, the relationships with clients they work with in adoption can be time-limited, but can also go on for many years, and even decades. It happened to me a number of times, and it's particularly likely with adoption work. You could be dealing with a young birth mother who would visit you a few times over the years, and even come back to you many years later. The adoptive parents might get in touch with you later on, or the child themselves might contact you when they are an adult. Even if you're working in a completely different area by the time they come back, as the social worker, *you* are the person they associate with the adoption, *you're* the connection to it all, and they will seek you out when they need you, because you were there at the time. That long-term element of service user needs is something that social workers in Ireland need to be trained for.

6.5 Adoption Education for Social Workers

I have been involved in training social workers in Ireland for over twenty-five years. Alongside training social workers for the profession, I have trained and continue to train many social workers as family therapists. I have thoroughly enjoyed this work, but I am also aware that, while the baseline training of social work is good, there are some deficits in their training which can impact adoption work. A lot of the skills taught are focused on working with individuals. Social workers are great at individual work as a result, but in my view they do not always have confidence to undertake interventions with more than one person. I think social workers need an enhanced technical, relational and self-reflexivity *skill* base - not just a theoretical and analytical base - to make a difference, and to implement more robust intervention plans. If they have an enhanced skill base, they can then work more effectively with dyads, with family groups, with extended family



I really believe that people working in adoption in Ireland should have specific post-graduate education on it – to work with the complexity requires more advanced adoption education.



groups, and with professional groups. All of this is important to the area of adoption.

I really believe that people working in adoption in Ireland should have specific post-graduate education on it – to work with the complexity requires more advanced adoption education. In Ireland, we do not provide enough adoption education on the basic professional course for social workers, given the demands of all the other areas that have to be covered on the curriculum. There are conferences here and there, but that is not enough. We need a very robust post-graduate diploma level course, because to sever a legal relationship for the child and for future generations is an enormous responsibility.

6.6 Early days on the Adoption Board⁸⁴ - Late 1990s

In 1997 I finished my PhD, which was on the area of kinship care⁸⁵. There are such complexities around kinship care, with so many emotions and relationships affecting decision-making. A birth mother might not want to place her child with family because of her own relationship with that family. Yet kinship care might still be the best solution for the *child*, because that child has a right, if at all possible, to be placed within his or her own *extended family*, if the child is to be separated from the birth mother. Adoption has such enormous

84. The nature and appointment of the Board was set out in the Adoption Act 1952, Part II, Section 8, available at: "Adoption Act, 1952," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1952/act/25/enacted/en/print#sec8>.

The nature of Board appointments was also outlined in:

Department of Health, *Adoption: report of review committee on adoption services* (Dublin, 1984), 64-67.

<https://www.lenus.ie/handle/10147/45641>.

Under the Adoption Act 2010, changes were made to the recruitment, composition and governance of the board of the newly established Adoption Authority. For further details see:

"Adoption Act, 2010," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.

85. Valerie O'Brien, "Fostering the Family: A New Systematic Approach to Evolving Networks of Relative Care" (PhD diss., University College Dublin, 1997).



generational implications, yet we often deal with it at a singular level. It is a singular decision at a point in time for people, but the generational implications are enormous.

I was appointed to the Adoption Board in 1998⁸⁶. The Board had held a conference, at which I had presented my PhD research on kinship care. I met some of the people in the Department at that stage. I knew none of them, but in 1998, not many social workers had completed a PhD. I was a policy analyst, social worker, and family therapist. I had a particular skill base, I was immersed in macro *and* micro understanding - I understood the basics of how things were done and the theories behind why they were done, and I think that is why I was appointed to the Board. At that time, the then minister always decided who would be on the Board. The procedures for state board appointments in Ireland changed over time, with an increased emphasis on governance and administration at board level.

We walked in on that first day in 1998 as a new Board, with a lot of new members. The Board was appointed in accordance with the legislation of that time. There were multiple stakeholder representatives on that board: people with expert knowledge of adoption, people with personal experience such as adoptive parents, and people who had worked in the field of adoption. My role, as I saw it, was to be a critical voice, to question the “*taken for granted*” and also to bring my adoption expertise - at practice and research level - to the Board.

To really understand the context of domestic adoption in the late 1990s, you have to look at what was happening in the wider adoption arena. There were tensions and conflicts around adoption in Ireland at that stage, but intercountry adoption was the big issue. We had been waiting for the Hague⁸⁷ legislation since 1995. Our first 5-year term, as a board, was from 1998 to 2003. By 2003, the government were trying to bring in a bill that

would lead to a law for search and reunion, and they were also doing a lot of consultation⁸⁸ to bring in the Hague legislation, and sign it. We knew that the Adoption Board was going to be replaced by the Adoption Authority under the Hague legislation. From 2003 to 2008, then, which was the next Board term, the Bill had gone through for what would eventually become the Adoption Act, 2010⁸⁹. However, at that time, it was still not clear *when* it would be enacted. So it was quite an extraordinary period, because unlike in other years, there were very few changes on the Board at that time. Perhaps the Minister decided to keep the same Board together for continuity in the context of such forthcoming change in adoption. So we stayed on for twelve years, until the Adoption Act 2010. I have been on many Irish and European boards since then. I put a lot of focus on good governance on boards, and on the responsibility of a director in that respect.

6.7 Personal Approach to Decision Making on Boards

By its very nature, adoption is emotional. There are multiple stakeholders, and emotion runs throughout it, and there are different emotions for the different stakeholders. In my experience as a board member on multiple boards, decision-making, and how those decisions are made, is very important. It is imperative to avoid that very human tendency to jump to a conclusion before you have all of the information. You have to make sure, as a board member, that you make fully balanced decisions, taking all of the evidence you have been furnished with into account. You need to notice how you, personally, are reacting to the information you are given, and to identify where the gaps are. That axis between heart and head - between the emotional and the factual as an orientating and positioning compass for decision-making – needs to be central to your work. So to recap my earlier comment, by its very nature, adoption is emotional and it is also, in my view, political. One has to be aware of one’s emotions, values and politics.

86. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, *Guidelines on Appointments to State Boards* (Dublin. 2014). https://www.publicjobs.ie/restapi/documents/Guidelines_on_Appointments_to_State_Boards_Jan2015.pdf.

87. Irish legislation which complied with the Hague convention on intercountry adoption. HCCH, *Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (The Netherlands. 1993). <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>.

88. Law Reform Commission, *Adoption law: the case for reform* (Dublin. 2005). <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/46298/1268.pdf?sequence=1>.

89. “Adoption Act, 2010,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.



The Adoption Board was quasi-judicial. While the formation of adoption policy was not our area, our annual reports to the Minister often contained our views on adoption-related issues and/or proposed legislative changes.



6.8 Working Within the Legislation

There is a difference between adversarial and inquisitorial, in terms of legal systems and processes. An adversarial legal system is where both sides pitch against each other. Inquisitorial, in judicial terms, means using a consultation model aimed towards more consensus decision-making. If you are a member of a board which is embedded in an inquisitorial system, for example, you need to attend more to what you must do, what you *should* do, what you *have* to do, what you *want* to do, and what you *can* do, when making decisions. You have avoided the risk of going with the consensus, and losing sight of questioning and courage. It is really important to know your own ethical standpoint, so that you can raise the questions you feel are important at every board meeting.

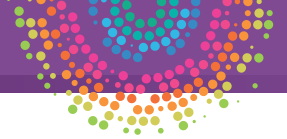
The Adoption Board was quasi-judicial. While the formation of adoption policy was not our area, our annual reports to the Minister often contained our views on adoption-related issues and/or proposed legislative changes⁹⁰. When I was on the Adoption Board, I gained a great appreciation of the differences between law, regulation, and practice guidance. Coming from a non-legal background myself, my time on the Board also gave me an acute appreciation of the legislation. You need to understand the law, and the application of law is, in practice, very nuanced. There are different ways of interpreting the written law, and in my view the important strength of a good board is in knowing how to do this.

6.9 Understanding the Role of Relationships on Boards

In my experience, relationships between board members are key, and tensions can arise in certain circumstances. The role played by the Chair of a board is really important, for example. Each voice on a board has to be given equal opportunity, and has to be seen as having an equally important role. In practice, however, there is a risk of this not happening, and of some voices being given more weight over others. The Chair has to try and hold the space at each meeting so that all of the different voices can be heard, and every Chair will have a different style and approach which affects how a board operates. During my time on the Adoption Board, there was a registrar and a CEO, in addition to the Chair. They are key relationships: that between the Registrar and the Chair, and that between the Chair and the CEO⁹¹. On boards, if close relationships such as those are working well in terms of mutual respect, even though there may be a difference in views, that is where the leadership comes from. Then there are also the other relationships with external and internal parties – for example between the Adoption Board and its relevant Government Department, and the relationship between the members of the Board itself and the executive – so, for example, the people who worked for the then Adoption Board. I felt it was really important, when on a Board, to place a lot of emphasis on commissioning – who was asking me to do what, and for whom? It's an important distinction to make, particularly as I was a social worker. I needed to bring that experience and knowledge to the table, but also be able to pull back and critically evaluate the wider picture. When one Chair was retiring, he specifically thanked me in his speech for holding firm in my questioning approach. I appreciated that – the role I had played had been respected. On reflection, I think it would have been helpful if the detailed discussions at adoption board meetings were documented in the minutes. Minutes were taken in terms of cases, noting the decisions made, but they did not record the discussions that led to those decisions. I feel there would be a great opportunity for learning if

90. For an example, The Adoption Board, *Report of An Bord Uchtala (The Adoption Board) 2003* (Dublin, 2003), 16-17. <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/43488/3431.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

91. The first CEO of the adoption Board was appointed in 2002, and took up office in 2003. The rationale behind appointing a CEO was to prepare for the upcoming legislation and its anticipated impact of the work of the Board. The Adoption Board, *Report of An Bord Uchtala (The Adoption Board) 2003* (Dublin, 2003), 16-17. <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/43488/3431.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.



more detailed minutes were kept – it would also be really useful for future adoption researchers. Processes shape the stories lived and the stories told.

6.10 Irish Adoption Research in the Mid-2000s

The social workers in the Adoption Board had a very unique perspective, and so when they undertook further training such as masters programmes etc., they tended to do their research on different areas of adoption. When the qualification for social workers changed from CQSW to MQSW⁹² for example, social workers in active employment had an opportunity to do a one-year top-up masters course in UCD, so some of the social workers in the Adoption Board went back to do it. A number of them did research theses, and these really added to the field of adoption research in Ireland. Other than that, Adoption Board statistics were published in the annual reports, and there were a small number of reports that presented data, with limited analysis. One social worker's study on step-parents was really important, and there was also a good piece conducted on search and reunion. A further thesis was done on the profile of parents placing children, and the children placed. The vast majority of Irish adoption research at that stage was done by way of these Masters dissertations – and it was really important work⁹³.

6.11 Birth Fathers' Rights in Domestic Adoption

Birth fathers' rights became more central to the adoption agenda in the 1990s, but it took a long, long time. We saw very few fathers, even though from 1998⁹⁴ birth fathers had a right to be consulted about, though not to veto, the adoption. The position of birth fathers in Irish society during that time was a difficult one. When it came to interacting with the board about the adoption of their child, they varied. Some might have had little awareness of the context they were walking into, while others really did not want the adoption to go through, which is why they

accepted the invitation to meet us, or asked for the right to be consulted. Birth mothers likely had more advice and guidance at that time, as part of the overall adoption process, than birth fathers did. Step-parent adoptions were increasingly common at that time. In my view, often the birth mothers needed the opportunity to regularise the legal provision for their children, in terms of recognising the position of their new husband in relation to the child. I think sometimes families wanted to show that they were now a “*normative*” family, by the standards of that time. Rights of the birth father in the adoption process were considered by the board in depth, yet the number of fathers we met continued to be very low.

6.12 New Patterns in Domestic Adoption: Late 1990s/early 2000s

As the numbers diminished in non-family domestic adoption throughout the late 90s and into the first decade of the new millennium, the complexities in the cases presented really increased. At that stage, I think a third of babies were born outside of marriage, so things had changed dramatically in Irish society. We had access to the very detailed case situations of the children who were being relinquished, and two trends were developing.

The first trend was that the level of concealed pregnancies increased. I don't think that was captured in annual reports, but it was definitely a trend, and it was reported in independent research⁹⁵. In some cases, it was immigrant women coming to Ireland, who would present at maternity hospitals in labour, give birth, and leave within twenty-four hours, relinquishing their babies for adoption. They were difficult cases. The mothers were often reluctant to engage with social workers, because they could be in very difficult personal situations. Very often they were leaving a birth father in another jurisdiction, and they told stories of violence, and of rape. Yet, if the birth mother mentioned the father's name, it would enter into a really protracted period around consent. The birth mothers were sometimes petrified, but the social

92. The first Irish MSWQ course was offered in NUIG in 2004

93. Many of these theses have been referenced in Adoption Authority of Ireland, *Research on Adoption in Ireland 1952-2017* (Dublin, 2018). https://aai.gov.ie/images/Report_1_An_Audit_of_Research_on_Adoption_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.

94. Under the 1998 Act, the birth father had a right to be consulted about the proposed adoption of his child, and the adoption could only proceed once every reasonable effort had to be made to find or identify him. For a review, see: Adoption Authority of Ireland, *An Overview of Adoption Policy and Legislative Change in Ireland* (Dublin, 2018). https://aai.gov.ie/images/Report_2_An_Overview_of_Policy_and_Legislative_Change_in_Ireland_1952_to_2017.pdf.

95. Crisis Pregnancy Agency, *Concealed Pregnancy: A case-study approach from an Irish setting* by Catherine Conlon (2006), <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/43751/3956.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

workers had to pursue the birth fathers, because of the 1998⁹⁶ legislation. The Adoption Act 1998⁹⁷ led to a huge slowing down of decision-making for children. As a Board member, it was very hard to look at what was happening for children in domestic adoption at that time. I was really concerned about those children getting older while all of this was going on. The fathers' right to be consulted, the slowing down, and the casework that was involved, all led to children being placed for adoption at an older age. I felt that the solution was really simple - the children needed to be placed in long-term foster care, with a view to adoption by their foster parents. So then, while all of that work was being done in the background, the child was growing up in a stable setting.

The second emerging trend at that time concerned a small cohort of women who already had a child that they had kept, but were contemplating the adoption of a subsequent child, because they had mental health challenges. So rather than being about stigma, as it had been in the past, now it was more about a mother not being able to manage because of her underlying mental health challenges and limited supports. Even in cases where the mothers had the capacity for consent, parenting the child was still a challenge that they felt was insurmountable. While there are many factors that contribute to mental health difficulties, the literature indicates that maternal mental health can have an impact on the mental health of the child. Therefore, in my view developing secure attachments with caregivers is of particular importance in these type of cases. However, these children were not being placed directly into the adoptive home, but they were with their pre-adoptive foster families for a long time. They were very often fifteen or sixteen months old by the time they went to their adoptive families, meaning that they had a second attachment break – first they lost their mothers at birth, and now they were losing their foster parent relationship. The children coming from both of these cohorts – concealed pregnancies, and mothers with mental health difficulties – really needed to ensure they had more stable parenting situations at a much earlier stage.

I had seen the challenges this brought about for

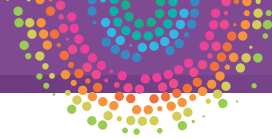
When I joined the Board in 1998, those cases where a child was in pre-adoptive care for a long time were the cases that caused me the most angst.

children years previously when I was a social worker, and I can remember being really angry, professionally at one point. I thought *“this is not child-centred decision-making, this is about finding children for families”*. So, when I joined the Board in 1998, those cases where a child was in pre-adoptive care for a long time were the cases that caused me the most angst. Even though concurrent planning as a philosophical and practice model had been well- embedded in other jurisdictions, we were still not doing it here. In the Health Board community care service there were two silos. You had the foster care service, and you had the adoption service. Adoption was seen as the “happy-ever-after fairy-tale ending” within the Health Board structure. Yet in reality, I felt Ireland was thirty years behind other jurisdictions in adoption practices.

As the numbers in domestic adoption decreased, the voluntary agencies closed, leaving the Health Board agencies to become more involved in adoption. Then inter-country adoption came in, and prospective adoptive parents had a right to an assessment for an intercountry adoption, so the Health Board had to set up new adoption teams to deal with those. When those adoption teams were set up, their focus was primarily inter-country adoption assessment, but they also dealt with the small and dwindling number of domestic adoptions.

96. The Adoption Board, *An outline of adoption law and procedure* (Dublin. 1998). <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/43487/3430.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

97. “Adoption Act, 1998,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/10/enacted/en/html>.



6.13 Adoption Rights Advocacy

The adoption arena is extraordinarily contested, with multiple stakeholders. I have great respect for the people in the Adoption Rights Alliance⁹⁸ who were really advocating for the right thing to be done in so many aspects of Irish adoption for many years, but whose voices were very often marginalised. I used to listen very carefully, and I used to read their writings very carefully. The Adoption Rights Alliance have played an extraordinarily important advocacy role in this country in terms of setting the adoption agenda.

6.14 Adoption from Long Term Foster Care – Openness and the International Perspective

The Adoption Amendment Act 2017⁹⁹ provided for children to be adopted out of the care system. I followed that incredibly carefully, because I do not want to see Ireland going down a domestic adoption route where adoption becomes an adjunct of the child welfare system, or where children are freed up too prematurely for adoption¹⁰⁰. Prior to the Act, more nuanced debate around the adoption of children out of the care system would have been really beneficial. The children’s rights agenda drove the legislative change, without enough analysis of what actually needed to happen.

In my view, Irish child welfare practice is too often influenced by English and American practices, without considering the particular service delivery and legislative context of those practices, and how they differ from ours. I spent three months in a US university in 2007. I went there to examine the American child welfare system, and I was very involved in what was happening there in terms of inter-country and domestic adoption. So from that experience, I developed a really wide view of these issues. I believe that Ireland is about thirty years behind the times in terms of many adoption issues. Many of the children who are going to be domestically adopted in Ireland now will have very good, long-established relationships with their birth family, because they know who they are through being in long-term foster care. Prospective adopters are coming with a view to adoption from long-term foster care, and various stakeholders are talking



In my view, Irish child welfare practice is too often influenced by English and American practices, without considering the particular service delivery and legislative context of those practices, and how they differ from ours.



about open adoption. Yet in Ireland, adoption itself is in fact much more closed both in practice and orientation.

When considering future directions, in my view it would be useful to make provisions, via legislation, for children to have a right to ongoing contact with members of their birth family. It would be very beneficial if a condition could be attached to an Adoption Order, for example, whilst making a provision that the decision could be re- entered if it was warranted. I can understand that such a provision may go to the heart of the constitutional family, but they have done it in other jurisdictions. I don’t think that there was enough debate about it, before the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017¹⁰¹. In “old” Ireland, as we know, domestic adoption was a solution to the “shame” of unmarried motherhood. Yet it could be argued that, although Ireland has changed substantially, adoption from long-term foster care has some similarities with how adoption used to be viewed. It is underpinned by a perceived requirement for a completely fresh start, and this is something we need to be mindful of.

I am not opposed to adoption from foster care, but I think that there is a lot of nuance that needs to be considered. I would be concerned about giving younger children an inordinate level of responsibility in the decision-making process, for example. Sometimes children aged 9 or 10 do not want to see their birth parents, so access is stopped, but

98. “Home,” Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

99. “Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/19/enacted/en/html>.

100. For further reading, see: Valerie O’Brien and Angela Palmer, “Adoption as part of the Irish care system: a new challenge for social work?,” *The Irish Social Worker*. (2016): 52-58. <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/617884/AdoptionPartofIrishCareSys.pdf?sequence=1>.

101. “Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/19/enacted/en/html>.

then they come back to meet their birth parents in their later teens, and they might be furious - *“why was I stopped from seeing my parents?”*. Their feelings can change over time. The cohort that will be adopted from long term foster care in the next number of years are all likely to be older. I really love the idea of children of sixteen and seventeen making their own decision, because that, to me, is a real child-centred approach. It is real self-determination.

6.15 Search and Reunion

In terms of Search and Reunion, I feel that, in Ireland, we have not helped adopted people or birth parents to understand the nuance that is central to any law - you have to make a distinction between a right to a birth certificate, which is an identity, and a right to a relationship. You cannot legislate for “a right to a relationship”. Yet much of the tension

between parties in the attempts to get legislation in this country stemmed from the failure to grasp that point.

6.16 Reflections

Ethics drive all my practices. To be an Adoption Board member was an extraordinary ethical privilege. In that position, it is important to ask yourself, *“am I doing the right thing? Am I doing the best here at this point with the information I have and with this level of responsibility?”* You have to pay so much attention to contextual spheres in adoption work, but ethics are at its core. I have worked with every domain of adoption, but I feel proud of the fact that, when I was on the Board, I was able to continue to raise the issues that I felt were important to the children at the heart of adoption services.

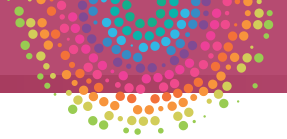
Section 3:

Demanding Change – The Era of Activists, Allies and Advocates

Section 3 comprises four narratives from participants who have strongly advocated for change in the area of domestic adoption in Ireland. From the early 1990s, adoptee-led activism began to take shape in Ireland. Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes and Martin Parfrey were part of this early adoptee-led movement, and have become well-known public commentators and activists, most recently pushing for change in the area of information and tracing. Catriona Crowe was head of the National Archives when she discovered a large amount of adoption-related files connected to adoptions from Ireland to America, and subsequently became a regular contributor to the media on this issue. Dr Katherine O'Donnell is an activist and academic who has worked with Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes on Justice for Magdalenes and the Clann Project.

Chapter
7

**Dr Claire
McGettrick,
born Lorraine
Hughes**



Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes is an Irish Research Council postgraduate scholar at the School of Sociology at University College Dublin. She is an adopted person, an adoption rights activist, co-founder of Justice for Magdalenes Research¹⁰² and Adoption Rights Alliance¹⁰³, and is co-director of the multi-award-winning Clann Project¹⁰⁴ with Dr Maeve O'Rourke. She has served as an external member of the Research Sub-Committee of the Adoption Authority of Ireland since 2019, and was elected to the board of the Irish Association of Social Workers in 2020. In that same year, she published an article entitled "Illegitimate Knowledge: transitional justice and adopted people¹⁰⁵" in the Irish Studies Eire-Ireland journal. The following year, she co-authored a book entitled "Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries: a campaign for justice" alongside Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke, James Smith and Mari Steed¹⁰⁶. In 2023 she published a chapter entitled 'Adoption Social Work Practice in Ireland: Critical Reflections on Present-Day Injustices' in 'Social Work's Histories of Complicity and Resistance: A Tale of Two Professions'¹⁰⁷. She is regularly invited to contribute to Oireachtas committees, Government consultations and national media discussions on issues relating to Magdalene Laundry survivors and adoption rights. She has written on many different aspects of these topics in print and online media.

7.1 Early Days: Connecting With Other Adoptees

In the 1990's, I started going to meetings of the *Adopted People's Association*,¹⁰⁸ which would later become known as *AdoptionIreland*. *AdoptionIreland* was affiliated with the *Adult Adoptees Association*, which predominantly operated in the 1990s¹⁰⁹. There were monthly support meetings in Wynn's Hotel for the *Adult Adoptees Association*, and then less frequently, as matters arose, *AdoptionIreland* would hold public meetings. Adopted people

speaking to other adopted people is crucial. Only an adopted person can understand what another adopted person is thinking or feeling— we have our own language. I had never spoken to many adopted people before that time so just on that level, it was fantastic. I was quite "green" when I started attending the meetings. I had only reunited myself a few years earlier. I hadn't a clue, for example, that there was a way to actually find your own birth certificate yourself. At first, my primary focus was on my own identity. Like a lot of adopted people, when I first reunited, I was just very grateful for what I got,

102. "Home," Justice for Magdalene's Research, accessed February 9, 2024, <http://jfmresearch.com/>.

103. "Home," Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

104. "CLANN," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.

105. Claire McGettrick, "Illegitimate" Knowledge: Transitional Justice and Adopted People, *Éire-Ireland* 55, no. 1 (2020): 181-200. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2020.0007>.

106. Claire McGettrick et al., *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries: A Campaign for Justice* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

107. Claire McGettrick, "Adoption social work practice in Ireland: critical reflections on present-day injustices," in *Social Work's Histories of Complicity and Resistance* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447364306.ch017>.

108. The Adopted People's Association had been set up in the early 1990s as a representative body for Irish people adopted in Ireland and abroad. The organisation is a predecessor of the Adoption Rights Alliance, which is still in operation.

"Adoption Rights Alliance (ARA) advocates for equal human and civil rights for those affected by the Irish adoption system. ARA operates a peer support network of 2,000 members [now over 2,800], providing advocacy and practical advice to adopted people, natural parents, natural family members and others who were in informal care settings" (see www.adoption.ie/help)

109. "The Adult Adoptees Association". Internet Archive. Accessed February 8, 2024. <https://web.archive.org/web/20000517102121/http://www.connect.ie/~apa/apa/contacts/aaa.htm>.

in terms of being able to find my mother. As time went on, though, I quickly realized that there was a whole other aspect of things – a political landscape. Until then I hadn't known about that at all.

7.2 Developing an Activist Voice: The Yahoo! Group

Just before the Millennium, in the late 1990s, the internet had come on the scene. In the early 2000's, the *Adopted People's Association* set up a message board on *Yahoo! Groups*. It was a precursor to *Facebook*, and in comparison it was almost analogue. For example, there was a photos section, but nobody had profile photos. I believe the setting up of that *Yahoo!* group was a crucial moment. It was different to the in-person support meetings, in that people could be anonymous if they wished, so it felt safer. People joined who had never spoken about their adoption experiences before, who were very new to it, who didn't know how to express it, or who were nervous about expressing it. All sorts of really, really important discussions, on a support level and on a political level, cropped up on that group. Up until that point, those discussions had been restricted to very few people at in-person meetings that were over in a couple of hours. There were, and in many ways there still are, very few people who do the day-to-day work of adoption advocacy. Suddenly, because it was online, the political discussion was happening within a wider group. Geography was not a problem anymore, in terms of getting to meet up. As a result, people like me and others came on board over the course of a few years, in Ireland and beyond, and started communicating with each other.

7.3 2003 Consultation¹¹⁰: Developing a Strategic Approach

The members of *AdoptionIreland* had appeared before Oireachtas committees and at other events in previous years, but the 2003¹¹¹ Consultation on Adoption Legislation was a big moment. It was the biggest event that had happened up to that point in terms of information legislation.

The Department of Health and Children had put out a call for submissions on the draft adoption legislation. The purpose of the legislation was to modernise the adoption system, so the consultation process was to allow for a discussion on the

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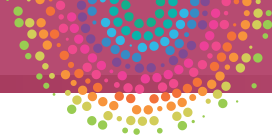
modernisation of a number of areas, and to solicit multiple stakeholder views. There was a written stage – many of us submitted personal, written testimonies for it - and *AdoptionIreland* put together a large submission based on all of our work to date.

The next step was an oral consultation stage, held in October 2003. The *Yahoo!* group came into its own there, because we were very strategic, and we planned it almost like a military action. I don't mean that in an aggressive way, but we were looking at the various workshops, and making sure there were going to be at least two affected people (i.e., adopted people and natural parents) in each one so that we would have that voice at all of the different tables. At each of the workshops at the Consultation, we delivered our “*Adoption 101*” message. Various professionals and stakeholders were there to have all sorts of intellectual discussions *about us*, and we were there to say to all of them “*hang on, you need to understand our position, you need to understand where we're coming from, as the people most disenfranchised by this system.*”

Representing our group, most of the people who showed up to the Consultation for those days were ready to say their piece. Some were more experienced than others, so we tried to have at least one experienced person in each workshop, so that those who were not familiar with the political realm would have support. Everybody gave it socks - they were fantastic. It's empowering to interface with the system in this way as an affected person. On the

110. Department of Health and Children, Adoption legislation: 2003 consultation and proposals for change (Dublin. 2005). <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/46683/1739.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

111. The full detail around this consultation process was written up in a 2005 DoHC report, provided here: Law Reform Commission, *Adoption law: the case for reform* (Dublin. 2005), 15. <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/46298/1268.pdf?sequence=1>



other hand it's hugely frustrating, because in order to get to the meat of our points, we had to bare our souls in those workshops so that people would get it. Some people had more difficult times than others, depending on who was in their workshop. Even to get to a simple point, you had to explain the basics, for example, that actually it's not such a good thing to grow up not knowing who you are.

The oral part of the Consultation was held over two days. The first day of the Consultation was predominantly about intercountry adoption. The second day was much more about domestic adoption, and information and tracing. We made it our business to show up for everything on both days, including the intercountry adoption sessions, because we did not want history to repeat itself. We felt very strongly that there was nobody there to speak up for us when we were younger, so we had a responsibility to speak up for adopted children and younger adopted people, who at that time were largely being adopted from other countries. It really disappointed us that many of the adoptive parents' groups, who had been at the consultation on intercountry adoption on Day 1, did not show up on day 2 - the information and tracing day.

We went for the entire thing, and we were utterly burned out after it. It took an awful lot out of us, because we literally had to go from scratch. We had to give so much of ourselves in the face of people who were frankly looking strangely at us at first. Eventually though, they started to get it, but it took a lot of energy to achieve that, and it took a personal toll on everybody. We did reflect on it afterwards - on what we had done - but my abiding memory is of all of us being completely exhausted. It's still exhausting but thankfully we've made progress in the years since. At the Consultation, we had to take baby steps with everyone in order to get the point across that we wanted automatic access to our birth certificates. It is easy to think, now, that everybody understands that concept, but back then they didn't. In fact, I think it is only since October 2020¹¹² that most of the general public have fully grasped that point.



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7.4 Reframing Adoption

My own thinking on adoption has evolved over the years. In the early days of adoption advocacy, there was a huge focus on the psychological aspect of adoption. There was a big influence from the USA in that respect - Betty Jean Lifton¹¹³ had come over to Ireland and spoken here. Adopted people were starting to become vocal, and trying to find the tools to get the message across. That takes time. It takes a while to build a class consciousness, to build a language, to build arguments, to actually drill down to naming the problem, and to clarifying the message you want to convey. In the early days, the focus was not on rights-based arguments, as the psychological damage argument was the only available framework at the time. And the bravery of these adopted people has to be acknowledged; they were the first to speak out, the first to put their heads above the parapet.

In later years, I moved into the academic space, looking at human rights, the social construction of adoption, and understanding the wider evidence-based landscape. I realised that, actually, some of those key texts that adopted people use as self-help mechanisms were not so helpful. On the one hand, they give you a certain kind of language to use, but it is very much based on damage. It only gives that framework, and there is much more to adopted people than psychological damage. We are not psychologically damaged. Injustices were committed against us, harms were committed against us, and while sometimes that

112. "Adoption Rights Alliance JFM Research". Clannproject.org. Accessed February 8, 2024, <http://clannproject.org/wp-content/uploads/ARA-JFMR-Clann-statement-28.10.20.pdf>.

113. Betty Jean Lifton was an adoptee and adoption advocate from the US who had written 3 books on the adoption experience during the 1970s and 1990s. After her death in 2010, the New York Times reported in her obituary that her "books' searing condemnations of the secrecy that traditionally shrouded adoption became touchstones for adoptees around the world" Margalit Fox, "Betty Jean Lifton Dies at 84; Urged Open Adoptions." *The New York Times*, November 26, 2010, Accessed February 8, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/27/us/27lifton.html>.

has manifestations in terms of a person's emotional wellbeing, how each person reacts to and deals with that is their own business. Yet these popular self-help texts only give a certain kind of language to adopted people. Compare it to the LGBTQ movement for example. If the self-help books only talked about how hard it was to be gay, and that everybody's afraid to come out of the closet, imagine the impact that would have on that cohort as a whole. *This* is one of my main arguments in terms of adoption. We have to change the language we use. I'm not denying that there is a psychological impact, but there is an over-focus on it, and a pathologising that's just not helpful, that makes its way into practice and policy. I think, the world over, a lot of work has to be done in terms of just taking the pathology out of adoption. There is too much focus on how adopted children and adults are adapting to adoption, and not enough on the adoption systems themselves.

7.5 Development of Adoption Activism in the Mid – Late 2000s

In my view, the only concrete outcome of the 2003 Consultation¹¹⁴ was the National Adoption Contact Preference Register, which was launched in 2005. At the same time, the then Adoption Board provided funding to *AdoptionIreland* and a few other advocacy groups so we decided to open an office. Funding can have a negative effect on groups that were previously voluntary, and unfortunately, the organisation disbanded at the end of 2006. It had a significant impact on those of us who were centrally involved in the organisation. I personally didn't want to know about adoption for a while. It was quite a difficult time for all of us.

Then a few things happened at once in 2009. Professor James Smith in Boston College approached myself and Mari Steed with a redress scheme for Magdalene survivors¹¹⁵. He was conducting research into State complicity in the

Magdalene Laundries in the course of researching his book, and had drafted a redress scheme that he wanted us to review, as he wanted to submit it to the Oireachtas. He'd drafted the redress scheme on foot of a Survivor phoning him and saying, "*What are you going to do about it?*" This led to the beginning of the Justice for Magdalenes political campaign. Katherine O'Donnell and Maeve O'Rourke both came on board and we began working with Jim's research and gathering new evidence and constructing human rights arguments to build a case for the women. In some ways we had always been doing evidence-based work—we were submitting adoption testimonies back in 2003—but with Jim, Katherine and Maeve on board it went to a whole new level. Years later, in 2015, Maeve and I established the Clann Project¹¹⁶, which is a multi-award-winning collaboration between Adoption Rights Alliance¹¹⁷, Justice for Magdalenes Research¹¹⁸ and the London office of Hogan Lovell's solicitors. We set up Clann to assist people who wished to give evidence to the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation¹¹⁹. We spoke to 164 people and assisted 82 witnesses to provide statements to the Commission and published the Clann Report in 2018.¹²⁰

Back in 2009 when Justice For Magdalenes' political campaign was getting under way, the Adoption Bill was making its way through the Oireachtas. I started reading it and realised that, although it was ratifying the Hague Convention on intercountry adoption¹²¹, there were no tracing or information provisions. So, three of us who had been involved in *AdoptionIreland*—Susan Lohan, Mari Steed and I—reformed as the Adoption Rights Alliance, and began work almost immediately. We hit the ground running. We were presenting at the Oireachtas Committee in December 2009¹²². We had all been joking beforehand, saying, "*nobody actually remembers the stuff we were campaigning on all those years ago since the '90s, we can break*

114. Department of Health and Children, Adoption legislation: 2003 consultation and proposals for change (Dublin. 2005).

<https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/46683/1739.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

115. Patsy McGarry, "Separate redress scheme urged for Magdalenes." *The Irish Times*, September 28, 2009, Accessed February 8, 2024,

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/separate-redress-scheme-urged-for-magdalenes-1.746281>.

116. "CLANN," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.

117. "Home," Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

118. "Home," Justice for Magdalene's Research, accessed February 9, 2024, <http://jfmresearch.com/>.

119. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Final Report: Chapter 13* (Dublin. 2021). <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>.

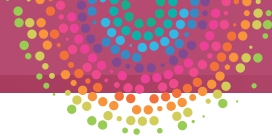
120. "CLANN Report," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, Accessed February 8, 2024.

<http://clannproject.org/clann-report/>.

121. HCCH, *Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (The Netherlands. 1993).

<https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>.

122. "Joint Committee on Health and Children Debate – Tuesday, 8 Dec 2009," Houses of the Oireachtas, Accessed February 8, 2024. https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_health_and_children/2009-12-08/5/.



out the “greatest hits” again”. So we went through the whole rigmarole. Incarceration in Mother and Baby homes, illegal adoptions¹²³, you name it. We were rhyming off all of the human rights abuses we were aware of that had yet to be dealt with by the State. Afterwards I got a phone call from Conall Ó Fátharta who said, “has anybody reported on this stuff before?” So none of this is new. This didn’t just happen in 2018 when Tusla found 126 files relating to illegal birth registrations¹²⁴. St Patrick’s Guild was in the news in the mid ‘90s and again in 2010 through Conall’s award-winning investigation of Tressa Reeves’ case¹²⁵.

7.6 The Consolidation of a Movement

In December 2009, Jim Smith and I were having meetings with various politicians on the Magdalene side. ARA¹²⁶ decided, almost informally, that much of the adoption stuff would temporarily take a back seat once the 2010 Act was passed. The Magdalene side was taking off, and a lot of the same people were involved. We were very conscious that there was only so much we could do, and we were recognising our own limitations, energy-wise. Yet the adoption work was still going on. Conall was breaking the news about Tressa Reeves’ case in 2010, and we were fighting the Adoption Bill right up until its enactment. We were fighting it in terms of information and tracing, but we were also trying to tighten up the intercountry adoption side as well. We felt that, in places, it didn’t go far enough. We didn’t agree with bilateral agreements, for example. The Adoption Authority is doing a great job holding the line against the idea that Irish parents can adopt children from anywhere. That’s not easy to do, but at the same time, we don’t want history to repeat itself. We feel very strongly about that.

I want to stress however, that I’m not claiming to speak for anybody. If a group of intercountry adopted people came and said, listen, we’re organising a movement, we’d like to take it on ourselves, we’d step back. Yet I’m not seeing these concerns being raised anywhere else. Nobody did it for us when we were growing up, so I think it is important that we do it for them.

What are our key asks? At its most basic, it’s about unrestricted access to birth certificates and files, including administrative files. And stop interfering in our relationships. If somebody wants help, they’ll ask for it, but by and large we know what we’re doing ourselves. For those who wish to pursue a legal route to address human rights abuses and illegalities, at the very least open the Courts properly. The Statute of Limitations needs to be lifted for those cases, and they need to improve the Free Legal Aid system so that people have access to the Courts. It’s not necessarily a route that many people would go down, but at least if it’s open to them, then people can make their own minds up about it.

In the past couple of years, we’ve realised we have a Movement. We probably wouldn’t have put that language on it before. We’ve always felt we’ve had to plough our own furrow, a lonely one at times, but in hindsight, it does feel like there was a slow, gradual consolidation into the Movement that is there now. We do have what feels like a Movement now, and it’s wonderful. It’s still the same core bunch of people, and I don’t think that’s a bad thing either. It’s not that we’re insular, but we’ve got a certain set of skills and experience. We’ve learned how to do what we do. And the wonderful thing is, adopted people themselves are becoming empowered, and the public are becoming more aware too. In the future, what happens when we get our rights? In my view, much is left to be done in terms of the rights of other affected people. For example, what about the rights of intercountry adopted people? What about the rights of donor-conceived people?

7.7 Understanding Adopted People

Despite the public support, I have to say that adopted people are not understood by most people. Some people think they understand adoption, but most aren’t “fluent in bastard”. Taking a leaf out of the LGBTQ book, many of us in the adoption community have reclaimed the word ‘bastard’ and proudly call ourselves ‘bastards’. Indeed, the name of the US adoption rights organisation ‘Bastard Nation’ is inspired by that of the LGBTQ rights

123. “Illegal adoption” is the phrase that was used by the Adoption Rights Alliance in their above submission

124. “Media Statement re St Patrick’s Guild adoption records,” TUSLA, Accessed February 8, 2024. <https://www.tusla.ie/news/st-patricks-guild-adoption-records>.

125. Conall Ó Fátharta, “Tortured journey.” *Irish Examiner*, April 19, 2010, accessed February 8, 2024. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20117609.html>.

126. ARA stands for adoption rights alliance.

group ‘Queer Nation’. Being an adopted person is entirely unique. You have to spend a lot of time around adopted people in order to become what we term an *“honorary bastard”* – that is, a non-adopted person who fully grasps what it is like to be adopted. There is more to us than what is depicted on television, and there’s certainly a lot more to us than what you read about us in the papers. Adopted people are incredibly resourceful. They are excellent researchers, because they have had to be. It is uncanny – extraordinary – what an adopted person can extract from a tiny piece of paper. Oftentimes, social workers might say *“there’s not really a lot in the files”*. Let us be the judge of that! We know. We’re also resilient, but I’m hesitant to use the word resilient, because we shouldn’t have to be.

The bodies of knowledge about adopted people play a significant role in how we are portrayed both inside and outside academic circles. Expert knowledge about adopted people also feeds into the legislation, policy and practice that governs their lives. Thus, I’m extremely anxious to complete my PhD. I view it as my academic driving license that allows me to do all of the things that I think need doing in this area. It is interesting to hear the perspective of people who are not adopted themselves, but who have observed adopted people over a period of time, both casually and professionally. For example, two of my colleagues have observed how adopted people are really adept at navigating complex relationships. People don’t actually realise *half* of what adopted people have to navigate, in terms of adoptive families, natural families - both sides.

As adopted people, our life trajectory changed because of the system of domestic adoption in Ireland, so from day one, from birth, we’re interacting with it, we’re a living embodiment of it. I’m sure I wasn’t the only adopted person born in Ireland on my birthday. So, at the flick of a pen, I could have been someone with a different name. I could have gone to different adoptive parents, and had a whole different life trajectory. In many cases, we’ve met people, or grew up around people who were adopted around the same time as us, and it’s literally – *“I could be you, and you could be me”*. Most adopted people probably don’t think about those aspects in legal terms when they’re growing



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up. But the older you get, you realise that this legal mechanism has literally dictated your life’s path, or at least a good chunk of it. You become very aware of that.

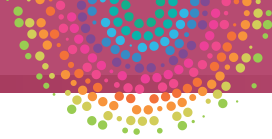
Decisions have been made on your behalf. *“If a different social worker was on duty on a particular day, would I have gone to a different family?”* If you’re adopted, you ask yourself these questions. Before I was even born, there was paperwork with my name on it. That vessel of an adopted child was created before I even came into the world. I unpack all of that in my work, in the hope that people will stop in their tracks, and think about it a little bit differently.

7.8 Mobilising the Public

Two email campaigns were turning points in our work. The first was in June 2019, after the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs unexpectedly brought forward amendments to the 2016 Bill¹²⁷. I was in the middle of a writing retreat with Maeve O’Rourke and Katherine O’Donnell for our book on the Magdalene Laundries¹²⁸ but we had to stop what we were doing and act quickly to intervene. Thanks to a bit of Googling, I’d figured out that you could use a code whereby we could create a link for people to email politicians. If people clicked on the link, it would open their email client, all TDs’ and Senators’ addresses would be already in it, and it would have a pre-composed email for them to send. For adopted people and natural parents, mothers

127. The details of this campaign are documented in Claire McGettrick’s 2020 article: Claire McGettrick, “Illegitimate” Knowledge: Transitional Justice and Adopted People,” *Éire-Ireland* 55, no. 1 (2020): 181-200. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2020.0007>.

128. Claire McGettrick et al., *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries: A Campaign for Justice* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).



The main takeaway message was – “hang on, stop, kill this Bill. This is demeaning to adopted people, it’s an insult to us, these proposals are an infringement on our privacy – and natural parents’ privacy.”



in particular, it’s very hard to express how you put your views on something if you’re not politically minded, or if you’re not used to it. You’ll know how you feel, but you may not have the language or the confidence to express it. So we sent everyone a pre-composed email that could be tailored to suit themselves.

We sent it around, and we publicised it on Facebook. The main takeaway message was – *“hang on, stop, kill this Bill. This is demeaning to adopted people, it’s an insult to us, these proposals are an infringement on our privacy – and natural parents’ privacy.”* Thankfully people understood what we were trying to do, and hundreds of people sent emails. It was predominantly adopted people and their families in June 2019, but soon we were getting messages from TDs and Senators saying, not only are we getting hundreds of emails in, this is really a Movement. The senders could copy us on the email if they wanted to, and we got about 830 emails. That’s enough to make the Oireachtas sit up and take notice. The result was that Fianna Fáil, who were in a confidence and supply arrangement with the Fine Gael government at the time, said *“hang on, we need to pause, we need to apply the brakes, we can’t go forward with this, we need further consultation.”* And, so, because of the email campaign, a stop was put to the Government’s gallop.

In November 2019, the Minister put out four options as to how the legislation could move forward. We ran a mini campaign after that to explain what

option we thought was best, i.e., Option Three, which would have safeguarded records, introduced a statutory tracing service and would also have put the National Adoption Contact Preference Register on a statutory footing. Eventually, on the basis of the responses she received, the Minister said that she would go with Option Three. But then that government was dissolved, and the Bill lapsed at that point.

The second email campaign was run by the Clann Project¹²⁹ in October 2020. The government was doing a Bill on the archive of the Mother and Baby Homes. The whole idea was to transfer the database to Tusla from the Commission, but then they were talking about sealing the archive of the Commission. Unfortunately, it coincided with budget day, which meant competing with that, but we said that we had to try. So we did our email campaign, I set up the code again, and created a link for people to click, and we put it out on the eve of budget day. We got word back from our contacts in Leinster House that 30,000 emails had arrived in one day. The whole server had crashed! They were meeting in the Convention Centre at the time due to Covid-19, their whole systems went down, and they couldn’t get the printers to print their speeches for budget day. We were blown away.

We were also completely burnt out. In the debates that ensued, there was some negative commentary about our campaign in the press. We’ve put all of the correspondence about that on our website¹³⁰ - we made a complaint to the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad about it. So it was a stressful time, but our message got through to the public. They started to get it, and soon it wasn’t just our own gang that were getting more politicised. At the first campaign in June, it had just been adopted people, but this time, it was all of them, plus the public behind us. I see now in posts on the internet – memes¹³¹ and jokes complaining about the government, the bank crashes and whatever - included in the litany of things on these various posts is the phrase – *“tried to seal the Mother and Baby Home records”*. We’re almost invisible in that, which is even more powerful. The public has made this fight their own. That said, we still have our work cut out for us. We’re constantly trying to counteract the latest slap

129. “CLANN,” CLANN: Ireland’s Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.

130. “Correspondence Regarding Defamatory Statements Made About CLANN in the Seanad,” CLANN: Ireland’s Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 8, 2024. <http://clannproject.org/commission-report/correspondence-defamatory-statements-in-the-seanad/>.

131. A meme is an idea, behaviour, image or concept that is spread on the internet (mostly through social media platforms) within cultures and social groups.

back that they've given us. I spent almost two weeks working on briefing documents for the latest effort in the legislature. A lot of work goes into even just one public statement.

7.9 The Impact of Adoption on Natural Parents

A social worker might say that a mother “*doesn't want to know*”, for example, she “*doesn't want contact*”. But it's never as simple as that; when mothers are given the space to talk through why it is they don't want contact, our experience is that it's often because they haven't gone back there, emotionally - they haven't gone back to that memory where they had to put up a baby, all those years ago. It's not that they don't want contact, it's that they find it extremely difficult to relive the pain they endured. And certainly in our experience, the vast majority of mothers are not opposed to their adult children having access to records. People think adoption research has been done, but we haven't done nearly enough research on its impact on natural mothers. Any other woman who has lost a child, through death, or a child going missing, they have the support of their community around them, and they're allowed to speak about it. Nobody's telling them forget about it. Yet the natural mothers had to get on with their lives and pretend like they never had a child. I don't see that reflected adequately in the research. I don't see those experiences properly voiced. In dealings with women who have lost babies to adoption, it's important to understand that aspect of things. If they're saying no, they're not being uncaring, they're not being cold, they're not rejecting - they're just trying to cope. They're just trying to cope with the fact that they lost a child twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ago, and they had to put this big wall up to mind themselves. They're not saying it, and they just need somebody who understands that to tease it out with them.

It would be good for natural mothers who feel that way to be able to have a chat with people like ourselves. It's not that we have an agenda in that chat, it's just giving them that space to unpack their feelings. It might be six months later that they decide – “*actually, I feel able to now*”. It's a long game. You hear people, sometimes in the Oireachtas, sometimes in hearings on adoption bills, talking about mothers and being frightened and what not, but you're hearing them in a moment of crisis. If you're a counsellor, if you're a social worker who's picked up the phone to a mother who's frightened, that's one moment in crisis. We

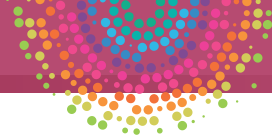


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speak from experience, over the course of many years. We're interacting with them, we're friends with them, we're colleagues of theirs, and we understand that's not the whole person. There's a whole journey that they end up going on sometimes, and sometimes that takes a long time. The mothers are not permanently in this frightened closet. In my view, well-meaning people, in their attitude towards those allegedly frightened mothers, are actually keeping them in that closet, they're not helping them find a way out. Finding a way out helps them to actually *heal*. If you're telling them – stay in that closet – well that's where they're going to stay. We've got to move out of that spot of shame and secrecy, and to help natural mothers figure a way around it, and that comes from each of our interactions. It also comes from the State, in what it says. A big criticism I had of the draft *Birth Information and Tracing Bill* was that it was perpetuating the culture of secrecy by setting adopted people and natural parents *against* each other. The materials publicising the bill suggested that natural parents would be alerted to the legislation. We *alert* people to something dangerous.

There aren't as many fathers that come forward. I've known quite a few over the years who come forward and want to trace their sons and daughters, some of whom remained in activism themselves, but they are in a minority in comparison to the other groups. There are probably a variety of reasons for that. I think it's fair to say that they didn't take on the same burden as the women. The women had to relinquish, the women signed the papers. The women took all of that emotional burden and legal responsibility. Some natural fathers feel very, very strongly, and I know that. But they are a mixed cohort. It would be interesting to see, as time goes



on, and as things hopefully get more open, what happens with natural fathers.

7.10 Working with the Media

Unfortunately, the media tends to focus on so-called human interest stories, for example adopted people finding their mothers, but many journalists don't want the hard-hitting stuff. The Tuam story broke in 2014. We were aware that there were deaths in Tuam, long before it was in the media. It had been in Jim Smith's research¹³². Of course what happened in Tuam was absolutely horrific, but we knew that there were high mortality rates elsewhere too. Furthermore, some of the children might not be dead - some of them might have been adopted. However, because this big worldwide media splash happened, we felt the government wanted to put a sticky bandage on Tuam. In my view, the media was focused on Tuam, so therefore the government was focused on Tuam. That's why the media is so frustrating for us, and the government's reaction to the media is frustrating too.

We need journalists to listen to our hard arguments. I feel Conall Ó Fátharta is one of the very few journalists who understood that, as, I think, did the late Mary Raftery¹³³. Some media outlets will ring up, asking if we have a Magdalene survivor or an adopted person or a mother they can talk to. We'll say no, unless an affected person actually comes to us, and says that they want to talk to the media. In that instance we will still only put them in touch with somebody we trust. I have qualms about the UK show "Long Lost Family". I'm delighted for people when they get to see each other, but you should not have to bare your soul on TV for it to happen.

Witness testimonies and oral histories are hugely important - we want to get people's experiences out into the public domain in an ethical way¹³⁴. We have a media guide, so that if there is a call from the media, we direct them to our media guide. But our main approach is to draw from testimony. We stick to the hard line, backed up by documentary evidence and people's own experiences. It is terribly emotional to read about all of the stories, but there's more to it than that. People need to hear also about

the long, hard slog of years of research, simply to find out who you are. You need to see the whole person, not just a few column inches of a story.

7.11 Sensitivity in Activism

It takes a lot to get the message across. It depends on the person sitting in front of you, and their own perspective that they bring to it. Sometimes, within a few minutes, somebody will get it. Other times it's more difficult, and you have to really tease it out with them. I've become more skilled over the years at putting our experiences and concerns in language that non-adopted people will understand, and that, in itself, has to be tailored to individuals. If you're adopted, and you're not in the political realm, it won't take much to knock your confidence if you're batted back when you're trying to express how difficult it is to be an adopted person without your identity. I don't believe in putting a hierarchy on anybody's experiences of injustice, yet as an adopted person you're conditioned into being grateful, you're conditioned into thinking that "*at least you weren't in an institution. You don't have it bad*".

So it can take very little for an inexperienced adopted person to be knocked back. That's a frustration, because it is so hard to get our point across, and we're still raising that kind of consciousness. Often I feel like a broken record on the airwaves. It's like some people need regular booster shots of this information that's been raised many times before. The ultimate frustration is that we're not really asking for all that much in the great scheme of things. Non-adopted people can get their medical records, birth certs, anything they want. Put adoption into the mix and suddenly people panic. We're not asking for a lot. As adopted people we set ourselves aside a lot, we make ourselves small for other people, we're very good at navigating the complexities of relationships. People have no idea the sacrifices adopted people make. Staying away from funerals, not saying things, not reacting to things if somebody says something unintentionally hurtful, just all sorts of different ways that adopted people will make themselves small and put themselves to one side. Yet in the

132. For a review, see James M. Smith, "Knowing and unknowing Tuam: State practice, the archive, and transitional justice," *Éire-Ireland* 55, no. 1 (2020): 142-180, <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2020.0006>.

133. O'Toole, Fintan. "The woman who opened our eyes". *The Irish Times*. February 9, 2013. Accessed February 9, 2024. <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/the-woman-who-opened-our-eyes-1.1251065>.

134. For examples, see the Magdalene Oral History Project: "Transcripts and Audio Files," Justice for Magdalene's Research, accessed February 9, 2024. <http://jfmresearch.com/home/oralhistoryproject/transcripts/> and the Clann Statements pages: "CLANN Project Witness Statements," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024. <http://clannproject.org/clannarchive/statements/>.



Adopted people are selfless – they put themselves in the background. People don't get it until they're around us, and then they realise. Most adopted people already go over and beyond in terms of protecting the feelings of others.



eyes of some, we're the dangerous ones, we're the ones that our mothers have to be protected from. It's not something our mothers are looking for, but allegedly, our mothers need protecting from us. That's the biggest frustration. To have our own words spat back at us – to be told *"this is humane, this is the way to do it"*. We don't need a lecture on privacy for something that's in the public record. It's so frustrating when adopted people already do so much to mind other people.

Adopted people are selfless – they put themselves in the background. People don't get it until they're around us, and then they realise. Most adopted people already go over and beyond in terms of

protecting the feelings of others. It just seems to be in our nature, probably because we've grown up in this sort of duality. If you know you're adopted, you know you've got other family out there. What we're looking for is really simple.

7.12 Reflecting on Adoption

The culture is the same the world over. I think people still have a hard time understanding that adoption should be a measure of last resort. People do not have a right to a child. Those of us who were adopted were, in my view, there to fulfil a need. Now that we have the need, and are trying to assert our rights, suddenly the world's kicking up. We're getting there, but I think we've got a long, long, long way to go.

The court of history is going to look back on these times in Ireland, and all of the debates around our rights and all of the debates on whether we should have access to a document that says who we are, and that we were born. I think that it is not going to look kindly on those who stood on the wrong side, in the same way that it will not look kindly upon people who opposed LGBTQ rights. For us to hang up our hats as activists, a lot has to happen. Good legislation will go a long way to helping things change, but we will still need to change the culture around adoption in Ireland. There's still a lot of work to be done.

Chapter
8

Martin
Parfrey

Martin Parfrey was adopted from a Mother and Baby Home in the 1950s. In 2002, following a radio show about adoption information rights, he co-founded Know My Own, an adoption support and advocacy group. He also co-founded the Adoption Support Network of Ireland. Up until the enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022¹³⁵, he regularly campaigned and lobbied for adopted people to have access to their records, and he continues to campaign for a full examination and preservation of the site at the former Bessborough Mother and Baby Home.

8.1 Searching for Roots: Secrecy and Disclosure

This whole journey started for me when I discovered that I was adopted. There were a few little bits of evidence which, when all put together, were enough to convince me, but anytime I asked at home, I was told I was not adopted.

As a child, a few children asked – some relatives knew, and their kids must have heard. There were a couple of other things. My place of birth and district of registration were Dublin on what “passed as” a birth cert, which of course was actually an extract from the Adopted Children’s Register. I wasn’t a bit happy about this. I was delighted years later to discover that all adopted births are registered in Dublin, and I actually was a genuine Rebel, born in Cork. I’m very proud of that.

I was lucky in a sense, in that being adopted never actually troubled me. I could imagine it having a big psychological effect on a lot of kids, but I was curious. I was never told, and I was in my mid-teens when I was one hundred percent certain. On one occasion after my mother had died, it was still denied but later confirmed.

8.2 Information and Tracing: Different Routes

Eventually, I started looking for my birth family, which I think is a natural thing to do. We all need to know where our roots are. There was zero help from the authorities when I tried to find my information. A lot of adoptees find that you start to search, you hit a brick wall, and you walk away from it, and after a while then something triggers it and you say, I’ll try again, I’ll try again.

I think sometimes the people who held the information – nuns in Mother and Baby Homes and so on, did try to help. For example, if an adopted person was in the Home to seek their information, I’ve heard stories of the nuns “accidentally” leaving papers with birth information on them visible on their desks during the meeting and so on – not giving it directly, but maybe they were leaving it up to the adopted person to spot it. Perhaps it was just carelessness, but I do wonder.

Eventually, with the help of one of our wonderful “search angels¹³⁶”, I did find out who my family were. The search angel was probably the best in the country. We called her “the Professor”, and she called me “the Bishop”. She located my information in Joyce House, where she painstakingly went through the records. With her help, I found the name of my birth mother, and the tiny little village that she was from.

8.3 Grassroots Development: The Yahoo! Group

AdoptionIreland had a *Yahoo!* group, and it was a huge group at the time. Unfortunately, problems arose and *AdoptionIreland* disintegrated. I was involved with others in founding the Adoption Support Network of Ireland, which morphed into Adoption Rights Alliance¹³⁷ - which is the main adoption group now.

AdoptionIreland was a fantastic group. It was a shame that it went wrong, because it was very supportive. They set up a *Yahoo!* chat page which was a support group more than anything - for advice, a shoulder to cry on, what have you. There was great camaraderie on it. I struck up a particular

135. “Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

136. The term “search angel” appears to have originated in the USA. It is often used to describe someone who volunteers their time and expertise to help someone find information relating to an adoption.

137. “Home,” Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

people whose births had been illegally registered with their lost parents, and parents with their children¹⁴¹". We're lucky to have these people in the media who are passionate about the subject and who are there to help us in any way they can.

8.7 Irish Information and Tracing Legislation: UK Comparison

No legislation, including the 2010 Act, has made any difference to us¹⁴². What we've looked for, from day one, is the same as they have in England, where the records were opened up in 1975. The only stipulation was that you had to agree to half an hour of counselling first. Some people in Ireland were objecting to having that, but I would have been happy to have it, because I think it's an important safety feature. The social worker knows what's in your file, but you don't. There could be some shocking revelation - maybe you were conceived as a result of rape or incest. I think the half hour of counselling would be important to prepare you for what's in the file.

I have friends who were born in England and who were adopted. I've actually seen two files, from the UK. The information in those two files was absolutely stunning. One friend of mine was born in England, so I gave him the name of somebody to write to in England, and she sent back this huge file, massive file. She sent the original paper documents, not photocopies of documents. That makes a difference. It's somehow more authentic. The other person wanted my help writing a letter to her birth mother. There is a particular way of wording that letter, so that if the letter falls into the wrong hands it won't cause trouble. She gave me her file to see. It was so thick, just huge! The amount of information in it was stunning.

The redaction of files is very frustrating. I've seen them, in one case the vast majority of the file was redacted – entire pages blacked out. When you compare it with what you would get in the UK, you realise what we're dealing with here in Ireland. You would have received very minimal information from a Mother and Baby home too in the past, but you'd generally get your mother's Christian name, her occupation, her father's occupation, roughly what part of the country she was from. It is useless information in itself, but where it could be useful would be if you succeeded in going through the



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index of birth records in Dublin, that non-identifying information might help you to confirm whether or not this is the right Cert. The sky didn't fall in in the UK when they opened up the records. No one died. Yet here we are in Ireland, forty-six years later, still looking for the same. Adoptees are not out to cause trouble, and I've seen plenty of examples.

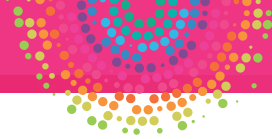
8.8 The Importance of Information

There are dangers associated with not having your information. Two adoptees could marry each other and turn out to be related by birth. There was a case like that in England. There are certain checks before you get married designed to prevent that, but it would be very easy for someone adopted to slip through that net.

Medical information can be crucial. A friend of mine found out he had a genetic illness that can be fatal in some circumstances. He went to the authorities looking to find his adopted child (now adult) to warn them of the possibility that they could be affected by it, and it is hereditary. No, they wouldn't help, wouldn't pass on any information to the adopted person, no help whatsoever. So he came to me. We had a fabulous search angel, who sadly has since passed away, and she managed to locate the adopted person and, luckily enough, the information was passed on, so at least they could be checked out to see if they were likely to be a victim of this disease. The search angel used to come down to Cork for the *Know My Own* meetings purely

141. Martin Parfrey and the Adoption Authority of Ireland wish to acknowledge the input of Sharon Lawless, of Flawless Films, who provided the extra information and context for this paragraph.

142. All interviews were conducted prior to the enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022.



to see if she could help people. She used to stay with us, herself and her partner. They'd come on Sunday and maybe go back on Wednesday. If there was any research they wanted to do around Cork, they'd use their time that way. She was a character, she had a great sense of fun. Getting her out of a Know My Own meeting at the end of the night was almost impossible.

8.9 Bessborough: Preserving the Site

A company had two planning applications in for development at the Bessborough site, and this was a major concern for *Know My Own*. Those planning applications were turned down, but another company are supposed to be looking for planning there now, so we have another battle on our hands. The correct handling of that site is essential. Over 900 babies died there, and the burial places of 64 are identified - the rest are all missing. Over 800 babies, unaccounted for. There is no record of them. Relatives of some of those babies are still trying to find out where they were buried. There is a burial ground marked on a map. We know that bodies were buried in other parts of that site, only *where* is anybody's guess. These people need closure, they deserve closure, and if there's development of the site, then any chance of closure for these people is gone.

There should not be any development of any type until the grounds have been fully forensically examined. In my view, it should be taken over by the government, and preserved as a memorial to those who died. Preserve it and the other Mother and Baby homes permanently as memorial gardens. Myself and two of my colleagues are involved in organising a commemoration every year at Bessborough, and it's a huge, beautiful event. The Adoption Authority's CEO came down to address us one time. We get people coming in from America, England, and all over Ireland.

8.10 Positive Shift in Society

There's a huge change in how society views adoption in Ireland. The terminology - words like *illegitimate*, which is a horrible term to use anyway - that's gone. The stigma is gone. There was a time when adoptees were regarded as being second or third class citizens through no fault of their own, but that's all gone.

Back in those days, most parents would not accept their single daughter being pregnant, would have told the daughter that she had two choices, get rid of this "embarrassment" without anybody finding



Adoptees are not out to cause trouble. I don't know what people are afraid of. When it comes to opening the records, the adoptees are not going to turn up where they're not wanted.



out about it, or get out. Straight and simple. At the time, there wouldn't have been any housing provided by the State, there was no Single Parent's Allowance. The women just didn't have a choice. Now they have the option of keeping their children, because they'll usually get accommodation, and they'll have the Single Parent's Allowance, and probably support from other people as well. At that time, they were very much on their own.

8.11 Preparing for Reunion

Listening to everybody's stories - and they're all different - we have to be optimistic. You have to have a certain attitude, because I've experienced some of the happiest stories you can imagine, I've experienced some of the saddest, most heart-breaking stories you can imagine, I've experienced ones that started one way and ended the other way. Sometimes people have years and years of heartbreak when a birth mother refused to acknowledge them, and then totally out of the blue, the mother changes her mind, even after maybe ten or fifteen years. When people are in the process of reunion, one bit of advice I've always given them, is be prepared for the best possible outcome, and be prepared for the worst possible outcome; the chances are it'll be somewhere in between. But you have to be prepared for both. You have to be prepared for rejection.

Adoptees are not out to cause trouble. I don't know what people are afraid of. When it comes to opening the records, the adoptees are not going to turn up where they're not wanted. Very, very few would, probably none. They're not going to turn up and cause trouble. So there's no reason not to open the records. We've been looking for it for long enough.

The way Ireland has handled adoption has been very poor up to now. Apart from voluntary groups,

there's been virtually no support for adoptees. In my case, I never got to meet my birth mother, because she died before I found my family. I met my siblings. When I was going to meet them, the emotions would be hard to describe. The only way I could put it afterwards was that it was like having every possible emotion all swirling around inside you at the same time, from highs to lows, to anticipation, fear, everything. One said that my birth mother had told them, about me, "*There isn't a day goes by that I don't think about him, that I don't worry about him, and I don't pray that he's ok, and I never want the subject raised again*". It just meant a lot to know that she really did care, that I wasn't just discarded like a bit of rubbish.

8.12 The Influence of Church on State

I believe the Archbishop was very involved in drafting the 1952 adoption legislation, more so than the government at that time. I'm very involved in the Catholic Church myself, but also I'd be the first to condemn how some people in the Church handled adoption and those affected by it - the Archbishop, some of the nuns in the Magdalene Laundries and the Mother and Baby Homes. But I've known a lot of priests, brothers, and nuns, hundreds of them, throughout my life - good people, decent people - and I'm not going to turn my back on them because of the handful of bad ones who are there.

8.13 The Importance of Advocacy Work

One time *Know My Own* and Adoption Ireland arranged a symposium on adoption in Cork. People came to that meeting from other counties and we offered to help them source local groups. *Know My Own* were actually the only group in the country who were meeting on a monthly basis. The Adoption Rights Alliance¹⁴³, to this day, still don't meet, it's all online. They're a brilliant advocacy group, they fight tooth and nail for everything, they do fantastic work,

but there's no actual place where people can go and talk to other people in the same situation, apart from *Know My Own*.

Know My Own has been in a very quiet phase with the pandemic. When we were holding meetings before the pandemic, the numbers were quite low anyway. A lot of people will come along, looking for help to trace their families and so on, some of them found what they were looking for and drifted away, others would stay on to help, support or advise others. It fluctuates, it drifts up and down.

People sometimes keep their connection to *Know My Own* a secret. One woman who attended the meetings had a tragic death in her family. A good few of us went to the funeral, but we couldn't approach her, because the family would be wondering who we were. So there is still secrecy in situations like that. Wouldn't it be lovely if everything could be just totally open? If we didn't have to worry about situations like that? Respect is very much a part of it - respect for people's feelings. That's why opening the records would not create a problem. Nobody *wants* to cause a problem, nobody wants to create hassle for anybody.

My sense of humour and positive outlook have definitely helped me with this work. There are so many things that could drive you under, if you allowed them to, such as the frustration. You have to have a sense of humour, you'd go under otherwise. Sometimes I get contacted a few times in the same day to do interviews. One day I was really tired and was asked to do an interview with RTÉ. I was hoping to get someone else to do it but the presenter had heard me on another show and didn't want anyone else to do it. I didn't feel like it, but I did it anyway. It needed to be done. We need to get our message out. What we want is the records opened up.

143. "Home," Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

Chapter
9

**Catriona
Crowe**



Catriona Crowe graduated from UCD in the early 1970s with a degree in English and History, and was later awarded a Doctor of Letters degree from the University of Limerick, where she was Adjunct professor of History from 2013 to 2016. She has also received honorary doctorates from Maynooth University, Trinity College, Dublin and UCD. She was Head of Special Projects at the National Archives of Ireland, where she managed the implementation of the Census Online Project which launched in 2007. Catriona Crowe is deeply involved in many aspects of Irish culture and is a well-known social commentator. She is a member of the Royal Irish Academy, Honorary President of the Irish Labour History Society, former President of the Women’s History Association of Ireland, and is very engaged with a number of intervention and support projects for people living in Dublin’s Inner City. She often comments on societal issues connected to adoption in Ireland.

9.1 Discovery of Ireland- US Adoption Files

In 1995, around autumn-winter, I heard an interview with a woman on RTÉ Radio. She had been born in Ireland and adopted to America in the early 1950s. She was talking about her search for her birth mother, and her absolute failure to find her. She did not know why, and she was really stuck with it. She said that she had had a very happy adoptive life, but that finding her birth mother was a matter of some extreme importance to her, to establish her own identity. She was not necessarily looking to have a relationship with her mother, but she wanted to know who she was. It struck me that this was very serious.

At that stage in my job in the National Archives, I was responsible for taking in records from Government Departments, which came in to the archives annually, thirty years after they were created. We had to get the records ready for the press to look at under “privileged access” arrangements on 30th - 31st of December, so that they could be published on the 1st of January¹⁴⁴. On Christmas Eve, 1995, I was looking through the files from the Washington Embassy. I was checking the files against a list, to see if they were all there, and I noticed on the list, that there was a file relating to children adopted in the United States. I

got the file out, and I saw that there were the names of a number of children mentioned in the file. I understood, of course, that these would be entirely confidential, but that nonetheless, they might help people like the woman on the radio if they ever wanted to come back and find them. So, I made a mental note of it.

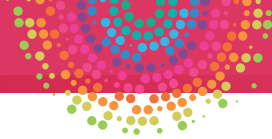
I heard the same woman on the radio in February, again saying that she was up against a brick wall trying to find any information at all. I thought this was terrible, and if the files we held could help at all, I needed to check it out. I went and got out the Washington file. I noted that these were good files, but there were relatively few names of children. I also wondered what the system was, which I didn’t understand. How did this system of foreign adoption operate?

In order to find that out, I needed to go and look for a Headquarters¹⁴⁵ file from the Department of Foreign Affairs that might lay out the policy regarding foreign adoptions. I found the number of a Headquarters’ file, and I went to the 3rd floor in the National Archives, where I discovered almost 2000 files dealing with children adopted in the United States between 1948 and the early 1970s. Each file was a case file for a child, or

144. State Papers – governmental files - are placed in the National Archives and released to the public after a certain period of time. In the 1990s this was 30 years; from 2021 it was reduced to 20 years after a legislative change in 2018.

“Archives held in the National Archives,” National Archives, accessed February 13, 2024.
<https://www.nationalarchives.ie/our-archives/archives-held-in-the-national-archives/>.

145. The Department of Foreign Affairs’ main office is located at Iveagh House in Dublin, and is referred to in this case as Headquarters. Headquarters communicates with a network of embassies, on myriad matters. Therefore Headquarters files that are sent to the National Archives would contain the administrative, policy and case files on international adoptions, which correspond with embassy file on the same topic.



sometimes siblings, where the only document related to the birth mother that appeared in the file was her “consent form”. The files contained the mother’s name, her address, and whether or not she was over 21. All of that could be very important information to an adopted person. The rest of the files were to do with the vetting of prospective adoptive parents, with a lot of confidential information about their economic status, their ability or otherwise to have biological children, and their religious orientation, because the people doing the vetting of these prospective parents were the Catholic Charities in America¹⁴⁶. I also found a box of administrative files, which laid out what the system was, and how it operated. The reason these files came from the Department of Foreign Affairs was that any child going to America had to get a passport.

I called the DFA and told them about the files, and when they announced it to the press it was taken up straight away. I walked down to the front door of the Archives that morning, and Joe Duffy was there waiting for me. At that time, he was a researcher on Gay Byrne’s radio show, and I had known him from his activist days as a student. He asked me to do an interview with Gay there and then. In those days, I was very nervous about public speaking - I didn’t like doing it, I was actually quite retiring! Yet I was too worried to be nervous. The important thing was for this to be done properly. It had the potential to upset and ruin people’s lives, but it didn’t have to, if it was managed correctly.

I talked to Gay Byrne, live on the radio, for I think close to an hour or more, which was quite unusual on that programme in those days. I told the story of what was there, what the files were, what information they contained. I emphasised that they were closed files, but that there was obviously a big serious issue here about contact between birth mothers, and potentially fathers, and adopted or fostered children, of whom there were many in those days. I said that something ought to be done by the Government – perhaps something like the voluntary contact register they already had in British Columbia. My job was not to be recommending Government policy, but if you don’t, who will?



I talked to Gay Byrne, live on the radio, for I think close to an hour or more, which was quite unusual on that programme in those days. I told the story of what was there, what the files were, what information they contained.



I wanted the DFA to take this seriously, because they were the custodians of these files, and the fortunes of the people affected by them would depend on how the Department reacted. I was trying to set a scene, firstly to protect the many women who had never told anyone that they had a child who had been adopted, but secondly to give children searching for their identity an opportunity to do so. It became a huge international news story. I was interviewed on 60 Minutes, on Sky News, on CNN - it went all over the world. I was on television for three days.

9.2 Contrasting Rights to Information and Privacy

My sympathies then, and over the next year or so, were very much with the birth mothers. As it settled down, the phone calls started coming to the Archives - usually from terrified birth mothers, who in many cases had never told their story before. I was very conscious that I was not a counsellor, so I would explain that, and would give them the contact details for Barnardos’ Adoption Advice Service¹⁴⁷. Barnardos also had a tracing service¹⁴⁸ to support people who wanted to conduct a search, which some of them did. Most of the birth mothers who rang were terrified that someone was going to come knocking on their door - someone whose identity they had never revealed before, about whom they hadn’t told their husbands, or their other children, and that this would be simply disastrous. All I could do was listen sympathetically, and assure them that the files were closed, and that it was very unlikely

146. This is documented in the “CLANN Report,” CLANN: Ireland’s Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, Accessed February 8, 2024. <http://clannproject.org/clann-report/>; and in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Final Report: Chapter 32* (Dublin, 2021), 100-136. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>

147. “Post Adoption Service,” Barnardos, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/post-adoption-service>.

148. “Origins Service,” Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/origins-service/>.

to happen. I would also suggest that maybe in the future, they might consider writing a letter to someone about what had happened, because if the adopted children were unable to receive information about themselves, it could be very difficult for them too.

However, my perspective on that started to shift over time. I became the sort of person in the Archives that was called for to deal with sensitive cases. People who had been in Industrial Schools, who had been born in Mother and Baby Homes - many of them came to the Archives as a last resort when they were searching for their birth mothers and finding it really hard to get information. I was still very sympathetic to the fears of the birth mothers, and about what had happened to them. Yet, I started to feel that it was a solid human right that someone should know their own identity. It would not have to mean a relationship with a birth parent, if that birth parent did not want it. We are all different, there are going to be different reactions and relationships. I have heard examples of lovely reunions where people got together and had great relationships, or ordinary ones where they met and talked a bit and there wasn't that much interaction thereafter. I have also heard of positively bad ones, where people felt doubly rejected because the person they contacted did not really want to have a relationship with them. My feeling was that *no matter what* - even taking into account the fears of birth mothers - everyone had a right to their own identity. I feel that very strongly to this day.

Adopted people's right to identity has been absolutely denied in a very prolonged fashion in Ireland. There was a Supreme Court case in 1998¹⁴⁹ taken by representatives of birth mothers, in which the decision was made to privilege birth mothers' privacy over the rights of their natural children. I feel this was the wrong decision, yet it became something that was used by Attorneys General, Departmental officials, Tusla, and the religious orders in the years that followed to make decisions, or to explain decisions made. I feel that Supreme Court decision was used by many institutions in Ireland to deny people their rights. Those rights are still being denied, despite the current Information and Tracing Bill. Maeve O'Rourke is a terrific human rights lawyer, and she has done a lot of good work

in this area. She has regularly told the Attorney General that GDPR gives people a right to their own information, and that the Supreme Court decision everyone was referring to, and using, was irrelevant as a result. I believe that point is now more or less accepted. We cannot "balance" the right of a birth mother against her child who is adopted, because that child has a human right to knowledge of their own identity, and that supersedes everything. The arrangements that are made around information are important and they matter, but that right has to be there, and has to be acknowledged. Everyone is different, and if there's one lesson learnt from all of this, it is that one size does not fit all. The adopted individual should be able to decide what they want to do. There should be an unfettered right to knowledge of your own identity after you've turned eighteen years old. People just need to be given straightforward, absolute access to any material to do with them. It is important that the Adoption Authority be prepared for this, that they make sure that the files are properly archived and, hopefully, digitised, so that the Authority can do what needs to be done with them when the time comes. This is a matter of urgency.

9.3 Irish Culture of Secrecy, Stigma and Shame

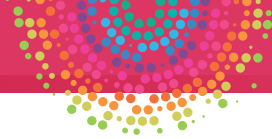
Marie Collins is a survivor of clerical sexual abuse who very bravely came to the fore about her experience. Derek Scally wrote a wonderful book called *The Best Catholics in the World*¹⁵⁰, which looks, in some detail, at how Ireland dealt with all of this. He asked Marie why, when she first spoke about this, she did not go to the Gardaí, and she explained that she didn't know why, but that she hadn't thought of it. Everybody forgets that now, but people did not *think* the same way in the past. We have ways of thinking, now, that were simply not accessible to the generations before us. To me, the denial of an adopted person's right to information is bound up with a very secretive value system of shame and cover up, which in the past was largely propagated by the Catholic Church and the State, and supported by the majority of the community, because they weren't allowed to think any other way.

As a country, I think we are also very poor at pulling ourselves back from what are obvious

149. IO'T v B. While the judgement was not made public, its implications are considered in the following publication:

The Law Society's Law Reform Committee, *Adoption Law: The case for reform* (Dublin, 2000), https://www.lawsociety.ie/globalassets/documents/submissions/law_reports/adoption.pdf.

150. Derek Scally, *The best Catholics in the world: The Irish, the church and the end of a special relationship* (London: Penguin UK, 2021).



We are now looking at another cycle of all of this secrecy and shame with the publication of the Mother and Baby Homes report in 2021



egregious mistakes. The Kerry Babies report¹⁵¹ and the Stardust tribunal¹⁵² are two examples. I hope Ireland can learn from both of those, and not be so slow when people are clearly suffering - suffering wrongly for reasons that have to do with stupid official decisions, poor judicial oversight or issues in society at the time. There are people of good faith in the public service, but in my view their voices are not being heard. The policymakers and legislators need to put themselves into the shoes of the adopted person who says “all I wanted to do was contribute to the record of Irish history and get information about my birth mother, and I’m now in my seventies, and I might die, so could you hurry up about it.” The survivors are making eloquent appeals to our compassion and our humanity, and as a nation we should be able to hear them, but I don’t see that much evidence that we do.

9.4 Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation

We are now looking at another cycle of all of this secrecy and shame with the publication of the Mother and Baby Homes report in 2021¹⁵³. I was surprised at how survivor testimony was handled by the Commission. It would have helped if they had explained it directly to the survivors. They are not obliged to, but there is a moral responsibility. They knew, when they wrote those conclusions, that people were going to have very serious questions to ask them, and yet they didn’t give survivors an opportunity to ask those questions. They were in a

position of trust – the State and the justice system have trusted them to tell us the proper story.

One useful thing that the Commission did was to digitise many of the official records, as well as those of religious orders, some of whose official records should have been open years ago. The Commission managed to get material open that had not been opened before. That has all been digitised and sent to the Department of Children. That should be opened up straight away and made available to anyone who wants to research it. The Report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission really did not address the issue of adoption, sadly, even though it was an opportunity to do so.

9.5 An Investigation into Irish Domestic Adoption

I believe we now need a proper investigation into adoption in Ireland, all the way back to 1922. We need to take a serious, historical look at this, and to understand domestic adoption as the huge societal issue that it is. Why was it that Ireland went on for much, much longer than any other European country, shaming women into giving up their children if they gave birth out of wedlock? We also need to know what the gradations and differences in all of this were.

We need to look at the areas of boarding out and fostering in the 20th century. Some of that has been covered, in a very limited descriptive sense, by the report into Mother and Baby Homes, but there is a lot more work to be done. We need to look at the systems and the legislation, how responsibilities were assigned, and how they changed over time. We need to explore how the move towards domestic adoption met resistance all the way, particularly from the then Archbishop of Dublin, even though it was so obviously the right thing to do. When legal adoption finally did come in, what happened then? What were the practises? How did the secrecy element continue?

It is also important to know how rural practises in Irish adoption differed from urban ones. In cities, for example, far fewer women went into Mother

151. “Report of the Tribunal of Inquiry into “The Kerry Babies Case,”” National Library of Ireland, accessed February 23, 2024, <https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtIs000234125>.

152. Stationery Office, *Report of the Tribunal of Inquiry on the fire at the Stardust, Artane, Dublin on the 14th February, 1981* (Dublin: 1982), <file:///G:/Research/Research%20Projects%202019-2022/Reflections%20on%20Domestic%20Adoption/Report/Stardust%20Report.pdf>.

153. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Final Report* (Dublin, 2021). <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>.

and Baby homes. There's the famous last scene of *Juno and the Paycock*¹⁵⁴, Sean O'Casey's great play, set in the tenements of Dublin, in 1924. It's Juno sitting with her daughter Mary, who has been betrayed by Charlie the cad, and Mary's now pregnant. Her mother says that they will move across the river to the south side, where nobody will know who they are, and they will have a lovely life with this baby who is going to change things for them. How wonderful! It represented a certain approach at the time. As long as you could keep the child in the family, that was what mattered. It was imaginative, and clever, and I am certain people would talk about such things for the purpose of an investigation. We could learn a lot from those stories. Rural respectability arrived on our plates at the beginning of the 20th century when people were suddenly getting land of their own for the first time under the Land Commission. Now that they had something to lose, it became important, and very different attitudes towards women and pregnancy arose out of that. The Church's involvement was critical and crucial. So-called health, education, and welfare services were handed over to religious orders with the full and enthusiastic agreement of the State, where they did all of this work with very little inspection or regulation.

All of that needs to be written up properly in a decent investigation, rather than one that is based on a Commission of Investigation model. The whole area of prosecution and testimony from witnesses taken under oath does not work, and it does not need to be done that way. It just needs to tell us the truth. Between the Adoption Authority and other agencies, there are about 150,000 files relating to Irish adoptions. It would be useful if someone went through those files, creating a proper database. We need to parse these files, understand their context, and get that information in order for when the people it concerns need to see it. If we properly examine all of these files, then we might have a clear picture of adoption, as one aspect of a much larger system.

9.6 Positive Developments in Irish Adoption

The Adoption Act 2010¹⁵⁵ was really important. I know that many people who had adopted children after that had a much more positive experience of contact with birth mothers, and had relationships with them, which was just better for everybody in all kinds of ways. It was a very different, much more open environment, and easier to manage. Of course, there were new challenges - nothing is simple in this area, everything is complex - but the 2010 Act was a definite step forward for the better.

Survivors becoming vocal was also a very positive development. The survivors being the people adopted through the foreign adoption system, boarding out, fostering, and what I would refer to as the forced adoption of children born in Mother and Baby homes in particular. People like Susan Lohan, Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes, Noelle Brown, and Mari Steed. They became vocal spokespersons for themselves and for their whole cohort. They are all wonderful individuals, who have had to live in the shadow of this, and they are very eloquent on what that does to you as a person. They have not been listened to as much as they should have been, but they have been listened to, to a certain degree, and they have made a difference. The reactions of birth mothers and children born in these places to the Report in January 2021 moved the Minister to have a look again.

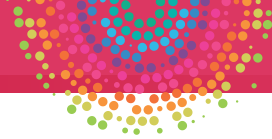
9.7 The Impact of Opening Records

In terms of opening up Ireland's adoption records, we can look to other countries to see how best to handle it. We can learn from the Stasi¹⁵⁶ files in Germany, where whether or not to open them to the public was a huge dilemma at the time. Some people wanted the Stasi files to be kept closed for longer, because in some cases there would be records of neighbours informing on each other. They were opened to the public in the end, and have been viewed by millions of people now. The sky has not fallen in; people have just learned the things they needed to know. My experience of people discovering information about their families

154. O'Casey, S. (1925). *Juno and the Paycock*, Act III:
"Mrs. Boyle: We'll go. Come, Mary, an' we'll never come back here agen. Let your father furrage for himself now; I've done all I could an' it was all no use — he'll be hopeless till the end of his days. I've got a little room in me sisher's where we'll stop till your throuble is over, an' then we'll work together for the sake of the baby.
Mary: My poor little child that'll have no father!
Mrs. Boyle: It'll have what's far betther — it'll have two mothers"

155. "Adoption Act, 2010," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.

156. In January 1992, the Stasi Records Agency made a large number of formerly secret police files from 1950- 1990 in then East Germany publicly available, in response to public demand.
 "About the Stasi Records Archive," The Federal Archives, accessed February 9, 2024. <https://www.stasi-unterlagen-archiv.de/en/archives/about-the-archives/>.



that they were not expecting is that, instead of it driving them crazy, it actually makes them thoughtful and reflective. We also need to learn from Australia and Canada, where they have had particularly dreadful experiences with the historical adoption and treatment of indigenous people.

In the early 2000s, I put the 1901 and 1911 census records online. There was a lot of fuss about that beforehand, like there had been in Germany with the Stasi files. There was concern that people would go crazy, that they should not see these files, but actually, the files had been open to be public in paper form since 1961. Anybody could walk in to the National Archives and look at them. All we were doing was putting them in a different format. Once they were made available online, everybody loved them, with one or two complaints. The concern in those cases was that, in putting the files online, I was making it easier for people to look, and that anyone could view someone's family's information. In my experience, however, people are generally only interested in their own family's history, not necessarily that of others.

Since we put those records online, I have been the beneficiary of lots of stories and phone calls from people since who found out things about their relatives that they had not known. Any number of those kinds of things. Instead of wanting to keep it a secret, it's so long ago, that they actually think it's wonderful that they can get this information now. They can imagine these people's lives and see it. It increases people's compassion and reflection about the past, about their own family, about all of that. It makes people thoughtful rather than angry. No one argues with the information they get; they trust it, and that's really important. You have to trust the information that you're being given, and that will be important for the Adoption Authority in terms of the adoption records. The same applies to records relating to the War of Independence and the Civil War, which I've been actively helping to get opened up over the past twenty years. Access to these files provides new information, and adjusts people's perspectives. It's revisionism - you change your mind in accordance with changing evidence. The files that the Adoption Authority and other agencies have in their possession are a subset of a really important record of 20th century Ireland. They have two values. They have enormous personal value to

the individuals mentioned in them, and they have huge scholarly value for historians in the future, for people interested in social and religious history. There's a dual purpose in opening them up.

What the Adoption Authority needs to do in terms of archiving the adoption files is very, very important work - possibly the most important archival job in Ireland for some years. The files have been the subject of so much attention and emotion, and now they need to be organised respectfully and efficiently so that they can be understood by individuals with personal connections to adoption, and by scholars looking to make sense of what happened and how. It's terribly important that it's done properly.

9.8 The Importance of Records

The content of the records is so important. Beyond details such as a name, date of adoption, and weight at birth, adopted people want context. If they were born in a Mother and Baby Home, they want to know what the place was like, what was going on there, who was in charge, was there a doctor who came regularly? They might want to know what the family home was like. It's important to give the survivors the maximum amount of information that they need and want. It's also important to create a scholarly archive that, into the future, will remind us what happened and can hopefully be used as an educational resource, allowing scholars to go in and out of it, and come to conclusions about what was going on within those spaces. There is a proposal now to establish an archive¹⁵⁷, most likely a digital archive, in the old Seán McDermott Street Magdalene Laundry - a memorial site for people who were in Industrial schools, Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries. I would like to see that happen. It would show immense respect to the survivors, and would provide a huge scholarly resource.

9.9 Advocacy Work

I'm constantly elated by the courage and the decency and the uniqueness of people I know who are survivors. They are wonderful people, and they cheer me up. People like P J Haverty and Mari Steed and Noelle Brown - wonderful human beings - stood out and fought for things, and they overcame stigma and shame to tell their own personal stories. It is exhausting and infuriating to

157. Órla Ryan, "Remembrance centre to be located at site of former Magdalene Laundry on Sean McDermott Street." *The Journal*, 29 March, 2022, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/national-remembrance-centre-sean-mcdermott-street-5723933-Mar2022/>.

contemplate these wonderful people being treated badly again. They have added to our knowledge of the experience immeasurably by what they've done. I visited Caroline O'Connor and she gave me her testimony in 2021. She's had the most dreadful experiences, but she educated herself, she came back to live in Ireland after travelling for a bit. She has not allowed this to dominate her life. She's a stage and interior designer, and is now in a place that she really loves, and she's happy. It's just a joy to spend time with her and listen to her telling stories about the work she does and her life which is so rich in many ways. It's not easy but she's working at it, and she reminds me that things are never, they're never ending in ways, with this sort of system. But then, perhaps all human relationships have a natural ending, at death, you know, but we're all finding out more about each other all the time, you can get a shock or a surprise about someone, for good or bad, that you thought you knew really well, so, it's part of the human condition. Yet, adoption is a forced separation that has to be repaired in a different kind of way. Anything I can do to help them, I will do. I sometimes feel that I could have done more to help in the area of adoption. Whenever I was asked to do things, I did them, but perhaps I was not as proactive as I could have been. However, I was always wary of trying to be a voice for survivors when they had their own voice, so I stood back. I have admiration for the courage and stamina of people who can show up for this, who wish to speak for themselves and get what they deserve, and I fervently hope they do.

9.10 Using our Domestic Adoption Experience for Intercountry Adoption

The one issue that has come into my mind and my attention on the media over the last, I suppose 10 or 15 years, is the issue of intercountry adoption. These children are being adopted by, I'm sure, loving parents who want to do their very best for them, and they have been adopted from places like China and Romania. I know some people have been wonderful advocates for children in trouble, particularly in Romania. However, many of these children are likely to be facing into the very same identity issues that our children, from Ireland, faced when they were adopted in America. Perhaps even *more* compounded problems, because of wider cultural and language differences. I hope that the Adoption Authority has a way of handling that, of ensuring that there are links back to the birth families, where that's possible.



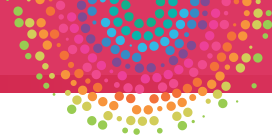
I have admiration for the courage and stamina of people who can show up for this, who wish to speak for themselves.



9.11 The Development of Domestic Adoption in the 1950s

Other countries were doing things differently to Ireland. In Britain and the Netherlands, there was an abandonment of coercive control in the institutions, starting in the 1930s. Even where religious groups were involved, they moved towards a model of supporting women to keep their own children, through creating halfway houses where they could come and get support while they had their child, helping them to get jobs and liaising actively with employers to do so. It was a very different approach, but it didn't happen here. However, there was one Mother and Baby home in Dublin, Regina Coeli, which supported "unmarried mothers" to keep their children, which was very unusual for Ireland at that time. At least they were trying to do things differently.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, people were calling for the legalisation of domestic adoption. It made sense. Children were being boarded out and exploited really badly by families, or were being fostered for money and treated badly, and meanwhile there were prospective parents who couldn't have children but wanted to. I think the proponents of domestic adoption felt that it would be far better to regularise that situation for parents so that they could be properly assessed, and deal with those children who were born in private nursing homes, for example. The heartbreak of losing your child must have affected those largely middle-class women in private nursing homes just as much as their poorer sisters who were in Mother and Baby homes, though of course there were some private patients in Mother and Baby homes too. Regardless, the pressures were coming from the same place: Church and family. I don't think it occurred to anyone, then, that identity



mattered to the child. I think, given the limited knowledge in that area at the time, they thought it wouldn't really make any difference once the child was brought up thinking and believing that these were their real parents. I think it was done with the best of intentions for both sides. People in the psychological research community started to realise that birth mothers had a huge emotional bond with their children, yet that concept took root in mainland Europe much faster than in the UK or in Ireland. In my view, as a country, we were slow in all kinds of ways to catch up with international thinking.

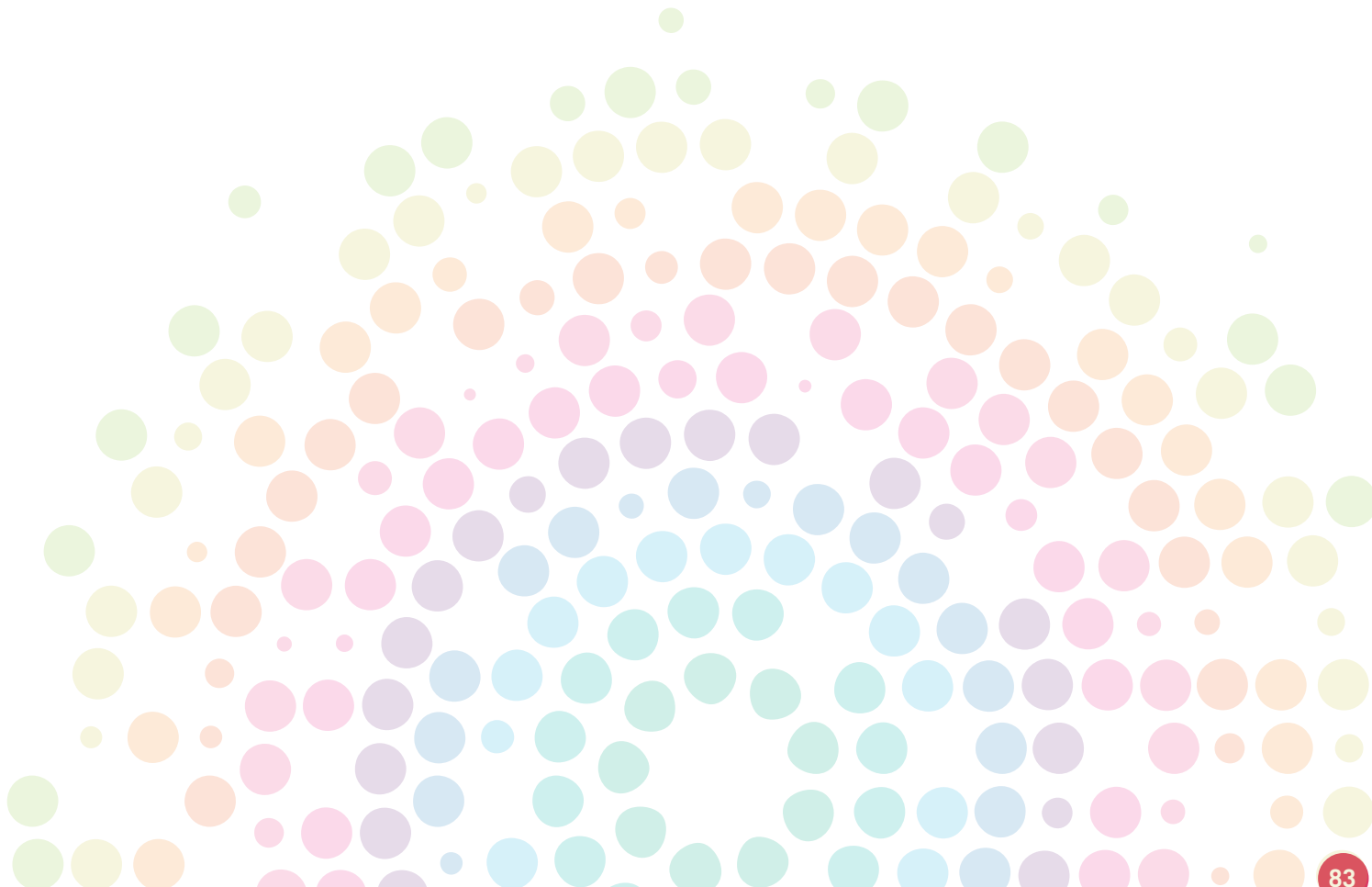
9.12 Reflecting on the Handling of Domestic Adoption in Ireland

We will look back on our handling of adoption as a country and will think we did it poorly. So much of historical domestic adoption here in Ireland relates to people who were in places where they should never have been in the first place. Adoption was rooted in a system that was coercive, cruel and abusive. It was inevitable that this would lead to

problems with how adoption out of those institutions was practised.

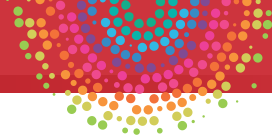
In terms of the ordinary course of adoption, there will be issues to be judged, but they will be judged in terms of how things were at that time. From 1952 on, the authorities in adoption were on a gradual learning curve in terms of what they should do.

More reading in the international literature would really help Ireland in terms of adoption – finding out the best practise elsewhere. We have not been good at that in this country – we don't look to international best practice. We need to respect the fact that other countries, in many cases, have far better research infrastructures than we have. We need better models to operate on. In my view we've got really good instincts, in Ireland, about children in trouble. Yet, for a long time, we suppressed those instincts, and we need to know why that happened. Our natural instinct is to help a child who is mistreated. Where that went, for so long, is what puzzles me.



Chapter
10

**Prof Katherine
O'Donnell**



Professor Katherine O'Donnell is Professor of the History of Ideas in the School of Philosophy in University College, Dublin, where she also lectures on feminist and gender theory. She received her BA from UCC and a Masters from Boston College, before returning to UCC to complete her PhD. Prof O'Donnell has received multiple awards for her academic work, and actively seeks out opportunities to work with people who suffer social disadvantage, including cultural stigma. She has had a strong involvement in the Justice for Magdalenes Campaign¹⁵⁸ and the subsequent Justice for Magdalenes Research¹⁵⁹, through which she has supported the Clann Project¹⁶⁰ and worked directly with many survivors of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. She has recently co-authored three books: "REDRESS: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice (2022: UCD)¹⁶¹, "Ireland's Magdalenes: A Campaign for Justice" (2021: Bloomsbury)¹⁶² and "A Dublin Magdalene Laundry: Donnybrook and Church-State Power in Ireland" (2023: Bloomsbury)¹⁶³.

10.1 Early Perceptions of Adoption in Ireland: Growing up in the 1970s

I am not adopted. I was born in Ireland in the mid-1960s, so I was naturally involved in adoption, as it was so prevalent a practice at the time. Some of my primary school classmates and relatives were adopted. I don't think my family lost anyone through adoption, but who knows?

As a child, I didn't understand that there was a stigma around adoption. Adults would sometimes say what I now know were negative phrases in relation to adopted people. Sentences such as "well, we don't know where they came from". Children amplify that kind of adult prejudice. I do remember a few instances of people being teased for being adopted, and I would row in to defend them, because I, personally, could never connect with thinking less of adopted people. It didn't make sense to me. Once I heard a child I knew "winning" an argument with his friends about who had more problems. They were comparing injuries and things, and his winning line was that he was adopted. I remember that the adult there at the time thought

that was really clever of him, to play that obvious card of such a perceived disadvantage, to win the argument. Yet I had a very different reaction. I was thinking "but surely being adopted is not a bad thing?"

Looking back, I think I was protected by my adopted friends, and in fact by all the adopted people I knew. They were protecting my naivety, protecting the fact that I wasn't aware of the inherent loss involved in adoption, and they did not want to burden me with it. I think adopted people are very adept emotionally, at knowing people's limits. In my experience, adopted people can read other people's emotions extremely well. Maybe the adopted people in my life wanted to protect me because they recognised that I actually *didn't* have prejudice, and didn't understand the implied prejudice in what others said about them, even though I had plenty of information that being adopted was considered "less than", or "suspect" or "dubious", by some. We all have difficulties with our family, and we all have joys in our family, so I really didn't see that adopted people's issues were very different from mine, or from other people who weren't adopted.

158. "JFM Political Campaign 2009-2013," Justice for Magdalene's Research, accessed February 9, 2024, <http://jfmresearch.com/home/jfm-political-campaign-2009-2013/>.

159. "Home," Justice for Magdalene's Research, accessed February 9, 2024, <http://jfmresearch.com/>.

160. "CLANN," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.

161. Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke and James M. Smith, *Redress: Ireland's Institutions and Transitional Justice* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2022).

162. Claire McGettrick et al., *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries: A Campaign for Justice* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

163. Mark Coen, Katherine O'Donnell and Maeve O'Rourke, eds, *A Dublin Magdalene Laundry* (Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

It has taken me a long time to learn how to be an ally to the adopted community – figuring out the best way to support them. I’ve learned a lot from simply being included in conversations, emails, text messages, and working closely with the Adoption Rights Alliance¹⁶⁴. Before getting involved, I wouldn’t have seen adoption as necessarily a bad thing - I would have seen it as, at least in some instances, a social good. Yet I’ve had time to reflect on that since. As an adult I am now more able to hear the kinds of difficult stories that adopted people and natural parents have. I’m much more receptive to realising the harms that can be done within adoption.

10.2 “A Terrible Country for Women”: Understanding the Social and Cultural Context Around Adoption

To understand domestic adoption in Ireland, and why certain things happened, you have to go back to how women in Ireland have been treated to date. Feminists call it “the patriarchy” - all of those explicit laws and implicit policies and customs that historically gave men in Ireland the sole power and right to make decisions, and particularly decisions about women which, naturally, included adoption. Young, single, Irish women used to emigrate in dramatically large numbers, compared to every other nationality. They left 20th century Ireland, in single female chain migration, as Hasia Diner¹⁶⁵ calls it. They helped each other to leave, to go to the UK or the USA. No other nationality did that - it was more common for people to emigrate in a family group. Yet Ireland was a terrible country for women, particularly for the so-called servant class, or working class, and they needed to escape. In mid-20th century Ireland, there was a huge shortage of servant girls for middle-class households. The bishops worried about it, the government worried about it, but still the young women who had filled those roles in the past kept leaving in huge numbers, and no wonder they left. The Rural Electrification Scheme meant that the male farmers could electrify their milking parlours, they could watch TV, they could listen to plugged-in radio, yet many of those homes, while they now had electricity, still had no running water. That naturally affected the women more than the men. In terms of personal hygiene every month, or tasks like bathing

children, washing clothes, cooking - all of that labour that was, at that time, left to the women, was so much more difficult due to the lack of running water.

Mary Daly¹⁶⁶ posits that issue as one of the many unnoticed reasons why young women left. In addition, there were so many rules and laws, and general surveillance on women’s bodies. They had little control over their own fertility, for example. Servant girls were raped in those households, and there was absolutely no comeback for them. So, 20th Century Irish women were in a precarious position, in all kinds of ways, and that forms part of the story of the development of domestic adoption in Ireland.

Patriarchy demands silence of men and collusion of men. If you want to keep male power and benefit from it in any way, you also kind of have to “go along with things”. I think many Irish men went along with things, and that applies to adoption. We really don’t hear much from the natural fathers, for example, anywhere in the history of domestic adoption. Sometimes I think they have been portrayed as having caused a problem that they walked away from. Yet, they were also affected by the culture in Ireland at the time. Many natural fathers may not have even known that they were fathers. Or sometimes the natural father married the natural mother after the child was adopted. Adopted people I know who have found their natural fathers have generally found open and welcoming arms. But of all the voices in adoption, I think I know a lot about the natural mother’s voice, and it is very, very different from how the State represents, or misrepresents it.

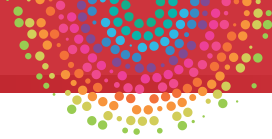
10.3 A Time of Change: The Turning Point in the Treatment of Irish Women

From the age of 17, which was in the early 1980s, I was a feminist activist. Getting the status of illegitimacy removed was a big triumph for the feminist movement in Ireland, and I was very proud of being associated with it. For me, taking the stigma away from so-called “unmarried mothers” was also part of our feminist agenda. The year 1984 was a big turning point for Irish women. I can remember what that year felt like – in 1984 Ireland

164. “Home,” Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

165. Hasia Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

166. E.g. Mary E. Daly, *Women and work in Ireland* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1997).



had the tragic cases of both Ann Lovett¹⁶⁷, and the Kerry Babies¹⁶⁸ – there was a strong sense among Irish women that we’d had enough, and that we were not going to put up with this anymore.

Those social changes in the mid-1980s also led to a change in adoption. There was such a heavy social stigma associated with being an unmarried mother, and so few supports, even after 1973¹⁶⁹. Until the mid-1980s, I, personally, had not made the link between that attitude towards single mothers, and domestic adoption in Ireland. Furthermore, I had not realised that adopted people were denied their early life files. Yet I was beginning to have first-hand experience, through people I knew, of the fact that there were likely forces at work. Forces who had taken these mothers and babies apart, and who did not want them to come together with notes and files and compare their experiences. Even now, roughly every month I will come across another adopted person, or another natural mother, who has stories about how difficult it still is to get the information they need to find their birth relative. Nothing has changed in that respect.

10.4 Understanding the Nuances of Activism

My activism continued as I pursued my academic career, moving to Dublin to work in UCD. We had a Centre¹⁷⁰ in UCD dedicated to this kind of work – the UCD Women’s Studies Centre. Through my role as Director of that Centre, I was invited into the Justice for Magdalenes campaign¹⁷¹, which was co-founded by Mari Steed and Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes - both of whom were very involved in the Adoption Rights Alliance¹⁷². I was very clear with them that once the Magdalenes issue had been addressed, I would join them in focusing on the area of adoption, which we all knew was going to be their next challenge. I wanted them to know



In activism, you have to be really clear on how to achieve your goals. You can either feed into whichever statutory process is ongoing and be as helpful as possible, or you can go the other way



that I wasn’t going to leave them – I was with them for every aspect of the injustices they were seeking to challenge, and that included adoption.

As a group, we were very focused on the Magdalenes, right through until May 2013. After the apology¹⁷³, working with Justice Quirke and his Commission, we became *Justice for Magdalenes Research*¹⁷⁴. Between that work, and changes in my career, I took a bit more of a back seat and was really just supporting the others as they set up the Clann Project¹⁷⁵. I would step in, in terms of reading documents, for grammar, logic and feedback, and help with various aspects of organising the events and things that they did. A lot of it was just providing moral support at that time.

In activism, you also have to be really clear on how to achieve your goals. You can either feed into whatever statutory process is ongoing and be as helpful as possible, or you can go the other way and be much more suspicious and sceptical. I have seen time and time again that what works in getting processes around issues like adoption changed is actually the latter. It’s the use of guerrilla tactics. It’s setting up a robust report that is patently well resourced and evidenced, and making supported

167. Rosita Boland, “Ann Lovett: Death of a ‘strong, kick-ass girl.” *The Irish Times*, March 24, 2018, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irish-times.com/life-and-style/people/ann-lovett-death-of-a-strong-kick-ass-girl-1.3429792>.

168. Aoife Barry, “The Kerry Babies: Death, tragedy and scandal, 30 years on.” *The Journal*, April 14, 2014, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/kerry-babies-case-30-years-on-1413918-Apr2014/>.

169. 1973 marked the first payments of the unmarried mother’s allowance

170. The UCD Women’s Studies Centre (WSC)

171. “JFM Political Campaign 2009-2013,” Justice for Magdalene’s Research, accessed February 9, 2024. <http://jfmresearch.com/home/jfm-political-campaign-2009-2013/>.

172. “Home,” Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

173. Then Taoiseach Enda Kenny issued a full apology on behalf of the State for the treatment of women in Magdalene Laundries.

Fora Staff, “In full: Enda Kenny’s State apology to the Magdalene women.” *The Journal*, 19 February, 2013, accessed 14 February, 2024, <https://www.thejournal.ie/full-text-enda-kenny-magdalene-apology-801132-Feb2013/>.

174. “Home,” Justice for Magdalene’s Research, accessed February 9, 2024, <http://jfmresearch.com/>.

175. “CLANN,” CLANN: Ireland’s Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.



Activism work is challenging, in that it does take a personal toll. If you have an idea, you're supposed to be ready to follow through in delivering it.



claims. I believe that approach has more impact than feeding into the process and going along with the report. So, within adoption rights activism, we certainly have differing opinions sometimes. Claire has a different approach to me in some ways. She works alongside the existing processes, and, in fact, despite my own opinion, I understand and respect why she does it that way. She's right to take that approach. In the longer run, it is a more honourable way to behave with the State. JFM and the CLANN project have used both approaches in tandem. We have produced robust, comprehensive "shadow reports", while at the same time also participating with the relevant State inquiries.

Activism work is challenging, in that it does take a personal toll. If you have an idea, you're supposed to be ready to follow through in delivering it. At one point I suggested to Maeve and Claire that they needed to do a shadow report about the Mother and Baby Homes report¹⁷⁶, the way we'd done a shadow report before with Justice for Magdalenes that sought to engage with the interdepartmental inquiry into State involvement with the Magdalene institutions, that was chaired by Senator Martin McAleese¹⁷⁷. It really didn't sit well with me, suggesting things but not actually doing them myself. Yet I didn't have the capacity at the time, and I really felt strongly that this work needed to be done. So, in that way, when I didn't have the resources for the activism work, I could still continue to help as an ally, providing advice and support and suggestions such as that one.

The work we do in adoption activism really

depends on the Minister at the time, and when the Minister changes, you need to be ready to change your approach. Sometimes I think the government involved didn't understand the core issues in relation to adoption information. For a long time, from what I could see, the Adoption Rights Alliance¹⁷⁸ operated in a reactive way, and I think they had little choice. They reacted to the legislation, or to their own treatment under it, for example in the proposed bill which suggested adopted people could under certain circumstances be criminalised for attempting contact with birth relatives. Yet, in activism, sometimes I think the best approach is to be pro-active, rather than reactive. To set the agenda, to draft a Bill, and to spell things out for the government. Maeve and Claire drafted what I felt was a really good Bill a number of years ago, writing exactly what they wanted to achieve. As a group we gave the draft Bill to the government, who unfortunately, I felt, really did not listen.

10.5 Power and Social Class in Irish Adoption

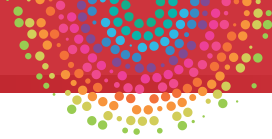
As an activist group, I think we need to get the message across, via the media, about how adoption in Ireland is related to social class. The adoption work and the Magdalene work feel quite separate in many ways, although I feel they are conflated in the public imagination. Yet there are such core similarities. They *both* involve poor marginalised women losing autonomy and agency. The difference is that adoption in the past *also* involved middle-class women - who were actually the empowered women in Ireland - falling foul of the theocracy, whereby they did not get to decide what kind of families they could form if they were not married.

Many of the women who had babies outside of wedlock were middle-class, and they used adoption, or were used by adoption agencies, to "solve the problem". Unfortunately, we are all missing part of the story, when it comes to understanding what happened in adoption, because we're only focusing, again, on women who were held in Mother and Baby Home Institutions, and those girls and women were generally not middle-class. That's a fine assumption when it comes to examining how the Magdalene Laundries operated, but adoption was

176. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Final Report: Chapter 9* (Dublin, 2021), 11. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>

177. Department of Justice, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries* (Dublin, 2013). Accessed February 9, 2024. <https://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/MagdalenRpt2013>.

178. "Home," Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.



different. Adoption is quite technical. People were boarded out before the Adoption Act in 1952, for example, and we know that there were illegal birth registrations.

10.6 Drafting an Information and Tracing Bill

The record will show that Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes and Maeve O'Rourke are people that the Irish State did not deserve. They have done immense intellectual, moral work, with the Clann report¹⁷⁹, and trying to engage with the Commission, yet they're only beginning to be recognised.

In terms of their draft Information and Tracing Bill, Claire connected all of the different elements that were involved in the adoption issue. She spelled it all out in her briefing notes, and the model that they came up with was exemplary – it was written in incredibly clear language. I felt it should have been made law so that we could begin, collectively, to move on with our lives together. I believed it was held up by deep prejudice and discrimination, not just against natural mothers, but also against adopted people. It was galling for me to see, and it was incredibly painful and hurtful for these representative people who are holding the interests of this wide and disparate group.

I work mostly with adopted people, although I do know a lot of natural mothers. I have friends who, since the 2010 Act, were saying that they had given children into adoption and really want to find them, want to be reunited, and some have done so. There appears to be a commonly-held idea that natural mothers want to be protected from meeting their children, but from the natural mothers I know that is not the case at all. I know of reunions that have gone really well. Reunions can be incredibly poignant because of the family similarities. When the adopted person comes into the family, they look like them, they have the same laugh, the same gait, and they have the same kind of interests. DNA is curious, we're learning so much about what the body codes. For all that joy, however, it also feels like a huge loss – the loss of so many decades. Through the Clann project¹⁸⁰ I've met various other natural mothers who are campaigning very hard to find their children, or siblings who don't know if

their brother is dead or was adopted to America. I've come across many other voices besides adopted people. Adoption affects a huge number of people.

The Information and Tracing Bill has a lot of amends to make, and it cannot discriminate against any group, either by omission or design. The legislation must centrally include and recognise people's right to their own personal information. If it doesn't allow easy, quick, safe and secure mechanisms whereby people can get their own information, I feel it will be yet another betrayal of adopted people and natural parents, and everyone connected to them.

10.7 Understanding Irish Adoption in an International Context

Looking at how other countries have handled adoption, Australia and Canada stand out, because there were so many similarities with Ireland. Even though they were dealing with racialising indigenous populations, it was a neo-colonial purity movement in all cases - it was exactly what we, in Ireland, did to ourselves in the past. I have linked in with the people working around these issues in both of those countries - Australia's Find & Connect¹⁸¹ project, and a similar study in Canada. It feels that the scale, and even the forces at work in both of those countries, were very, very similar to what happened in Ireland. So I think we have more in common with those two countries, in terms of adoption, than with our fellow European countries. From my limited understanding it seems that most other countries in Europe didn't have the same proportion of people who were adopted as Ireland did, so it's naturally a bigger issue for us.

10.8 Adopted People's Right to Information

In the area of information and tracing, there has just been one missed opportunity after another. The proposed Clann Legislation needs to be fully adopted. The Attorney General declared that there was a GDPR issue around adopted people and natural mother's rights to their files, so that's hopeful.

However, months later, we still have not seen the proper mechanism for releasing information files of adopted people. I felt that had to happen immediately, and the proper legislation had to be

179. "CLANN Report," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, Accessed February 8, 2024. <http://clannproject.org/clann-report/>.

180. "CLANN," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.

181. "About Find & Connect," Find and Connect, accessed February 9, 2024. <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/about/>.



The adopted people I know are very, very adept at managing other people's emotions, but they have a limit, and they don't want to bring on having to manage more emotions for other people than they're already doing.



in immediately. The mothers of the people my age, who were adopted at the peak of domestic adoption in Ireland, are now mostly in their eighties. Many of them are dying, and they wanted to meet their children, and their children have families to meet. It was happening in some cases, but not in a straightforward way. It's through people learning how to be clever with archives, finding shards of information, patiently stitching it all together, with lots of trepidation, fear and unknowing. Adopted people often get the information and don't act on it, sometimes for years. I think this is particularly true in those cases where parents went on to marry after placing their child for adoption. The people adopted in those cases sometimes felt like they were extraneous, and they don't want to go in and unsettle an entire family now, after all these years. The adopted people I know are very, very adept at managing other people's emotions, but they have a limit, and they don't want to bring on having to manage more emotions for other people than they're already doing. In some cases, perhaps they are aware that there is a life they didn't live, that their life could have been different in many ways, and that's a very weird stress that those of us who weren't adopted don't have to deal with. Imagine, when you're feeling down and things are going against you, if you knew that you could be having a different life? Adopted people need so much resilience to cope with that. Even post-reunion, there is still a lot of grieving to be done, because there was so much missed.

10.9 The Media in Ireland

From my standpoint as a non-adopted person, I think the media are pretty good at handling adoption in Ireland. The purpose of the media in Ireland is what it should be, and what it was designed to be, which is a public forum. A space where public opinion is formed. It has been a vehicle that has articulated and amplified the voices of adopted people and natural mothers. That has been great – it gives them a fair and proper hearing that they might not get elsewhere. We're lucky in Ireland that we have a good standard of journalism. Facts are checked, we don't have much sensationalism. We're a small country, and we have lots of local radio stations and online newspapers and local newspapers. I think they have done a good job, but then I am not adopted. So I leave it up to adopted people and natural parents to be the definitive opinion on the media.

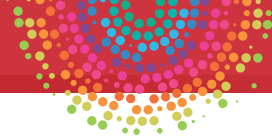
10.10 A Growing Movement in Ireland

So many amazing women have fronted up this adoption activism in Ireland. The Adoption Rights Alliance¹⁸² have 2000-plus people involved in their Facebook pages. What they have created is now a Movement, I believe. Their health is likely to have really suffered in so many cases, because the burnout from this kind of work is exhausting. The work of Claire and Maeve, for example, is done to a consummately high level. The kinds of care and briefing notes that they do, the level of detail and the level of listening, and the creative responses that they have - that takes a huge amount of effort and it takes a personal toll.

We conducted a targeted campaign on the Dáil on budget week with a deluge of emails saying "do not seal those files"¹⁸³. That was more than adopted people and Irish parents. That was Irish people saying; "we see you". I tweeted a link, and thousands of people retweeted it and liked it within hours. It just flew. In my view, Irish people, particularly Irish women, have had it. I think Irish people can generally be quite a docile, polite, gentle, non-confrontational group. Yet I believe that there are certain lines that have now been laid down, and boundaries set. I think that giving natural mothers and their children information is something that the majority of people in the country have a deep feeling about. We know that harms were done, and we want that stopped.

182. "Home," Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

183. "TD and Senator Emails," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, <http://clann-project.org/td-and-senator-emails/>.



We have been very lucky in Ireland that we have people like them to take the lead, but now I can see that there's a whole Movement developing, and it's growing – most Irish people are behind this.

10.11 Ireland Dealing With its Past

I wrote an article¹⁸⁴ about the Mother and Baby Home Commission of Inquiry Report very soon after it was published, and I think those criticisms still stand. In my view, the Report utterly ignored all of the testimony that it gathered - 550 people's testimony. The archive was then sealed, so as it stands, I feel we can't believe a word of the report, because it can't be verified. Even within the report, their findings are contradictory. It was as bad as I expected it would be, and for my colleagues in Clann I think it was far worse than they thought it would be.

Ireland ratified the Hague Convention¹⁸⁵ in 2010, and that was really positive, but we definitely need more progress. As a country, I believe we need to take on the difficult stories – and that starts with practices like not ignoring testimony. We've heard so many difficult stories over the last thirty years, that I feel we're emotionally able for more. I'm of the view that justice should always be on the horizon. We should always be aiming higher - it's never going to be a finished product. It's a paradox, but if Ireland is going to be a truly just and egalitarian and caring society, we must never be content with "arriving" at justice. We can always be fairer, more inclusive, more thoughtful, and more caring.

We certainly have work to do, but in the case of adoption, there are clear, obvious steps - legislation, releasing records. For me it does feel like deconstructing one of the final pieces of Ireland's architecture of containment that surrounded poor women and their children into a whole network including industrial schools, reformatory schools, Mother and Baby homes, Magdalene laundries and psychiatric institutions. We managed to lock up 1% of our population, and that 1% came from particular parts of the country. They came from particular classes, and we need to take that very recent legacy on, very seriously, and start to address it. There will be more change needed, and there will be more

justice needed, but we need to start with first steps such as following up on Tuam, and giving adopted people a right to their information.

10.12 Reflections on Own Contribution

All of the work and campaigning around adoption rights would have happened without me. I chipped in, and I hope I have been useful at times, providing friendship, moral support or a listening ear. I'm trying to make a contribution through writing and putting together collections that explain the neo-colonial mentality that led Ireland to this point, in terms of how things like adoption were handled. The Vatican and encyclicals informed Irish State policy and practice in the 1920s, and even before then. The Irish parliamentary party was *already going* to operate in the way that we saw happening right throughout 20th century Ireland because of the colonial context that they were in. Certainly from 1891 and the publication of *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII in 1891¹⁸⁶, it was absolutely inevitable. Catholic social doctrine says that the States ought to encourage private 'voluntary' groups to provide social services and the 'principle of subsidiarity' became the guiding practice, and indeed still is, in Ireland in terms of the provision of healthcare, education, and social welfare services. I am also currently working to get lesson plans on adoption and also Magdalene Laundries inserted into the second-level curriculum. That is what the Magdalene women asked me to do – to ensure that Ireland's architecture of containment, incorporating all of these issues, is taught and understood in schools, as part of our cultural understanding of how Ireland compares to other countries. This kind of system often develops in poor countries coming out of colonial situations, which is exactly what Ireland was. I'd like to make an appeal to the Ireland of today, though, that we all know what has to be done for those connected to adoption. We need proper legislation, and adopted people need their files. Please just do it.

184. Katherine O'Donnell, "Comment: Revisionism on Mother and Baby report must not be allowed". *Irish Examiner*, January 18, 2021, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40209191.html>.

185. HCCH, *Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (The Netherlands. 1993). <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>.

186. Seminal encyclical by Pope Leo XIII, detailing the Catholic Church's response to the social instability and labour conflict in the wake of industrialisation and the rise of socialism. https://www.catholicism.com/documents/leo_xiii/leo_xiii/Rerum_novarum.pdf

Section 4:

Identifying Current and Future Challenges and Trends in Irish Domestic Adoption

This section contains two chapters involving 3 participants – Orlaith Traynor, who is current chair of the Adoption Authority of Ireland, Patricia White, Social Worker with Barnardos, and Christine Hennessey (RIP), Project Manager of Barnardos Adoption Services. All three had over 40 years' experience in the area of Irish domestic adoption at the time of the interview. Ms White and Ms Hennessey were interviewed together. They explained their pathways into adoption as a field of work, challenges faced over the years, and discussed current and potential future issues in the area in Ireland.

Very sadly, Christine Hennessey died unexpectedly, shortly after the research interview took place. After consultation with Barnardos, Ms White and, through them, Ms Hennessey's family, we have decided to publish her narrative and Patricia White's together in one document, as an "in conversation" piece. This is reflective of how closely they worked together over a long period of time.

Chapter
11

**Christine
Hennessey &
Patricia White**

Christine Hennessey (RIP)*Project Leader, Barnardos*

Christine Hennessey (RIP) served as head of post-adoption services in Barnardos¹⁸⁷ until her untimely death in 2022. Christine qualified as a professional social worker in the mid-1970s from University College Dublin. Early in her career, she worked as a child protection social worker in North Dublin. In 1994, Christine joined Barnardos as a project leader in the post-adoption support service, where she worked directly with adoptive families and birth family members. In addition, Christine managed the Barnardos Origins Service¹⁸⁸, which provided tracing for individuals who spent time in the industrial school system in Ireland. Christine sadly passed away in April 2022. The following narrative has been developed with the permission and involvement of Christine’s family and colleagues in Barnardos.

Patricia White*Project co-ordinator, Barnardos*

Patricia White is a social worker who worked with the post-adoption service in Barnardos since 1985. She studied Social Science in University College Dublin in the early 1970s, and then worked first in St Vincent’s Hospital, before moving on to work in Community Care with the Eastern Health Board. Patricia’s experience within the Eastern Health Board involved work in both adoption and fostering. She joined Barnardos¹⁸⁹ on a part-time basis as a social worker and was instrumental in the creation of their birth mother and adopted adult supports. She retired in 2022, shortly after this interview took place.

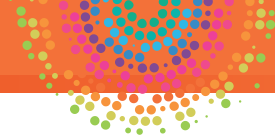
A note on the method:

In this particular case, Patricia White was recruited for the study and requested that she would be interviewed alongside her long-term colleague, Christine Hennessey. This is the only case, in the study, where a joint interview was conducted. It is presented as one narrative, in conversational style, to be as true to the original interview as possible.

187. “Post Adoption Service,” Barnardos, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/post-adoption-service>.

188. “Origins Service,” Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/origins-service/>.

189. “Our Work,” Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.



11.1 Early Days: Social Work in the 1970s and 1980s

Christine:

I qualified as a social worker in the mid-1970s. I worked in St. Vincent's Centre on the Navan Road, before moving to the Eastern Health Board as it was then called. I held a number of different roles within the EHB including child protection, assessment of both prospective foster parents and adoptive parents and I did a small amount of counselling of birth mothers in the adoption service which was called St Louise's.

Patricia:

I started at a similar time to Christine. I studied social science in UCD, starting in 1971. While I was in college, my very first social work placement was in the maternity section of James's Hospital in Dublin. At that stage, the social work profession was in its infancy, and social workers were really considered "outliers". We were based in a former football changing room area on the St James' grounds that had been converted into the social work offices.

At that time, all "single mothers" going through the maternity section were interviewed, to make sure that they had some form of plan for themselves and the baby after they gave birth. That plan, whether or not of their own choice, was usually adoption, so we would liaise with the various adoption agencies in Dublin about the next steps. That was my introduction to the area of adoption. When I finished college, I worked in St Vincent's hospital for a time, before moving to the Eastern Health Board in the mid-1970s. I was working in Community Care, so my remit was very broad, but it included some adoption work – mainly assessments of prospective adoptive parents.

Christine:

One of my key memories from working at the Eastern Health Board is attending placement meetings in the old St. Patrick's Home on the Navan Road¹⁹⁰. The placement meetings were held in the parlour, and I would regularly see the women who were resident in the home in the corridor after I left those meetings. There were so many babies, and not enough adoptive parents. Sometimes, a baby

would often have to wait until the next month's placement meeting, because there were just not enough adoptive parents available, approved and assessed, waiting to take them. I was very conscious of babies in the nurseries upstairs, onsite in St. Patrick's Home. They were getting older as the months went on. That was the case throughout the 1980s. People don't realise the sea change that occurred over the years in terms of the number of babies available for domestic adoption. It really decreased so much as time went on.

Patricia:

I also occasionally attended placement meetings for adoptions in the Navan Road. My own key memory is that there was a particular focus on the adopters and their suitability to adopt. Within the Eastern Health Board, I then moved to the Fostering Resource Group where I worked for nearly ten years, recruiting foster families, running campaigns, and attending matching or placement meetings.

Christine:

Working within the area of adoption, I was always very critical of the system. I felt, and we know now, that it was a very uneven playing field. Working in the Eastern Health Board during the '80s, in my view the mothers who were pregnant were not given any support or any realistic options other than adoption. Many mothers were just put onto the adoption path, without the social work service spending enough time considering how to enable this young woman to keep her baby. That was part of the system, and was reflective of wider society at that time - people were extremely negative towards the idea of single women keeping their babies. Single women, back then, could not compete with what the system felt a married couple could offer a baby. There was no understanding of identity and loss issues on behalf of the child, and certainly no understanding of the long-term grief experienced by the birth mothers. Adoption was perceived as a short-term event that would be recovered from in a relatively short time, yet we now know that this was far from the case for all sides. The different original domestic adoption agencies handled adoption differently. I think the larger State agencies were trying to cope with adoption as part of a whole range of services by very pressurised social workers.

190. Formally Pelletstown, St. Patrick's Mother and Baby Home was run by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, who were employed by the local authorities. The institution housed unmarried mothers and their babies, and was in operation from 1910 through to 1985. Following the closure, a new facility was opened in Eglinton House. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Final Report: Chapter 13* (Dublin, 2021). <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>.

The smaller, religious voluntary agencies have had a huge amount of criticism in recent years because of their association with either the Catholic Church or the Church of Ireland. It is obviously a very mixed picture, but in my experience, many of the social workers working for those voluntary agencies were able to offer a more personal service because it was the sole focus of their work. They stayed in touch with some of their clients over the years. The smaller agencies were very focused on adoption - that was their work. So, it's very nuanced.

I did my CQSW¹⁹¹ while I was working for the Health Board, still in the 1980s, and as part of that year I did a placement in a Sexual Abuse Treatment Unit in California. I was so surprised at just how many people were abused – it really opened my eyes. When I came back to my job in Ireland, I was referred a lot of the newly emerging sexual abuse work because of my US experience. Sexual abuse cases were really only starting to emerge then. I think that reflected a gradual progression in Irish society. As the 1980s went on, people started to get the courage to speak out about experiences that had always been there, but had never been spoken about before.

I left the Health Board in 1990. I took a career break for 3 years, and then I returned to work briefly in the Rotunda Special Care Unit. I interviewed for Barnardos' Post Adoption Service¹⁹² in 1994, by which time Patricia had been there for 9 years. We have both been there ever since.

11.2 The Barnardos Adoption Advice Service

Patricia:

I had left the Health Board in the mid-80s, and went to work part-time in the Barnardos Adoption Advice Service as a social worker. I knew that Barnardos¹⁹³ had set up a fantastic single parent support service in the 1970s. It was still running when I joined, and it continued until the 1990's. Through that service, single mothers received extra support over and above that offered by the Health Board Community Care social workers. If the choice was adoption, Barnardos would work with the mothers through that in conjunction with a registered Adoption Society, or if it was to keep the child, Barnardos would offer ongoing support. Barnardos was really

Most of the birth mothers who came to us in the early days of the Adoption Advice Service were thinking of looking for their sons or daughters, whom they'd had adopted in the UK.

very ahead of its time with that pioneering work.

The Adoption Advice Service, as it was then called, was founded in 1977 as a short-term service which is still going strong more than 40 years later with 24 staff and services based in Dublin, Cork and Galway. It was a pilot project, but I always say the pilot light has never gone out - it has just become stronger over the years. At first, when I started in the Adoption Advice Service in the mid-1980s, it was a helpline, running from 2 to 6 every Tuesday. The hour between 5 and 6 pm was to allow people to make trunk calls - calling us on a cheaper phone call rate. It was more expensive to make phone calls during the day.

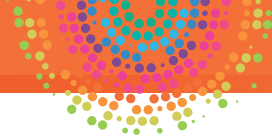
We had such a variety of calls to the Adoption Advice Service over the years. A lot of the calls were from adoptive parents, wondering about eligibility. Their concerns typically involved age – whether they were too old to adopt - or religion, if for example they were in a mixed religion marriage. We also got calls from birth mothers, people who had been raised in care, and adopted adults.

A lot of those Irish birth mothers were affected by the UK legislation in 1975, which allowed adopted adults to access their birth certs. Most of the birth mothers who came to us in the early days of the Adoption Advice Service were thinking of looking for their sons or daughters, whom they'd had adopted in the UK. Or perhaps their child had approached an agency in England, and they were now looking for some agency like ourselves to support the mother in Ireland, mediating contact with their son or daughter adopted in the UK. There has been

191. Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW), awarded between 1975 and 1991.

192. "Post Adoption Service," Barnardos, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/post-adoption-service>.

193. "Our Work," Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.



so much talk recently about birth mothers' right to privacy, yet in 1975, that didn't come up as a huge issue. We didn't get many calls from people nervous about how it might affect them.

The people who were raised in care contacted us because they really had nowhere to go for support. These were often people who were raised in institutions, and who, when they went back to the convent or the school, had often been discouraged from doing any further tracing work. They came to us because we had a reputation for being helpful with advice around navigating the area of tracing. Because of our experience in working with this group of people, the Department of Education funded Barnardos to provide the Origins Service¹⁹⁴ which is a specific service for people who spent all or part of their childhood in an Irish industrial school. We also heard from people who had been affected by illegal birth registrations. That was a whole other issue, and it surprised me.

Sometimes, birth fathers rang the Adoption Advice helpline. They might have known that they had a baby, and while they were no longer in contact with the birth mother, they wanted to know how their child, now an adult, was doing. In other cases, the birth mothers would have married the birth fathers, after the adoption had taken place. As part of our response, we offered group work support at that time.

We also got a lot of calls from people who had been adopted from Ireland to America. I didn't know about American adoptions before I started in the Adoption Advice Service – I had never come across them before. We have had the privilege and opportunity, in Barnardos¹⁹⁵, to work with some of the birth mothers whose children were sent to America in the 1950s and '60s. From that work, I heard that sometimes couples in America were told that they were adopting orphans from Ireland. Many of the children were not actually orphans, but had instead been in Mother and Baby homes with their mothers prior to the adoption. At one stage, I believe American soldiers who were stationed in the forces



The people who were raised in care contacted us because they really had nowhere to go for support. These were often people who were raised in institutions.



in England may have come to Ireland to adopt children here, because the rules were different in Ireland than the UK. This has been huge learning for us to bring forward into our work in intercountry adoption in particular, because there are similar themes with the Irish-American adoptions.

Christine:

In 1995, a large number of records of Irish babies who had been sent to America for adoption were found in the National Archives¹⁹⁶. Under Norah Gibbons¹⁹⁷ leadership, we set up a special helpline in response. A very large number of Irish-born American-adopted people were triggered by that story in the media, and contacted us to find out how they could trace their birth family.

Now, we deliver a counselling and therapeutic service for adopted adults who are referred by a Tusla social worker. We also work with birth parents and the adults who were illegally birth registered¹⁹⁸. Tusla have provided funding for us to establish a service to the people affected by this issue. The people affected by the St Patrick's Guild files¹⁹⁹ were often shocked, angry and distressed. Along with offering one to one support, we started a support group for anyone affected by illegal birth registration which has worked out very well. The attendance has been consistent So, I think we've been of help to that population.

194. "Origins Service," Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/origins-service/>.

195. "Our Work," Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

196. Jim Dunne, and Peter Smyth, "National Archive receives adoption files". *The Irish Times*, June 21, 1996, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/national-archive-receives-adoption-files-1.60369>.

197. Norah Gibbons (RIP) was a children's rights campaigner, served as director of advocacy with Barnardos from 2005-2012, and was the first chairperson of Tusla, the child and family agency: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/norah-gibbons-obituary-tireless-advocate-for-children-1.4248619>.

198. "Post Adoption Service," Barnardos, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/post-adoption-service>.

199. Cormac McQuinn, "Illegal adoptions: Government to consider review of St Patrick's Guild files." *The Irish Times*, March 9, 2021, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/illegal-adoptions-government-to-consider-review-of-st-patrick-s-guild-files-1.4504735>.

11.3 Birth Mother Support Groups

Patricia:

In the late 1980s, we noticed that birth mothers had been coming to us in increasing numbers, and many wanted to meet other women in the same situation. So we started organising one to one meetings between birth mothers, and in 1990 we decided to try and set up a group meeting for them. Norah Gibbons, our manager at the time, was very progressive. Once we suggested it, she told us to go ahead and set up a birth mothers' group immediately. Those groups have been running for over 32 years now!

We ran the first one in October 1990, and I don't know who was more nervous - us or the mothers. We had about 6 or 8 women at that first meeting, and it was an absolute revelation. They shared so generously about how difficult it had been for them - the pain and the loss associated with their child's adoption. I had thought it would become easier over time, but for some of them it was just getting more and more difficult as the years went by. They were so relieved to realise that other people felt the same way they did. They had felt really isolated, so it was hugely important for them to connect with each other. Apart from when they were in a Mother and Baby Home or similar, many of them had never spoken to somebody about their experience, and there was huge relief to realise that others felt the same way. They were suddenly part of a group that they never knew existed. In 2020, we published the "Growing Stronger Together" collection and audio documentary²⁰⁰ which is a collection of accounts provided by 14 birth mothers where they shared their experience and the support they received from Barnardos over 30 years.

Christine:

Norah Gibbons was wonderful and very dynamic. Within a month of starting my job in 1994, she invited me to co-lead my first birth mothers' group. I felt very humble, really. Meeting these women in those early months of my job was a real revelation, because nobody had really heard their voices before, and suddenly I was there, listening to them. In our groups, the birth mothers are the people with the expertise, they've walked in those shoes, so we have to approach the topic with huge humility. We're bringing experience, but we've never actually been there.

Most of the women in the early days of the groups would have been in Mother and Baby homes. That has obviously changed over the years, but we had a wealth of information from those women first-hand about what life was like in the Mother and Baby homes for them. In the birth mothers groups, they really appreciated the experience of meeting somebody else who might have been in a Mother and Baby home with them at the same time, and talking about the various nuns that they dealt with. There was such relief for them in actually feeling that they weren't mad, that other women had the same memories of that experience as they did. It was hugely therapeutic for them. The groups now contain a younger cohort, so obviously they are less likely to have been in Mother and Baby homes. Yet the issues for birth mothers attending our groups really haven't changed over the years - the loss, the grief, the loneliness, the uncertainty, the post-reunion grief, the sense that you're never going to get the relationship back. The issues for adopted adults haven't changed either - identity confusion, anger, issues around control. Not all adopted adults, but many that we see, are affected by those issues.

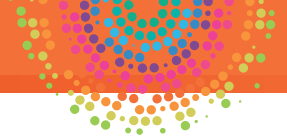
Patricia:

The birth mothers group is still running, and even though times have changed, I would say that the same issues come up for birth mothers today. They are left with the feelings of the shame, and loss, because that's what they experienced at the time. Some of them describe looking back and saying "oh if only I'd been stronger" and "I'm really annoyed at myself, why didn't I stand up to these nuns or these social workers"? Yet they may have been just 17 or 18 at the time.

Christine:

There is a more open public conversation generally around adoption now, and this has been of great benefit to the people coming to our groups. There is not the same level secrecy and shame, but it's still there to a certain extent, as Patricia pointed out. The women who attend are not creeping in the door as much anymore, but some of them still haven't told their husbands and adult children about the son or daughter they placed for adoption so many years ago. So they are still dealing with secrecy and shame on a daily basis.

200. "Growing Stronger Together: Barnardos Ireland," Sound Cloud, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://soundcloud.com/user-371436144/growing-stronger-together/s-rHF4ZUVdG83>.



Patricia:

When we started the groups, a lot of the birth mothers were only in their 30s, as indeed I was. Being the same age as the women in the groups was good. We had all been young in the '60s and '70s. I think that helped, as we had an understanding of what Ireland was like back then.

Christine:

We also had many women who had travelled to the UK, had their babies over there, returned to Ireland in total secrecy and never mentioned the experience again. For them, attending a group was a hugely significant step, and often gave them the courage to consider approaching the agencies to search. That was a forbidding prospect - going back to agencies which, for some or many of them, were associated with very difficult memories of dealing with that agency in the past. They needed a lot of support from the group and from ourselves to get the courage to go back and enquire about their son or daughter.

11.4 Structure and Format of Birth Mothers' Groups

Patricia:

Our birth mothers' groups follow a certain pattern. Mothers initially come to a 6-session course, either in the autumn or the spring, at which there are about 8-10 other women. Following that, about 4 times a year, we run a support group, to which we invite all of the women on the mailing list. That includes anyone who has done the groups at any point over the 30 years. We generally get maybe 20 or 30 women at that support group session. Some months, we have what we call a "go-around", where everyone shares their story, update people, and sometimes look for advice. Somebody might say, for example, that they had been reunited with their son or daughter, but that the contact now has fizzled out, and they are wondering if they should keep in touch. They might be getting frustrated by somebody not replying to their texts or similar. So, the group will advise them. They might say "yes - keep in touch, even if it's just a Christmas card or a birthday card, it keeps a thread there so that if they ever want to come back into your life they have a way in". The groups provide that kind of peer support.

When we run groups, we always try to help people get an understanding of the others in the adoption

circle. At adopted adults groups, for example, we'd have birth mothers in to speak. At birth mothers groups we'd have adoptive parents or adopted adults to come in and share their perspective. Those sessions have been game-changing, particularly when the adoptive mother speaks at a birth mother group, because that's the voice, for birth mothers, that's probably one of the most difficult to hear. Some of the birth mothers might initially feel "they gained it all and I lost everything" when it comes to adoptive mothers. Yet when they hear an adoptive mother talking in real time about the challenges and the difficulties that they also had to face, and the loss that they themselves dealt with such as the loss of a hoped for biological child - those insights are hugely helpful. They are also helpful for the relationship with their son or daughter going forward. As soon as the person leaves, the others will usually say "oh my God I had no idea". The birth mothers had no idea what was going on for adoptive parents, and that is huge. We have also developed a handout summarising the reflections of birth fathers that have attended Barnardos²⁰¹ which has been very enlightening about fathers' perspectives.

Often our clients drive change in our services. The birth mothers group members once asked if we could convene a meeting with adults who had been raised by their birth mother, who then went on to meet adopted birth siblings. So we arranged that. We've had endless requests - we could be running groups every night for different reasons. We can only do what's within our resources, but there's so much scope there for people from all of the different perspectives in adoption to get support, and to meet people who are in the same position. From day one, we saw the value of that. I remember so clearly two birth mothers meeting in our old offices in Harold's Cross and the idea for the group arose from that. People have asked for it, and we've responded, and in general they've been very well received. We did try and run a group for more recent birth mothers one time. We had been asked to set it up by a small number of women, but that didn't take off for some reason. It's hard to know why.

My role in the group is as a facilitator. If somebody comes up with a question in the group, I throw it very much open. I might say a few words, and then I'd say something like "has anyone in the group experienced what this group member is now experiencing, and how have you handled it?"

201. "Our Work," Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

And they'll run with it then. It's fantastic. There's great growth in that, and they really listen, and then sometimes they'd decide to meet separately for a cup of coffee to discuss things further. They feel understood, and they want to learn from each other's experiences. And that's where all the growth and the learning is. We always say "it's not going to be a lecture". Sometimes I think people sit down waiting for us to give the lecture, but we haven't walked in their shoes, so that's not the way the groups work. The women coming into the group see it as being different to other advocacy groups. They're looking for support from other women, and to chat to other women, but apart from a small number they're not interested in necessarily campaigning for change.

Christine:

I understand that some people had awful experiences dealing with religious orders in the area of adoption, but in the media, for example, we tend to hear the voices of the people who had the most negative experiences. Through the groups, we tend to meet more of the people in the middle ground.

11.5 Information and Tracing

Patricia:

The lack of legislation around birth certs has been very difficult for people. As Ireland has an open civil registration system, people could trace themselves sometimes, if they had certain pieces of information. I was on a committee with a broad range of representatives for years in the '80s and '90s, trying to get a contact register established. It took until 2005 to set up the National Adoption Contact Register, and until the new law comes in in 2022, that Register is still not on a legislative footing. That was a big gap. It seemed like a very obvious thing to do, but it took so long for it to be done.

Incorrect information was often passed to birth mothers about the adopters, and vice versa. It's hard to know why it was done, but it was. I think it made people personally affected by adoption very mistrusting of the adoption agencies, if they had been given a very different picture of the other party at the time of the adoption. For an adopted person in particular, growing up thinking that something was the absolute truth, and then discovering, 30 years later, that it was not, was very difficult.



I understand that some people had awful experiences dealing with religious orders in the area of adoption, but in the media, for example, we tend to hear the voices of the people who had the most negative experiences.

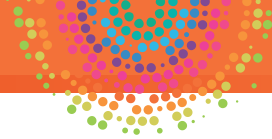


The Mother and Baby Home Redress Scheme is starting now. For birth mothers, this has gone on forever. They'll need further support around this. Then with the Information and Tracing law changes, the small number of mothers concerned about being found, or about their secret coming out, will require support. Adopted adults will need support around that too. There is a lot in the new legislation about all the different things people will be entitled to. People's expectations may be raised that there are big files on them, and yet we know that's not always true. The records are sometimes very scant and inaccurate, but I think getting the records and getting their birth cert in tandem will be important, because sometimes the birth cert will give them very little information. Furthermore, many of them have a birth cert already, having located it through the public registry system. So they will need to get both. Birth mothers might be concerned that some of the records are not accurate, and many of them now may want to check the files and add an amendment to what has been recorded. It will be important for mothers to have that opportunity.

The delay in the Birth Information and Tracing legislation²⁰² has been frustrating. When I started, there were some peer support networks developing, and changing the Irish law to allow access to birth information was always being discussed within those groups. The Natural Parents Network of Ireland²⁰³ started in the mid '90s. Some of the women in that group actually met each other through our service, and then formed a Network to speak on behalf of their group. The adopted

202. "Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022," Houses of the Oireachtas, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2022/3/>.

203. This group later became also known as "Adoption Loss"



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People have had to ask at every turn for information that really was rightfully theirs, and we're so behind other countries in this respect. That has been a source of frustration to us, as well as to the people affected.
 ”

adults groups also started to come together in the mid '90s, campaigning for a change. Like many organisations including the then Adoption Board, Barnardos²⁰⁴ took part in the consultation on potential legislation in 2003²⁰⁵. We were very much looking forward to a change in legislation, and we supported it, but with only two staff in the Barnardos Adoption Advice Service²⁰⁶, our focus was the therapeutic support needs of the adopted adults and birth mothers.

I remember Norah Gibbons talking about the debates around the first Adoption Act in 1952. Even then, it was mired in controversy. Some argued that it was giving a licence to women to have “illegitimate” pregnancies, because adoption was seen as providing an opportunity to solve that problem. Adoption in Ireland has been surrounded by secrecy and shame, and I think history will reflect on the Irish State as being very slow to address that. You cannot please everybody in this very complex circle as there are complex and sensitive issues involved. Somebody needed to make the decision that adopted adults had a clear right to their information, and then work on that basis. At least that seems to have happened now, but history will reflect on Ireland being very slow to act, and only responsive to crisis points throughout the whole area of adoption.

As a system, we have exercised a huge amount of control over people affected by adoption. People have had to ask at every turn for information that

really was rightfully theirs, and we're so behind other countries in this respect. That has been a source of frustration to us, as well as to the people affected. To have adults who don't have a right to their medical history, or to their original name, has been so wrong for so long. It is easy to criticise in hindsight, but I think birth mothers were often treated with very little respect when they went back to the old agencies, now closed, for support. They weren't given the support that they needed. Some agencies were extremely respectful and careful, but others were not. We have heard stories of letters and mementos being left on files, for example, that weren't sent on to adoptive families, and they should have been. So that's been painful for us to witness on behalf of these women.

11.6 Adoption in the Mid-2000s

Christine:

Around 2005, I took a year's leave of absence from Barnardos and I worked between Cúnamh and Holles Street Hospital for a year. My job in Cúnamh was to set up a group for women who had recently placed children for adoption. I ran the group for 6 months, and about 8 women attended it consistently. At that time, a reverse stigma had developed. When I had worked with women who had placed their children in earlier decades, the shame was in being pregnant in the first place. Yes, this younger group had other options. They could have kept their baby, but for one reason or another these women had to part with their children. They were very ashamed of placing their children for adoption. In my view, Cúnamh were very progressive in offering open adoption to their families. As well as the ongoing day to day work of the agency, I witnessed the meetings between birth mothers and the adoptive parents who were adopting their baby. I took the opportunity to do a small piece of research into open adoption. I looked at the open adoption experiences of about 10 families from the perspective of the child, the birth parent and the adopted parent.

During that year, I also worked at Holles Street Hospital. As well as being a maternity hospital, Holles Street had been an adoption agency in the past, and they had a very strong connection with the mother and baby home in Dunboyne. The senior

204. “Our Work,” Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

205. “Background to Adoption Information Access in Ireland,” Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 9, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/background-to-adoption-information-access-in-ireland/>.

206. “Post Adoption Service,” Barnardos, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/post-adoption-service>.

social worker at the time needed some work done to prepare the adoption-related files for eventual transfer once appropriate legislation was enacted, and I took on that role. So I worked across the two agencies for that year and it was really interesting to see adoption from those other perspectives – that of a voluntary agency, and of a hospital. It was very interesting, I enjoyed it very much, and I brought that experience back to Barnardos.

The National Adoption Contact Preference Register really made a difference to people affected by adoption in Ireland. I remember speaking to the Adoption Board staff at the time, the first night that the Register went live in 2005. There was so much excitement when the calls started to come in, and when the first matches were made. There was a real sense of achievement by the Adoption Board. For the first time, it allowed people the choice of coming forward and registering their interest in finding each other. I know it's imperfect and it's due for improvement under the new legislation, but when it was first implemented, this was a real highlight in Irish domestic adoption.

11.7 Responding to Need in Irish Adoption

Barnardos²⁰⁷ is registered as an accredited body under section 4(k) of the Adoption Act 2010²⁰⁸. That has been really useful, because it means that we are poised to pick up on emerging needs. When the Contact Preference Register was set up in 2005, we were asked by the Adoption Board to provide a mediation service, because the agencies simply couldn't deal with the number of mediation requests that were being made of them. There was also a gap in service when St. Patrick's Guild closed, which from what I recall was during a very busy time for matches on the Register. Over a period of about two years we did that mediation work on behalf of the Adoption Board, and I think people appreciated having an independent agency providing that service for them.

In 2009, Tusla funded us to expand our adoption service to include children. Our initial brief was to set up a therapeutic support service for intercountry adoptive children and parents, and then to accept referrals of Irish children moving from foster care to adoption. This side of our work started around 2017



The voices least heard tend to be that of the birth mother and indeed adoptive fathers. Very often the voice of the birth mother is absent.



and has grown since the Adoption Amendment Act 2017, which allows further opportunities for children in the foster care system to be adopted²⁰⁹. When 16-18 year olds have access to their original birth certificates under the proposed new legislation, our service will need to provide therapeutic support for that cohort around the reception of their birth certificates.

11.8 Absent Voices in Irish Domestic Adoption

Patricia:

There are different voices to be heard in the conversation around adoption. The voices least heard tend to be that of the birth mother and indeed adoptive fathers. Very often the voice of the birth mother is absent. There is an opinion, sometimes, that all adoptions were forced, but some women would like to feel that they made the decision themselves - a very hard decision, but one they made themselves. All decisions are forced by different things, but some birth mothers feel they did have a say, and they did make the decision. So, there are missing voices, and sometimes the birth mother may be the person whose voice isn't always heard.

Christine:

In addition, I would say that birth fathers are the untold story in all of this, even today. With all the discussion about the new legislation and how it might affect birth mothers, we have still heard very little from the perspective of birth fathers. I remember the Keegan case, which was taken to the European Court²¹⁰, by a birth father. He didn't want

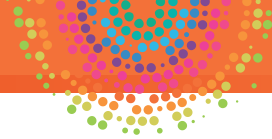
207. "Our Work," Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

208. Section 4(k) of the Adoption Act 2010 refers to the making arrangements for the adoption of the child:

"Adoption Act, 2010," Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.

209. "Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017," Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/19/enacted/en/html>.

210. European Court of Human Rights, *Case of Keegan v. Ireland* (Strasbourg, 1994). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57881>.



to stop the adoption, but he challenged the fact that his consent was not sought. I remember thinking that was ground-breaking – I felt it was about time a father took a stand on that issue. In Barnardos²¹¹ we have heard from fathers over the years, but in smaller numbers, and we have run some groups with fathers. We’ve certainly heard from hundreds of mothers talking about the experiences of the partners that they had loved very much, and in many cases went on to marry, who, as they told it, literally had the door of the mother and baby home shut in their faces. They were allegedly not welcome to come forward to play any part at that time. And their consents, of course, weren’t sought. So that change, brought about by the Keegan case, was a real highlight for me.

The media has brought out the personal stories of many of the people affected by adoption, and that’s been essential to progressive change in legislation, the media has been very supportive of the adoption advocacy groups in Ireland too.

11.9 DNA Testing

Christine:

There are more resources out there for people affected by adoption now, and DNA testing has been a huge development over the past few years, particularly for adopted adults conducting a search. In some situations, people are registering on DNA sites, and then becoming indirectly connected with a birth mother or birth father through other family members. It’s usually unlikely the birth mother or birth father has, themselves, registered on the DNA site - instead a member of the younger generation usually registers. That means that the first point of contact is likely to be with somebody who may have no idea that there was an adoption in the family. Somebody who never knew about the experience of an elderly aunt or uncle, or even of their own mother. That is the kind of scenario that we’re seeing in our service now, and it causes ripples within the birth family. We’re not getting many, but we’re getting a few. Yet, with the advent of GDPR, and the shutting down of a lot of avenues of information, DNA is really becoming the most accessible and convenient way for people to advance their search.

Patricia:

There are, of course, pros and cons to using DNA tracing services for adoption-related information. Yet I think home DNA testing can be really significant



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for people who were abandoned, or “foundlings” as they were called at the time. With no records, their birth relatives would never have been found via traditional means. It is similar for people whose births were illegally registered. There’s certainly a need for counselling around the issues to think of before you do the test, however, and then how to work with the results. I think there should be a mediation agency to do that element of work. At the moment, people are put in direct contact with each other by the companies who provide the kits, and in the case of an adoption, they often really don’t know how to handle it, or what to say. We had a very useful group meeting with adopted adults a few years ago on the topic, and they came up with really interesting feedback, detailing a lot of pros and cons. While we’re about to get the Birth Information and Tracing legislation, unless that’s properly resourced, people will still want a quicker solution to finding information, and the DNA testing kits provide that. At the moment [February 2022] I think you could be on a 2 or a 3 year waiting list for a trace with the AAI or Tusla, so unless they are further resourced, I imagine people will continue to use other, quicker methods.

11.10 Reflecting on 40 Years of Adoption Work

Patricia:

What really struck me is that everyone in the adoption circle – natural and adoptive parents, adopted adults and extended family share so many similar issues – loss, shame, lack of control. That is why it is important that they get the chance to meet each other, share experiences and gain insight. They often discover that they have more in common than they ever knew.

211. “Our Work,” Barnardos, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/>.

Christine:

Adoption is an absolutely fascinating area of work. I have never, ever felt that I'm "coming to work" - that dread about a workday that people sometimes speak of. I always feel that there's going to be something interesting happening today. Adoption captures so much about human nature - what it is to separate a baby from a mother and a father, how we've underestimated what that meant to both parties, and what it really does mean. Then, what happens when those two people, the birth mother and the adopted adult, come together? What kind of a dynamic is created, and where does the adoptive family fit into that? How are they to make sense of that situation? How do they cope with that, and fulfil their duty of allowing an open conversation about what adoption means? How do they cope with their loss of that? To me, it is a hugely fascinating set of dynamics that's played out with similar and yet different themes, depending on the individual you're working with. That's why I've stayed in it all my life.

Chapter
12

Orlaith
Traynor

Orlaith Traynor²¹² is the Chair of the Adoption Authority of Ireland, a post she was appointed to in November 2020 by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’Gorman, TD. She has practised as a solicitor for nearly 50 years, and has a particular expertise in family law. Orlaith has vast experience in adoption, having served as a member and subsequent Deputy Chairperson of the Adoption Board and the Adoption Authority of Ireland since the early 1990s. In addition to her initial legal qualifications, she holds a Masters in Advanced Legal Practice from Northumbria University, and a Diploma in Quasi-Judicial Decision Making from the King’s Inns in Dublin. Her thesis for her Master’s degree was on the topic of Birth Fathers’ rights.

12.1 Background

I qualified as a Solicitor in 1975 and had spent 17 years in private practice when I was contacted by the then Minister for Health and Children, Dr Michael Woods, to say that I had been appointed to the Adoption Board. I was sent an information pack, including annual reports for the previous few years which I found most interesting. At that time, the Board was mostly involved with domestic adoptions. Inter-country adoptions were just beginning.

12.2 Commencement

When I commenced as a Board member in 1993, the initial appointment was for a four-year term. The Board met every week, on a Tuesday, mostly to grant adoption orders. I didn’t know what to expect at first, but I found the work rewarding as I felt that I was contributing to a better life for children. At that time the Board members changed quite frequently - mainly because of the time commitment - and the stipend was a nominal amount. I think, in general, those who stayed the course did so out of a sense of commitment.

12.3 The work

The first Chairperson I worked with had a legal background and was particularly adept at managing challenges which arose for the Board. At that time, there were quite a lot of adoptions from long-term foster care²¹³. I remain in awe of the wonderful foster families who open their homes and hearts to children, and who then go on to adopt them. They

are amazing. Without them, some of the children would have no proper home life.

Adoption work can be very challenging personally, and individual cases stay with you, for instance in cases where a parent or child is terminally ill and approaching end of life. Your role as a member of the Board, and the decisions you make, are of the utmost importance in seeking to support and provide security where it is really needed. In terms of domestic adoption at that time, there were several instances where the mother wished for her child to be returned to her. Such cases are always heart-breaking for everyone involved. In the past, the issue of private placements was a concern, as no assessments of suitability and eligibility would have been carried out in those cases. The legislation was amended by way of the Adoption Act 1974²¹⁴ so that, after its commencement, private placements were no longer permitted, subject to certain limited exceptions to include where a parent placed a child with a relative for the purpose of adoption. In 1998²¹⁵, the legislation was further amended to prohibit such placements and to provide additional protections to birth fathers. As domestic adoption applications slowed down in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we began to see more step-parent adoptions. These now form a large proportion of our current caseload.

The Board went on circuit²¹⁶ a few times a year. I didn’t go on circuit very often due to work and

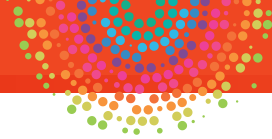
212. NB: this chapter reflects the personal views of Orlaith Traynor, and therefore should be viewed as independent of the Board, and of her position as Chair.

213. The Adoption Act 1998 had allowed for the adoption of children whose parents failed in their duty towards them: “Adoption Act, 1998,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/10/enacted/en/html>.

214. “Adoption Act, 1974: Section 3,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1974/act/24/section/6/enacted/en/html#sec6>.

215. The Adoption Act 1998, as above

216. A circuit is the practice of the Board holding their meetings at different locations around Ireland, rather than in their Dublin-based offices.



The Keegan case in 1994 had a huge impact on the working practices of the Board. It involved a birth father who brought a case to Europe because an adoption order had been made without the Board consulting him.



family commitments, but as my children got older, I started doing it more – and the practice was much more frequent in those days. We would interact with the Health Boards, as they were known then, and we would make orders and meet local committees. A lovely aspect of the work was, and still is, meeting the children who come into the Board for the making of the adoption orders. To be present at the granting of an adoption order is a truly special occasion.

The first Act dealing with intercountry adoption (then known as foreign adoption) was introduced in 1991²¹⁷, a few years before I joined the Board. At that time there were Romanian children coming to Ireland. This was all very new. The Adoption Bill 1996 was introduced as a private member’s bill by Dr Michael Woods “to make provision for the validity in law and the entry in the Register of Foreign Adoptions of adoptions of children made in the People’s Republic of China and for that purpose to amend and extend the Adoption Acts, 1952 – 1991²¹⁸”, however it was defeated. I was appointed Deputy Chairperson in 1998, and part of my role was to read the legislation of different countries to see if it complied with ours.

12.4 Birth Fathers

The Keegan case²¹⁹ in 1994 had a huge impact on the working practices of the Board. It involved a birth father who brought a case to Europe

because an adoption order had been made without the Board consulting him. Prior to that case, birth fathers had no role in the process. Birth father consultation now forms a large part of our work. In cases where we are unable to consult, it is necessary to apply to the High Court for authorisation before the adoption can proceed. Over the years, as birth fathers became more involved in the process, differences in opinion could arise due to different areas of expertise and speciality on the Board.

12.5 Board Changes after 2010

The role of both the Chair and the Board has changed significantly since the Adoption Act 2010²²⁰. The Chair at the time, Dr Geoffrey Shannon, guided us through the preparation for the Act. I served on successive Boards as deputy Chairperson from 1998 until the new legislation was enacted in 2010. I served as deputy to several judges and retired judges in their role as Board Chair, all of whom were unstinting in their generosity with their time and commitment to the Board. I have worked with some absolutely brilliant Chairs and CEOs, totally committed to their work, and I have learned a lot from them. If there are differences of opinion on the Board, the Chair, or in the absence of the Chair, the deputy chair, has a second or casting vote (this was provided for in the Adoption Act 2010). The Act 2010 also established the new Adoption Authority, and one of its purposes was to regulate intercountry adoptions.

12.6 New Ways of Working Post 2015

I was reappointed to the Board as deputy Chairperson in 2015. At that time, birth father consultations and the difficulties surrounding them were still a big issue. I was embarking on a Master’s programme with the Law Society of Ireland in conjunction with the University of Northumbria and I decided to do my thesis on birth fathers’ rights. This thesis only deepened my commitment to the Board.

Governance now forms a huge proportion of our work, and we receive a large volume of detailed papers before each hearing. Board members

217. The Adoption Act 1991 provided for the setting up of the Register of foreign adoptions: “Adoption Act, 1991,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 23, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1991/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

218. “Adoption Bill, 1996,” Houses of the Oireachtas, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/1996/8/?tab=bill-text>.

219. The court found that the birth father’s constitutional rights had been violated, through Ireland not seeking his consent to the adoption of his biological child. European Court of Human Rights, Case of Keegan v. Ireland (Strasbourg, 1994). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57881>.

220. “Adoption Act, 2010,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.

now serve on different committees such as the Risk and Audit Committee, the Strategic Planning Committee and the Research Sub-Committee as well as helping with tenders for services and recruitment. I suggested reintroducing the circuits, which we had done previously. This went down well with both Board members and stakeholders who appreciated the Board coming to them. There had also been changes in terms of domestic adoption. Infant adoptions were very rare and there was a large increase in stepparent adoptions. These applications increased further when the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017²²¹ was introduced, as it provided for civil partners and co-habitees to adopt. The format of the fostering adoptions changed, in that if the birth parents are not consenting, the applications go to the High Court.

We have to hear all voices before coming to our decision: Tusla, lawyers, birth parents and the children themselves, if they are of an age to be heard, and others involved in the adoption process. In my view, perhaps the most important development of all has been the concept of the best interests of the child. In the 1990s, the tendency would have been to shield children from legal proceedings, and their views would have been obtained mainly through social work reports. Since the Child and Family Relationships Act 2015, this has entirely changed. The children's views must be heard, and their welfare is the paramount consideration. Guardians ad Litem were introduced in relation to children in legal proceedings in the Childcare Act of 1991 and their role in adoption cases is becoming more frequent. This is to be lauded, and we now have much more interaction with the children themselves.

The 2010 Act²²² ratified the Hague Convention²²³ and established safeguards to ensure that inter-country adoption takes place in a controlled way to ensure the best interests of the child are safeguarded. Prospective adopters wishing to adopt from abroad now must go through a rigorous assessment process and a negative recommendation may be appealed. These appeals



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are difficult. You may have people who have been disappointed after being turned down following a lengthy assessment process and who have their hearts set on adopting a child from abroad and giving a child a better life than they would otherwise have. The Board deals with these appeals in a fair and compassionate manner. In terms of the intercountry adoption, as a Board member, you feel that you are doing some good for children. It extends beyond legal matters. The humanity behind this process is what I find so rewarding about adoption. You see the good in people, and you see the good that they can do.

12.7 The Future of Adoption in Ireland

Changes in adoption so far have often been driven by the legal challenges over the years, for example the Keegan case in 1994²²⁴. On my appointment as Chair of the Board of the Authority, I had to outline to the Oireachtas Committee my own personal vision of the future of adoption. In my view, what I think would really make a difference is the possibility of making adoption orders without severing access to birth parents. Many children availing of adoption have existing family relationships that they may wish to continue. The format of the orders we currently make is essentially unchanged since 1952, when formal adoptions commenced. For many years, via annual reports, the Board have been calling for legal recognition of open adoption²²⁵. Open adoptions may allow for greater parental contact, but for this

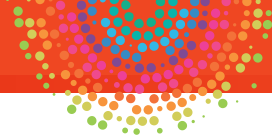
221. "Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/19/enacted/en/html>.

222. "Adoption Act, 2010," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.

223. HCCH, *Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (The Netherlands. 1993). <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>.

224. European Court of Human Rights, *Case of Keegan v. Ireland* (Strasbourg, 1994). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57881>.

225. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *Annual Report 2013* (Dublin. 2013), 11, 20, 21. <https://aai.gov.ie/images/Publications/AAI-Annual-Report-2013.pdf>.
The Adoption Board, *Report of An Bord Uchtála (The Adoption Board) for 2006* (Dublin. 2006), 20, 59. <https://aai.gov.ie/images/Publications/Adoption-Board-Annual-Report-2006.pdf>.
The Adoption Board, *Report of An Bord Uchtála (The Adoption Board) for 2004* (Dublin. 2006), 21. <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/214390/2004AdoptionARTEXTproof.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
The Adoption Board, *Report of An Bord Uchtála (The Adoption Board) 2003* (Dublin. 2003), 19. <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/43488/3431.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.



to happen they need to be legally recognised, with current openness practices placed on a statutory footing. Surrogacy is an issue for the Board at present. Parents are applying to adopt their children conceived by way of surrogacy and our current legislation does not specifically address this.

12.8 Information and Tracing

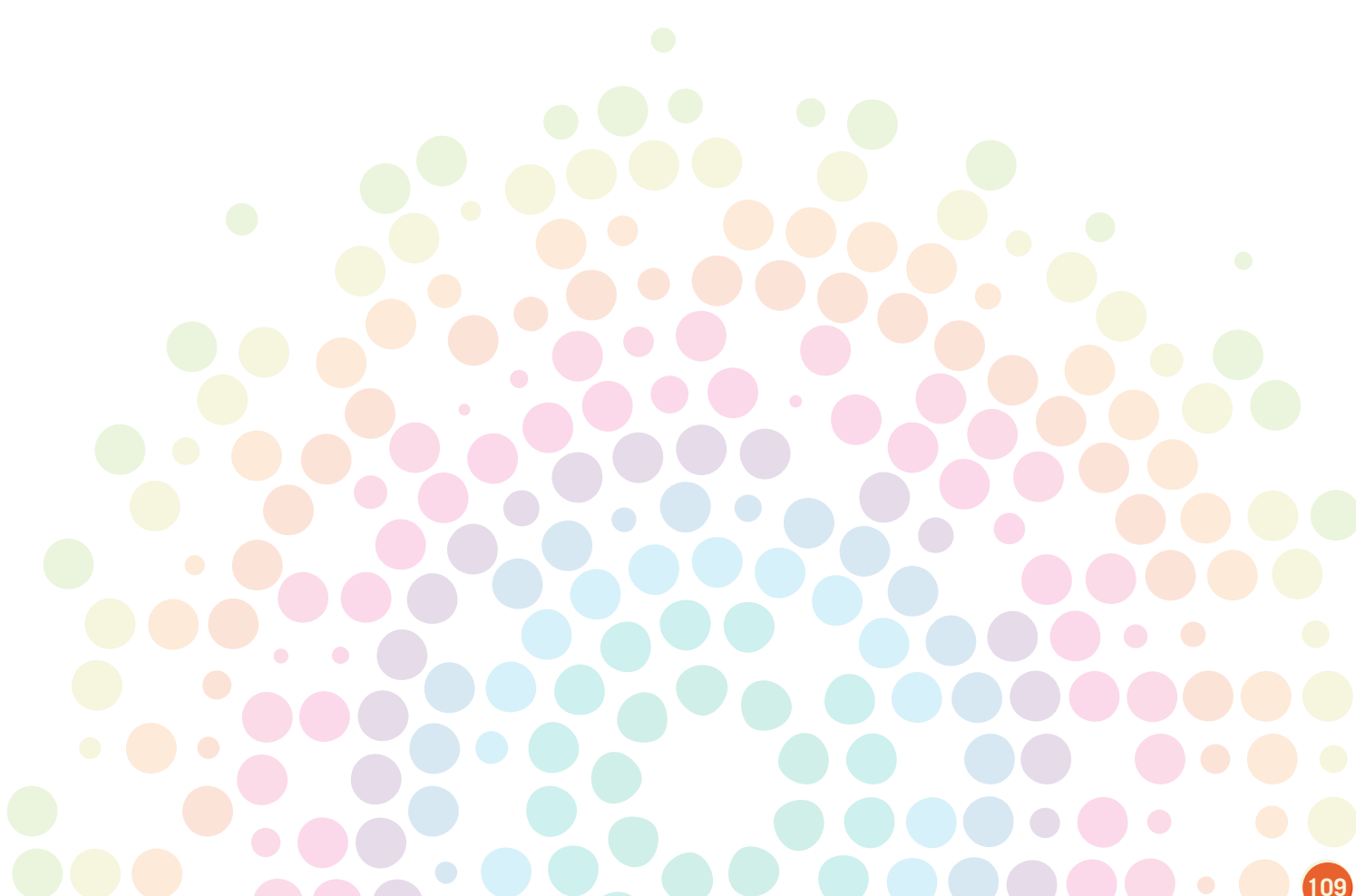
Another area which is expanding is that of information and tracing. The Board had always dealt with requests for the release of birth certificates, had been involved with the National Adoption Contact Preference Register since its implementation in 2005, and had been effective in reuniting birth parents with their adult children once both parties requested contact. The Board had to balance the rights of both parties when considering requests for the release of birth certificates. The Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022²²⁶, goes further to allow adoptees access to their birth

records and this has opened up a whole new area for the Authority. The new legislation is groundbreaking, and I am pleased that I and the Board have been at the helm at its introduction.

12.9 A Time to Reflect

In 2020, I applied for the position of Chairperson through the local appointments commission and I was appointed Chairperson in November 2020. When I look back over the years that I have been involved with adoption, the work has never eased. Since I was first appointed to the then Adoption Board in the 1990s, I have witnessed so much development in the area of Irish adoption, and it continues to change. I have been Chair of the Authority since November 2020, and I can't think of a more fitting way to use the experience gained from my legal career of nearly five decades. Indeed, I look forward to leading the Board through the inevitable challenges that lie ahead.

226. "Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022," Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.



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Part 2

Findings

Chapter
13

Thematic
Analysis

13.1 Introduction

Domestic adoption in Ireland has evolved in myriad ways since it was first legislated for in 1952. It is part of a large, complex, ever-changing, multi-directional system.

13.1.1 A note on the data analysis

The interviews for this study took place between January 2021 and April 2022. As such they capture the time just before the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022²²⁷ was finalised and enacted. This was a time of much debate around addressing the human right to birth information with the proposed Birth information and Tracing Bill. It should be noted that the following findings are based on an analysis of the raw transcripts of 14 participant interviews, which were approximately 17,000 words each, and not of the narrative chapters developed from 11 of those interview transcripts, which were approximately 5,000 words each. Two participants made anonymous contributions and as such while there are no narrative chapters representing their interviews, their raw transcripts were analysed alongside the others, so the findings of the thematic analysis also include their views. As recordings of natural human conversations, the raw transcripts often contained repeated themes or prolonged discussion around specific, recurrent topics. Such repetition was not replicated in the narrative chapters, which for the purpose of this report were required to be readable and were edited for flow and ease of understanding. However, repetition or prolonged discussion of specific topics within the interview data does render those topics more likely to come through in the thematic analysis²²⁸.

13.1.2 Contextual Background to Findings: The Changing Trajectory of Domestic Adoption in Ireland

The nature and profile of domestic adoption has changed hugely since adoption was first legislated for in 1952. Between 1964 and 1984, for example, there were typically more than 1000 domestic adoptions per year – the number only falling below 1000 on 2 occasions. This number was almost exclusively made up of children born to “unmarried” women. However, between 1985 and 2005, the number of children being domestically adopted decreased dramatically, from 800 to just 253 per year. This is consistent with and reflects the societal and structural changes of the time. Again,

from 2006 to 2015 the numbers fell even further, such that from 2015 to date there have been approximately 100 domestic adoptions per year.

In addition to the reduced numbers, due to a combination of societal trends and recent legislative changes, the *profile* of children being domestically adopted has changed substantially, with most of these domestic adoptions now either comprising adoption by a step-parent or from long-term foster care. Table 13(i) details the breakdown of domestic adoptions over the 5 years to 2022 by *adoption type*. Table 13(ii) details the ages at which children were adopted. As the breakdown of domestic adoptions has changed, the majority of those who are domestically adopted are now in their mid to late teens at the signing of the Adoption Order. On average, there have been fewer than 10 infant domestic adoptions per year since 2010, which marks a dramatic change from more than 1000 per year from 1964 – 1984. To put this in context, more infants were domestically adopted per week in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s than have been adopted per year in recent times.

It is important to note all of the above trends when reading the findings in this chapter. Due to the long-term nature of their contribution to domestic adoption in Ireland, many of the participants in the present study were either adopted *during* or were dealing with adoptions/files *from* the period when domestic adoptions were very high in number, and relatively homogenous in nature. As outlined above, the profile and nature of adoption has changed dramatically in recent years. Furthermore, in the past, adoption was often perceived as a one-off intervention, but it is now known to be a lifelong process, which continues to affect the individuals involved – the adopted people, their birth and adoptive relatives - throughout the lifespan. This is why, although these findings may focus on the past, they are nevertheless extremely relevant to current practice. Many of the social workers, for example, who worked in adoption for multiple decades,

227. “Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

228. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).

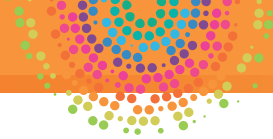


Table 13 (i): Recent Trends: Domestic Adoption²²⁹

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Step Parent	35	51	58	65	60
Long-Term Foster Care	25	21	16	24	29
Infant	7	6	5	2	9
Foreign to Domestic	3	0	0	5	0
Extended Family	2	1	2	5	2
Total	72	79	81	101	102

Table 13 (ii): Recent Trends: Age at Adoption²³⁰

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
17 Years Old	30	35	41	36	36
12-16 Years Old	23	24	23	45	33
7-11 Years Old	7	13	13	16	23
2-6 Years Old	9	4	3	7	8
0-1 Years Old	3	3	32	1	2
Total	72	79	81	101	102

moved from assessment work – dealing with the prospective adoptive parents – to the information and tracing work as time progressed. As such, they were following the large number of people in earlier decades through their natural life trajectory. This will be discussed further in chapter 14.

13.1.3 The Birth Information and Tracing Act, 2022

The Birth Information and Tracing Act²³¹ commenced on 1st July 2022 for applications to the new Contact Preference Register, and on 1st October 2022 for applications for birth and early life information release. This legislation provided a full and clear right of access to birth certificates and birth and early life information for all persons who were adopted, boarded out, nursed out or the subject of an illegal birth registration, or who otherwise have questions in relation to their origins. It also allowed for access to information by next of kin in certain circumstances. The new law also established the Contact Preference Register (CPR) on a legal basis, and a robust tracing service, as well as a range of new bespoke measures to address issues arising for people affected by illegal birth registration. It mandated the safeguarding of adoption records by the Adoption Authority.

13.1.4 Summary of Findings:

This chapter details the findings from a thematic analysis²³² which was conducted on the raw transcripts from all 14 participants. It should be noted that two of these participants chose to remain anonymous, so in these cases, the quotes are taken from their *original interview transcripts*. When a participant is named, for consistency the quote is taken from their narrative, which was edited after the interview. For further details, please see the detailed method available in “*Reflections on the Irish Domestic Adoption Process 1952 – 2022: Technical Report.*”

Three themes about domestic adoption in Ireland were generated from analysis of the raw interview data. All three themes are conceptually connected with an overarching theme of *control*:

1. The all-pervading, persistent culture of secrecy
2. Adoption-related information is power
3. Going the extra mile: using personal agency to drive change

From before its legal inception, a culture of **secrecy** (theme 1) was already a central tenet of domestic

229. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *Annual Report 2022* (Dublin, 2022). <https://aai.gov.ie/images/aai-ar-2022.pdf>.

230. Adoption Authority of Ireland, *Annual Report 2022* (Dublin, 2022). <https://aai.gov.ie/images/aai-ar-2022.pdf>.

231. “Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

232. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).

adoption in Ireland. As such, it permeated every aspect of adoption, and has been deeply woven into the fabric of domestic adoption. Its legacy continues to be felt by many parties, and it has very real and serious implications for all, but most notably for adopted adults, and for those who relinquished a baby for adoption.

Due to the legacy of secrecy, **information** (theme 2) about adoption became extremely hard to access, was strongly protected, and developed a high intrinsic value. Its value was further consolidated by changing societal norms and legislation. From the moment the information was bestowed “secret” status, an imbalance of power was created between the party/parties who held the information and the party/parties who did not have access to it. The flow of adoption-related information was inconsistent, unpredictable and multi-directional, prompting stakeholders to take steps to manage it, and re-route available information to those who needed it where possible.

Working within this culture of power imbalances, it was notable that individuals invoked a sense of **personal agency to create change** in Irish adoption (theme 3). Participants frequently commented on how one individual, armed with progressive thought, either brought about a change in practices, took a test case via the legal system, or delivered a clear message via activism, which had a strong impact and caused change in how domestic adoption worked. While activism in this area is not new - a number of very effective pressure-groups existed in the 1970s/80s - it was traditionally led by social workers, adoptive parents or other concerned parties who respectfully took on the fight as their own. Yet the voice of the adopted person, and indeed of the birth parent, is notably absent during this time. Since the early 1990s, however, the voice of the adoptee in this arena has been growing, and recent campaigns by this group have highlighted the challenges of the domestic adoption system in Ireland for adopted people and for birth parents. All three themes are explored in detail hereunder.

13.2 Themes:

13.2.1 Theme 1: The All-pervading, Persistent Culture of Secrecy in Irish Adoption

Secrecy was raised consistently by all participants as a core element in their experience of Irish domestic adoption. Through the thematic analysis²³³ it was clear that secrecy was all-pervading. Deeply

embedded in Irish culture since the previous century, secrecy formed an integral part of the new legal adoption mechanism. However the *nature* of the adoption-related secrecy – how the secret was maintained, why and by whom - seemed to become compounded over time, impacted and influenced by a number of people and factors. Furthermore, secrecy around the adoption, and those it affected, seemed to grow exponentially for individuals as years passed. With this in mind, three sub-themes have been developed:

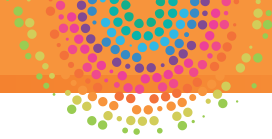
- Sub-theme 1: Fertile ground: the long-held culture of secrecy in Ireland
- Sub-theme 2: The secret makers, the secret keepers
- Sub-theme 3: Saddled with a legacy of secrecy

A breakdown of these sub-themes is provided in Table 13(iii):

Table 13 (iii): Sub Themes from Theme 1:

<p>Sub-theme 1: Fertile ground: the long-held culture of secrecy in Ireland</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secrecy was highly valued in Irish society, and impossible to avoid
<p>Sub-theme 2: The secret makers, the secret keepers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From its inception, adoption was embedded, and developed, in this social context • A network of people/institutions/organisations was involved in maintaining secrecy
<p>Sub-theme 3: Saddled with a legacy of secrecy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The adopted individual grows up within the culture of secrecy and must continue to withhold the secret in some way • This legacy of secrecy then impacts other relationships, with continued secrecy around the adoption and its effects: e.g. reunions, adoption peer support • Secrecy leads to a lack of trust in authorities, which breeds further secrecy

233. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).



The sub-themes are explained in further detail below.

13.2.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Fertile Ground: The Long-held Culture of Secrecy in Ireland

It is important to note that the nature and profile of domestic adoption has changed hugely since adoption was first legislated for in 1952. It was clear from the interviews that secrecy was a huge obstacle in Irish adoption.

Adoption was first legislated for in the 1950s, at a time when the Irish State and Church were deeply intertwined, and moral values rigidly adhered to. Any deviations from the ideological standard of the normative family brought a social stigma, imposing a sense of shame on those who were perceived to have deviated.

In the first instance, secrecy could be considered a response to stigma and shame, yet it also generally perpetuated further stigma and shame. It was apparent from the interview data that secrecy was highly valued, intricately managed and facilitated at all levels, from informal family and friendship networks to religious organisations and statutory bodies.

It is essential to note that this culture of secrecy as a response to stigma and shame did not begin in the 1950s however, nor was it particular to Ireland, as Eileen Conway notes:

“We think we are very unique in Ireland, but the sad history was that across all these countries, unwed motherhood was a stigma. A moral element forced women to give up their babies”.

*Dr Eileen Conway,
Social Worker and Lecturer*

From the end of the previous century, the central moderators of society in Ireland at the time – Church and State - had both valued similar societal norms, particularly the traditional family structure, albeit for different reasons. After the foundation of the new Irish Free State in 1922, a strengthening focus on the importance of “morality” by the joint forces of the Church and the State created the perfect breeding ground for secrecy. Katherine O’Donnell and Catriona Crowe both spoke of the origins of this culture, and how Church and State came to work together. As Catriona Crowe noted:

“Rural respectability arrived on our plates at the beginning of the 20th century when people were suddenly getting land of their own for the first time under the Land Commission. Now that they had something to lose, it became important, and very different attitudes towards women and pregnancy arose out of that. The Church’s involvement was critical and crucial. So-called health, education, and welfare services were handed over to religious orders with the full and enthusiastic agreement of the State, where they did all of this work with very little inspection or regulation”.

Catriona Crowe, Social Commentator & Ally

Social workers in particular frequently mentioned the challenge of “society” for unmarried, pregnant women from the 1950s to the mid-1980s. These participants were directly involved in adoptions, met the women concerned and were effectively co-keepers of the secret via the nature of their roles. In general, they felt that the restrictive society in which they all operated at the time propagated an inescapable culture of secrecy. Many of these participants noted that, rather than any one force such as Church (Catholic or Protestant), State, or family, the wider society in which these powers operated, and which all of them sought to uphold, was the issue. The culture of secrecy in Ireland was all-pervading, and for the majority of the population at that particular time, effectively impossible to avoid:

“People did not think the same way in the past. We have ways of thinking, now, that were simply not accessible to the generations before us. To me, the denial of an adopted person’s right to information is bound up with a very secretive value system of shame and cover up, which in the past was largely propagated by the Catholic Church and the State, and supported by the majority of the community, because they weren’t allowed to think any other way”.

Catriona Crowe, Social Commentator & Ally

13.2.1.2 Sub-theme 2: *The Secret Makers, the Secret Keepers*

“The great fault in the adoption system at the time was the excessive secrecy”

Anonymous Welfare Officer

From the 1950s to the 1990s, the interview data analysis suggests that the threads of secrecy around the adoption itself had often been instilled long before the adoption took place. As mentioned above, domestic adoption was happening within the context of a relatively new society, recently independent, with a rigid moral code.

To avoid stigma, any diversion from the socially acceptable norms of the time was typically kept secret by those involved. Preceding the decision to place a baby for adoption, the nature of the relationship between the birth parents may have been kept secret in case it was deemed immoral and therefore socially unacceptable. Once a birth mother realised she was pregnant, it was common for her to then keep her pregnancy a secret from the birth father. She was thus effectively isolated, and holding the secret alone.

Another response, certainly in the 1950s – 1980s, was when a young birth mother would choose to keep the pregnancy a secret from her own parents. If they did not have the immediate resources to travel to the UK, birth mothers had little choice but to continue with the pregnancy in Ireland, so another layer of secrecy would be added in the moment that a birth mother chose to confide in someone else. A friend, sister, healthcare worker or other confidante then instantly became the keeper of a piece of “information”, which could develop increasing significance and weight as the years passed. In this first example, the participant was working with birth mothers from the 1950s onwards:

“For many of the mothers - particularly girls who had gone to England when first pregnant, and then came back – their own parents would not have known they were pregnant. That was why they went to England in the first place - they did not want their families to know. At that time, the “higher up” the social scale you were, the greater the shame in having a baby outside marriage was [...] Naturally, the mothers hated parting with their babies. However, as I remember it they were also very relieved that

the baby was getting a good home, and that nobody knew about their secret”.

Anne Ronayne, Social Worker

It is interesting to note the sense of relief mentioned above. Yet the thread of secrecy then extended to those with whom the secret was shared:

“Friendships were so important to these young women – they relied on and trusted their friends to help them navigate their situations with as much privacy as possible. I was so honoured that I could be such a friend, and that together we were able to navigate situations of great difficulty”.

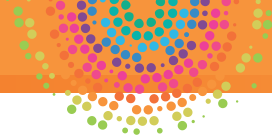
Dr Valerie O’Brien, Social Worker and former Adoption Board member

If the birth mother’s secret was to be maintained, it needed to be further shared with, but then subsequently kept by, a series of professionals. In sharing the secret, the birth mother was risking stigma, and this is where the promise of confidentiality became a feature. Confidentiality was a method of upholding secrecy, which enabled information to be shared with more parties – typically GPs, nurses, social workers, Health Board staff, members of religious organisations, staff of adoption agencies, Mother and Baby Homes, and hospitals. Thus, that thread of secrecy continued, and infiltrated other areas, such as the new adoptive family, as described in this case:

“A lot of adoptive parents were very anxious about the baby’s background, and we didn’t tell them about the child’s or the mother’s history. Sometimes - not always, but sometimes - you would feel they were wondering “has the baby come from a “good” background?” In many ways I think they didn’t want to know the details, and the birth mothers didn’t want to know about the adoptive family either. Sadly, I think perhaps they didn’t feel that they had the right to know.”

Anne Ronayne, Social Worker

It is notable, in the quote above, that the birth mothers “didn’t feel they had the right to know” about the adoptive family. This suggests that the culture of secrecy was now re-affecting the birth



mother in a different way. She had a secret, she shared it, but part of the arrangement was that information concerning her child in future would then be kept from her.

From the earliest days of legal adoption, social workers were required to ensure that secrecy was maintained via confidentiality. It is interesting to note that social worker training and practice, even in the 1950s, placed the child at the centre of adoption:

“Adoption was always because of the child - the child had been born out of wedlock [...] The biological tie between a mother and child was so important for the child – we were taught this in training. You did not want to cut the biological tie by placing a child for adoption if you didn’t absolutely have to”

Anne Ronayne, Social Worker

Despite this emphasis on the child in practice, training and in theory, it is notable that the main purpose of all of the secrecy, which permeated everything, and would have lasting effects, was to protect the interests of every other party except the child. Some participants felt that the stigma associated with adoption had abated over time, while others disagreed. Christine Hennessey commented on how birth mother groups had changed in some ways over the years, while certain themes, including secrecy, remained, in different ways:

“There is not the same level secrecy and shame, but it’s still there to a certain extent[...] The women who attend are not creeping in the door as much anymore, but some of them still haven’t told their husbands and adult children about the son or daughter they placed for adoption so many years ago. So they are still dealing with secrecy and shame on a daily basis”.

It is clear from the interviews that an element of secrecy is still woven throughout the fabric of domestic adoption in Ireland for many, and this will take patience, time and effort to disentangle.

13.2.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Saddled with a Legacy of Secrecy

The third sub-theme concerns how the instilling of secrecy in adoption at such an early point

continued to impact the next generation – those who were adopted, their relatives and peers - and beyond. Theoretically, the decisions made around adoption with its legalisation in 1952 were intended to absolve the adopted child from the then stigma associated with the “illegitimate” pregnancy. Furthermore, as society progressed, there was a sense of stigma abating. Yet in many cases, it appears that for those personally affected by adoption, the stigma became more complicated over time, due to the secrecy which had been initially proposed as a short-term and poorly conceived solution. In other words, as they layers of secrecy built up, they became more complex, involved more people, and were more challenging to unpack. As one participant explained:

“People say that adoption affects the person who was adopted. Yeah, it does [...] it also affects both natural parents and it affects the adoptive parents as well, to a point. But we don’t stay babies forever. I have kids. My adoption has impacted them [...] and it is going to continue on down [...] if, in three generations, someone does a DNA test, “where do these [people] come in?””

Anonymous adopted person and birth mother

In ways, it was apparent that secrecy was now in a different form – that the singular thread of secrecy from prior to the individual’s adoption was now permeating multiple aspects of multiple lives. One participant commented on how his lived experience of adoption-related secrecy began at home:

“I was never told, and I was in my mid-teens when I was one hundred percent certain. On one occasion after my mother had died, it was still denied but later confirmed”

Martin Parfrey, Adopted person and activist

Yet Martin Parfrey and other participants also spoke about the inherent secrecy involved in an adopted person’s daily interactions, up to the present day. So, at this point, the secrecy has deepened, going beyond the birth family, beyond the adoption itself, to become effectively internalised by the adopted person. Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes spoke about the impact of living with this inherent learned secrecy:

“As adopted people we set ourselves aside a lot, we make ourselves small for other people, we’re very good at navigating the complexities of relationships.

People have no idea the sacrifices adopted people make. Staying away from funerals, not saying things, not reacting to things if somebody says something unintentionally hurtful, just all sorts of different ways that adopted people will make themselves small and put themselves to one side”.

Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes, Adopted person, advocate and activist

It was clear from the interviews that the culture of inherent secrecy continued to prevail when an adopted person tried to form or build relationships with birth relatives. Reunions were sometimes conditional, requiring promises of continued secrecy on the part of the adopted person, sometimes reuniting with some, but not all birth relatives for example. This in turn impacted on various related issues, from hiding one’s membership of adoption support groups, to attendance at family events such as birthdays, weddings or funerals (as mentioned above), to difficulty ascertaining which individuals were party to one’s adoptive status, and thus wondering how much or little to reveal in any given situation. One illustration of the complexity and depth of adoption-related secrecy involved adopted people protecting non-adopted friends, as Katherine O’Donnell explained:

“Looking back, I think I was protected by my adopted friends, and in fact by all the adopted people I knew. They didn’t expose me to what was going on. They were protecting my naivety, protecting the fact that I wasn’t aware of the inherent loss involved in adoption, and they did not want to burden me with it”.

Prof Katherine O’Donnell, Academic, advocate and ally

In this case, the adopted person was not maintaining a secret to avoid stigma for their birth mother, or to protect themselves in some way, but was in fact creating a new, additional layer of secrecy around adoption in general, to protect the feelings of an unrelated 3rd party.

Secrecy, while permeating many aspects of the

adopted person’s life, could also be used by the adopted person, perhaps to gain back from an authority figure some earlier-lost control. One illustration of this point related to secret recordings of conversations. In two cases (not contained in published narratives for identification purposes), participants mentioned the recording of conversations related to the adoption in which they were personally involved. In each case, the person in question was making a recording for their own personal use, so that they would have a record of what had been said at the meeting. The fact that they felt a recording was necessary, however, may point to an inherent lack of trust in some authorities regarding domestic adoption. It is yet another element of the compounded and complex nature of adoption-related secrecy in Ireland.

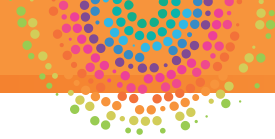
It is clear from the interviews that the culture of secrecy in adoption led to a power imbalance, which then placed a huge emphasis on the salience of adoption-related information. This will be explored in the next section.

13.2.2 Theme 2: Adoption-related Information is Power

The prevailing culture of secrecy in Irish society had a strong impact on adoption, and this accordingly increased the cultural value of adoption-related information.

Once it was legislated for in 1952, those working in and affected by adoption had to operate within a legal framework which had effectively rendered Ireland’s adoption system “closed”. Under Section 22(5) of the 1952 legislation, An tArd-Chlárathoir (the Registrar General) was required to keep an index which linked the child’s entry in the Adoption Register with their entry in the Register of Births, but the following proviso was included: *“That index shall not be open to public inspection; and no information from it shall be given to any person except by order of a Court, or of the Board.”* The adopted person was only permitted to receive a short form birth certificate.

The closed nature of the adoption system, as reflected in the law, was consistently embodied in the culture and practises in Irish adoption, and this was clear in the interview data. From the 1950s onwards, this closed nature of adoption, combined with the endemic secrecy, created a tension and effected a power imbalance between those who possessed information related to an adoption, and those who did not. This section discusses Theme 2: “Adoption-related information is power”.



A breakdown of the sub-themes is provided in Table 13 (iv):

Table 13(iv): Theme 2: Sub-themes

<p>Sub-theme 1: The powerful and the powerless</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption information is valuable • Those who possess it are thus rendered “powerful” <i>Some members of this group have a level of freedom and opportunity to choose what to do with the information they hold</i> • The group who do not possess the information are effectively “powerless” <i>They have little choice in how they receive information, and in how much, if any, they receive</i>
<p>Sub-theme 2: Reclaiming power: re- routing the flow of adoption-related information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influenced by legislation and multiple agents, the flow of adoption-related information between parties has been inconsistent, unpredictable and multi-directional • Evidence of people finding ways to organise information in order to give power back to the “powerless”

The first sub-theme explores how certain groups of people were effectively rendered *powerful* or *powerless* depending on the information they had access to. Within the interviews, the word “information” arose frequently, referring to a host of different types of information, and a wide variety of information holders and seekers. Yet in each case, the person or organisation *with* the information accordingly had a certain element of power, in that the information was needed by, or connected to, an individual affected by an adoption. Aside from simply having access to information, the information holders also often held responsibility for deciding how to record the information, how to use it, and how much of it to share with those to whom it related. In essence, they had a choice, and a certain element of freedom. In contrast, the person *without* or *seeking* the information, typically an adopted person or birth relative, was relatively

powerless in the situation, and had little choice until someone chose or was able to share the information with them.

The variety of information types, holders and seekers, combined with the inherent value of the information, resulted in a flow of information which was multi-directional, inconsistent, and unpredictable, and this has been challenging for all involved. A number of individuals and groups elected to redistribute the balance of power by re-routing the flow of adoption-related information. This pattern is explored in sub-theme 2. Both sub-themes are discussed hereunder.

13.2.2.1 Sub-theme 1: *The Powerful and the Powerless*

Information, in relation to domestic adoption in Ireland, related to a wide variety of documents, from original birth certs, to written testimony for an investigation. Similarly, those who held the information comprised a diverse group, ranging from children to social workers to government departments. In the absence of clear legislation around the disclosure of information, those who had information thus had an element of power. This exerted a certain level of stress on many concerned – both information holders and information seekers – and, underpinned by secrecy, it promoted a culture of mistrust around adoption-related information and those who held it.

The power imbalance around adoption information effectively began before the adopted child was born, as Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes commented:

“Before I was even born, there was paperwork with my name on it. That vessel of an adopted child was created before I even came into the world”.

Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes, Adopted person, advocate and activist

The assumption underpinning Claire’s comment is that someone had completed the “paperwork” to which she referred, thus intervening in the trajectory of her life. That person therefore held a power that she did not hold.

Once its seeds had been sown, this power imbalance continued after the adoption took place. The first group of “powerful” information holders actually encountered by an adopted person in

childhood often included friends or acquaintances, alongside adoptive family. Martin Parfrey, for example, spoke about how during his childhood, the questioning from other children made him wonder, for the first time, if he was adopted. In this case, one could infer that the “power” that these children exerted was to make him question his own biological identity and rumoured adopted status. However, his adoptive parents had chosen not to tell him that he was adopted, so the children, as information holders, and indeed the adults from whom they had heard the information (albeit unwittingly), also rendered his adoptive *parents* powerless in this situation. Another participant spoke of children in her class in school using her adoptive status against her. In this way, the power that those children held was in bringing into question, for the participant, the perceived social equality of adopted and non-adopted children. In the following example, children had the power to infer that the participant was “less than”, while a teacher had the power to change that perception. Yet as an adopted child with little information of her own, the participant herself was relatively powerless in the interplay:

“I remember being ten years of age, there were two of us in school that were adopted and, it was simple things, nobody wanted to play with us. I remember the teacher calling us up and she kind of turned and said [to the others] “your mammy had three girls, do you really think she wanted a fourth?”[...] and she goes “well their mummies and daddies got to pick them” [...] Then everyone wanted to be our best friend”

Anonymous adopted person and birth mother

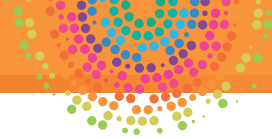
Outside of an individual’s family and peers, social workers operating in the area of adoption, by the very nature of their role, had access to a wealth and range of adoption information within the closed adoption system. This furnished them with power, and rendered them a frontline of sorts. While they were required to operate within the legislation of the time, different adoption agencies which employed social workers were rooted in a variety of umbrella organisations - religious or statutory - and this led to varying cultures, practices and policies between the agencies. A number of participants commented that, by the 1970s, Ireland’s newly emerging social work profession was at a challenging crossroads.

This meant that social workers operating at the peak of Irish domestic adoptions were in a unique and somewhat vulnerable position. Not yet governed by data protection or EU regulations, they were working in an area where their clients’ actions were tinged with social stigma, in a profession still in relative infancy, which was being publicly questioned. In this fragile environment, and with limited resources, they were making decisions about how to record, store and share adoption-related information, which would have ramifications for decades to come.

Many social workers were aware of the power they had through having access to this information, and this was intimidating or challenging for some. There were decisions to be made around record keeping, particularly in choosing what information to include, beyond the legally-required basic demographic data. Laetitia Lefroy spoke about keeping information sparse because, if a social worker wrote too much, it looked like they were being subjective, which did not seem professional by the standards of the time. She spoke of the phrase “*you’d better not write that down*”, particularly in reference to the more nuanced details around a birth mother. However, on reflection, she felt that those nuanced details would have been useful to the adopted adult seeking information in years to come. As she put it,

“was she bubbly, was she stern, was she quiet, was she keen on Bob Dylan?” These are the sorts of things that make birth mothers real. Yet these things had become “not something that you wrote down”

Social workers were also often the first point of contact when an adopted individual sought to find their early life information, or to trace a birth relative. As such, they had the responsibility of imparting information where it was available, and, prior to legislation, choosing which information to share and how to share it. This once again placed them in a position of power. A number of participants mentioned a culture, within some adoption agencies, of attempting to paint a “socially acceptable” picture of birth parents by changing some of their details. When an individual sought a trace, social workers often found that there was a contrast between what the individual knew about their circumstances, and what was on the file. One anonymous participant commented on being at a conference at which it emerged that a number of adopted people had been told by the same agency that their father was a doctor and their mother was



a nurse. In a similar vein, Eileen Conway, a former social worker, spoke of working with adopted people who were seeking a trace in the early 2000s:

“We would ask what kind of information they already had, because sometimes it was different from the information we had. Now and then, I think adoption agencies either left out some of the background information when talking to adoptive parents, or they would possibly inflate the information a little bit. So the adopted person might say, for example that their birth mother had been a nurse. We would have the record card, saying that while she did work in a hospital, her occupation was domestic work, not nursing. At times, we knew we would be sharing difficult information. We were trying to gauge when to say it. We would say “is there information that I might have, that you’d find very difficult to hear?” and we would work from there. We did not hold things back, we did share any information we had”

Dr Eileen Conway, Social Worker and Lecturer

While social workers comprised a frontline, those who managed the adoption agencies and the adoption system were arguably more powerful, but perhaps less visible, or accessible. Illegal birth registrations were referred to by a number of participants as a key challenge to adopted people, and to adoptive families, trying to make sense of their limited information. Some participants gave the example of the Mother and Baby Home Commission of Investigation Report as a source of frustration and upset. Again, the power theme came through very clearly in this case. Those charged with conducting the investigation had been bestowed a certain amount of valuable information – Mother and Baby Home survivor testimony - and to a certain extent they had a choice in how to use it. Their choice appears to have been hugely upsetting to many:

“In my view, the Report utterly ignored all of the testimony that it gathered - 550 people’s testimony. The archive was then sealed, so as it stands, I feel we can’t believe a word of the report, because it can’t be verified”.

Prof Katherine O’Donnell, Ally and Academic

“We are now looking at another cycle of all of this secrecy and shame with the publication of the Mother and Baby Homes report in 2021. I was surprised at how survivor testimony was handled by the Commission. It would have helped if they had explained it directly to the survivors. They are not obliged to, but there is a moral responsibility. They knew, when they wrote those conclusions, that people were going to have very serious questions to ask them, and yet they didn’t give survivors an opportunity to ask those questions”.

Catriona Crowe, Social Commentator and Ally

Over the years, the responsibility for adoption moved between various government Departments and ministers. These changes often led to paradigm shifts around adoption information, which impacted those personally and professionally involved with adoption. The following quote from an anonymous participant illustrates where adoption in Ireland was situated at the peak of domestic adoptions:

“In the mid-1970s, the Adoption Board was under the Aegis of the Department of Justice. It was in the miscellaneous division, along with the Censorship of Books & Papers and the Film Censor”

Anonymous welfare officer

The concept of adoption being in a “miscellaneous” division suggests a lack of clarity about how it was conceptually placed. As adoption moved between Departments, the responsibility for paper records also moved, and was impacted by different agents. This led to a certain element of risk around the valuable adoption information, as the “power” was re-distributed. In one example, participant Catriona Crowe described finding, in the course of her work, over 2,000 files relating to the adoption of children from Ireland to the USA in the 1960s. These files had been released to the National Archives from the Department of Foreign Affairs. They had previously been kept by its predecessor, the Department of External Affairs.

Both Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes and Martin Parfrey spoke of the significant impact of changing ministers on their activism work. At one stage, a Bill was being proposed in Dáil Éireann that

would criminalise any adoptee attempting to contact their birth family²³⁴, or vice versa, once a contact veto had been lodged, with possible penalties of a fine or imprisonment. When a new minister was appointed, he abolished this suggestion. This example is starkly illustrative of the power of those in control of adoption-related information.

Sub-theme 2: Reclaiming Power: Re-routing the Flow of Adoption-related Information

In addition to the information being held, or sought, it also flowed sporadically between different parties, and this is where challenges often arose. It was clear from the interviews that, certainly since 1952, the flow of adoption-related information between parties has often been inconsistent, unpredictable and multi-directional. This has added to the overall sensitivity around the already emotive subject of adoption-related information. In the absence of clarity, participants described finding ways to somehow organise the flow of adoption-related information themselves.

A number of participants spoke of inconsistencies in how adoption-related information was stored and relayed. In the absence of clear legislation around information and tracing, choosing what information to share, and how to share it, varied depending on the staff or agencies involved. Some participants spoke of adopted people being turned away when they attempted to make contact with agencies, seeking their birth information. As one participant explained:

“Sometimes they felt guilty. We were often dealing with people who had been back to other agencies prior to us, and had not got a warm reception. Where they did not get past the front door, and maybe they were told “Why do you want to do this? Why do you want to go looking? Haven’t you had a good life?”

Dr Eileen Conway, Social Worker and Lecturer

In other cases, certain limited information was shared in a secretive manner. One participant, for example, described a situation in which a staff member at a Mother and Baby home, while saying

the information could not be shared, left papers exposed on which the participant’s birth mother information was clearly visible. The participant then wondered whether this had been done on purpose.

There were many examples, throughout the interviews, of participants or adopted people garnering small pieces of information, connected to them, from various birth and adoptive family members, and working to piece it together on a personal level. Yet there was evidence in the interviews of a number of participants trying to re-route the flow of information using a wider, systemic approach - gathering it and presenting it in a way that made sense to those seeking it. Laetitia Lefroy spoke of encouraging stakeholder buy-in when she set up the Barnardos Adoption Advice Service, for example. As she remarked:

“I started the Barnardos Adoption Advice Service in 1977 because there was so little information available about adoption, and people needed to know more [...]. So I decided to start off an advice service that would actually allow people to express what they didn’t know, and try and find the answer. [...] Before we opened, I needed to find out what our potential service users should do in certain situations. I needed to have the information ready to go. So I contacted all the adoption agencies and other that might be involved and asked them how they handled different situations, and what information they could give me that would benefit people”.

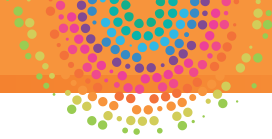
Laetitia Lefroy, Social Worker

Lefroy also wrote a book²³⁵ with Charles Mollan, published in the early 1980s, in which they provided a directory of Adoption Agencies and related groups, alongside detailed information about how to navigate the Irish adoption and fostering systems. In this way, they sought to direct the flow of information about how to adopt a child to those who needed it.

From the interviews, it was also clear that Irish adoption activists and allies such as Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes, Martin Parfrey, Katherine O’Donnell and their colleagues were

234. Law Reform Commission, *Adoption law: the case for reform* (Dublin, 2005), 15. <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/46298/1268.pdf?sequence=1>.

235. Laetitia Lefroy, and Charles Mollan, *New Families: Your Questions on Fostering and Adoptions Answered* (Dublin: Turoe Press, 1984).



working to redirect the flow of adoption-related information at a number of different levels. They worked to influence policy and legislation through direct submissions, writing draft bills, promoting adoption-related education, instigating social media campaigns and ensuring they were represented at government level discussions on same. They also worked directly with those seeking adoption-related information, providing advice and support via meetings, social media and on their groups' websites. The following participant spoke about her sense of relief at obtaining her original birth cert through publicly available birth records. She had found out how to do this through attending an adoptee-led support group meeting:

"It was at that I was told that if you have a name, you can get your birth cert. I think I was outside the place the next morning, before it opened, to get mine. And that was the highest, highest point of the whole thing [...] I wasn't picked, I wasn't chosen, I wasn't special, I wasn't anything. I was born. I was the same as everyone else [...] I know logically that I was born, but I had no proof of it. And I suddenly had a piece of paper in my hand that cost me probably two or three quid, that told me I was born, and I was the same as everyone else".

Anonymous adopted person and birth mother

On an individual level, sometimes people became the unexpected holders of adoption-related information, and had to then decide how to manage it. Yet in Catriona Crowe's case, this happened on a much larger scale. Having found over 2,000 files, for the purpose of archiving, which related to adoptions from Ireland to the USA, she felt that she had an obligation to try and make sense of the files she had received, for those whom they concerned:

"The important thing was for this to be done properly. It had the potential to upset and ruin people's lives, but it didn't have to, if it was managed correctly."

Catriona Crowe, Social Commentator and Ally

Some participants mentioned additional ways in which adopted people could empower themselves, through use of information. Valerie O'Brien described adoption from long-term foster care as a way of empowering older children to make decisions about their own adoptions. At-home DNA testing, meanwhile, was mentioned by many as a way of adopted people and birth relatives taking back control. While some risks were acknowledged, ultimately it was perceived as an additional tool which adopted people could use to gain personal information, without relying on proposed legislation.

"..with the advent of GDPR, and the shutting down of a lot of avenues of information, DNA is really becoming the most accessible and convenient way for people to advance their search."

Christine Hennessey, Project Manager of Barnardos Post-Adoption Services

"There are, of course, pros and cons to using DNA tracing services for adoption-related information. Yet I think home DNA testing can be really significant for people who were abandoned, or "foundlings" as they were called at the time".

Patricia White, Social Worker

It is important to note that these interviews were conducted in 2021 and early 2022, prior to the enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act in October 2022²³⁶. Many participants spoke of hoping for the long-awaited information and tracing legislation. Yet some expressed concern about whether or not the proposed legislation was suitable, discussing various elements that had been debated in the years prior to the enactment, such as the proposed information session for adopted people.

13.2.3 Theme 3: Going the Extra Mile: Using Personal Agency to Drive Change in Irish Adoption

A clear theme of personal agency ran throughout all of the narratives. Passionate about the area of domestic adoption for a variety of reasons,

236. "Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022," Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

but keenly aware of the legislative and practice limitations in the Irish system, people sought out opportunities to create real change. For professionals working in the area, this initially took the form of advocacy using existing channels. As their careers progressed, however, they started pushing for change in a stronger way, using different routes to achieve their objectives. From the 1970s onwards, those personally affected by adoption sought to make change through activism, with adoptee-led activism developing in the 1990s. Since then, adoption activism in Ireland has grown from small but effective non-governmental organisations, through intensive grassroots adoptee-led work, into what has now been described by some participants as a social movement.

Table 13 (v): Theme 3: Sub-themes

<p>Sub-theme 1: Pushing boundaries: advocating for change in a professional setting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying theory to practice in an adoption-related role • Seeking out opportunities for change
<p>Sub-theme 2: Reclaiming Control: the Rise of Adoption Activism</p>	<p>People affected by adoption reclaim control in a number of ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through language • Through kinship-style closeness • Through activism

13.2.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Pushing Boundaries: Advocating for Change in a Professional Setting

There was evidence throughout the data of professional advocacy – people employed in the area of adoption seeing opportunities for improvement in adoption-related services and using innovation and resourcefulness to achieve it. It was clear that each participant had a similar set of experiences, which they felt had prepared them to be a change-maker in this area. They typically had early, personal interest in social issues around unmarried mothers, a clear understanding of good practice from their formal education, and supportive supervision, through which their suggested change was facilitated. All of this was underpinned by a genuine desire to best meet the needs of service users, including adoptive and birth parents, grounded in the best interests of the child. Over the years, as their careers progressed, they gained

experience, and society continued to move forward, their approach became stronger and more targeted at higher-level structures such as the law, policy, and government.

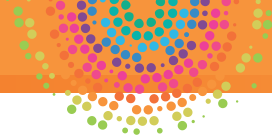
It was clear from the interviews that a number of the participants had an early interest in social justice, often garnered from family discussions in childhood. Anne Ronayne described seeing children at an orphanage and being concerned, as a child herself, about their situation. Similarly, Valerie O'Brien spoke of hearing stories at home which helped her critically consider the society in which she was growing up. With a different perspective, Katherine O'Donnell spoke of having a distinctly positive curiosity and interest in the adoption experiences of her friends as a child, before making the connection between adoption, stigma and social injustice in later years, as she pursued her own trajectory as a feminist activist.

Having received formal education in their chosen area, participants were keen to apply their theoretical knowledge to practice in the workplace. In early examples of what could be described as an advocacy mindset, a number of social workers described noticing areas of improvement in their work in the 1970s and 1980s and taking steps to effect change. In each case, the area of work was general, yet the improvements would ultimately be connected to domestic adoption, which they would later find themselves working in:

“I was still working for Barnardos at this time and felt that Barnardos should be more open to working where the poverty was - with Catholics, and taking referrals from FLAC. So my manager and I wrote to the head office in the UK, looking for permission to extend the service. I felt very impertinent about writing to head office but was lucky with my manager - she was really very supportive. I was given permission to try it, to see if it would work. So, for the first time in Ireland, working with Catholics became formally a part of Barnardos policy, and it transformed the work it was doing.”

Kerry O'Halloran, Social Worker, Academic and Writer

The concept of a “supportive manager” was a key component of this sub-theme – in each case the participant suggested change via the pre-



determined channels in work and was supported to implement their idea. Valerie O'Brien and Laetitia Lefroy both described similar situations in the 1970s and 1980s, whereby they questioned traditional ways of working and were supported to develop their innovative ideas, despite challenges from other parties. Both described developing new education programmes for women using social services, covering topics such as barring orders, contraception and sex education. Non-governmental groups including ALLY and Treoir²³⁷ had also been established by people working in the area around this time, seeking better treatment for single mothers and their children. From these early, general years, each participant's work then became more focused on the area of adoption. Working for Barnardos in the late 1970s, a number of years after Kerry O'Halloran's above suggestion, Laetitia Lefroy subsequently drove further change by deciding, in response to a growing demand, to set up an Adoption Advice Service. Initially billed as a pilot project, this has since evolved into the much larger Barnardos Post Adoption Service²³⁸ still in operation today.

By the 1990s, the focus in adoption was starting to shift to the area of information and tracing, and the impacts of Ireland's closed adoption system were beginning to emerge. In their advocacy, participants were taking a stronger attitude - no longer seeking permission, but instead unapologetically pressing for wider, systemic change:

"I was asked to give a paper at the Central Council of Irish Adoption Agencies meeting on 19th January 1990, on the subject of the adoption triangle. I remember standing and saying to all my fellow social workers, 'we need to be ahead of this, we need to be making our policies, not waiting for the sort of pressure that will be coming. We need to be proactive'."

Dr Eileen Conway, Social Worker and Lecturer

Utilising a similar approach, upon becoming aware of the existence of files connected to adoptions from Ireland to the USA, Catriona Crowe engaged with the media to get her point across:

"I said [on radio] that something ought to be done by the Government – perhaps something like the voluntary contact register they already had in British Columbia. My job was not to be recommending Government policy, but if you don't, who will?"

Catriona Crowe, Social Commentator and Ally

By the late 1990s, Valerie O'Brien, who had been actively employed as a social worker since the 1980s, had completed a PhD²³⁹, was working as a lecturer, and was then appointed to the Adoption Board. As such, she found herself in a new, influential role, within a very familiar area. She noted how, as a Board member, she had to re-position herself to reflect the responsibility of her appointment. This attitude was also mentioned by a number of other participants: realising that your own voice carried weight, and therefore ensuring that you used it, even when it felt uncomfortable to do so:

"When one Chair was retiring, he specifically thanked me in his speech for holding firm in my questioning approach. I appreciated that – the role I had played had been respected."

Dr Valerie O'Brien, Social Worker and former Adoption Board Member.

13.2.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Reclaiming Control: The Rise of Adoption Activism

Personal activism in the area of adoption had started to emerge in the 1970s. Participants mentioned a number of organisations which had been set up by people personally affected by the failings in the Irish system. Cherish²⁴⁰ was established by an unmarried mother who had

237. For more detail on the NGOs in operation at this time, including ALLY, Cherish and Treoir, see:

Treoir, *Towards Equality for Unmarried Parents and Their Children* by Margot Doherty et al., (Dublin, 2016). <https://www.treoir.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Treoirahistoryoffirst40years.pdf>.

238. "Post Adoption Service," Barnardos, accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.barnardos.ie/our-services/post-adoption-service>.

239. Valerie O'Brien, "Fostering the Family: A New Systematic Approach to Evolving Networks of Relative Care" (PhD diss., University College Dublin, 1997).

240. For more detail on the NGOs in operation at this time, including Cherish: Lorraine Grimes, "'We did what needed to be done': Cherish, the first support group for unmarried mothers in Ireland," *Women's History Review* 32, no. 1 (2023): 21-35. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09612025.2022.2088087> and Treoir: Treoir, *Towards Equality for Unmarried Parents and Their Children* by Margot Doherty et al., (Dublin, 2016). <https://www.treoir.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Treoirahistoryoffirst40years.pdf>.

chosen to keep and raise her baby, and Children First by adoptive parents who had concerns about perceived flaws in the adoption system. In addition to the aforementioned Treoir and Ally, and other similar groups, these organisations all served to put pressure on the Government, and on Irish society, to re-consider its approach to new or non-traditional family compositions. Yet, at this time the voices of the adoptee, and of birth parents, were noticeably absent.

In addition to pressure groups, individuals personally affected by adoption managed to effect change in the system through taking, and winning, legal challenges. Kerry O'Halloran spoke of "test cases" as a motivating factor for him in his early career, as he started to study law in addition to his career as a social worker. Indeed a number of these cases, brought by individuals who had found the legislation lacking from their own perspective, went on to create legal changes which permanently altered the course of the Irish domestic adoption process. One anonymous participant commented that, in their view:

"Legislators only react when there is a public outcry about aspects of adoption and rarely innovate changes themselves."

Anonymous welfare officer

Such legal challenges sometimes created a ripple effect, which led to an activist response by concerned parties. Eileen Conway mentioned the "McL case"²⁴¹ of the 1970s, for example, following which an Adoption Order was determined to be null and void, and an adopted child was returned to the birth parents, having spent 6 years with the adoptive family. The Adoptive Parents' Association formed in reaction to this, and the law was subsequently changed. The "Keegan case"²⁴² was mentioned by a number of participants as another example of one person driving change through the courts:

"The Keegan case in '94 had a huge impact on the working practices of the Board. It involved a birth father who brought a case to Europe because an adoption order had been

made without the Board consulting him. Prior to that case, birth fathers had no role in the process, but birth father consultation now forms a large part of our work."

Orlaith Traynor, Chair, Board of the Adoption Authority

Cases, such as the McL case and the Keegan case, seemed to effect paradigm shifts, to which those working in the area of adoption reacted with new legislation, policies, and approaches.

It is clear, from the interviews, that adoptee-led activism in Ireland began to take shape around the early 1990s. Prior to this, the voice of the adopted person was noticeably absent from all discussion and debate around adoption. Since the early 1990s, this group has grown in strength and number, most recently gaining a wave of public support as they pushed for change in the area of birth information and tracing. As Valerie O'Brien commented:

"The adoption arena is extraordinarily contested, with multiple stakeholders. I have great respect for the people in the Adoption Rights Alliance who were really advocating for the right thing to be done in so many aspects of Irish adoption, but whose voices were very often marginalised, or even demonised, by some of the institutional voices of the time. Yet, their claims have been evidenced. I used to listen very carefully to what they had to say, and I always read their work. The Adoption Rights Alliance have played an extraordinarily important advocacy role in this country in terms of setting the adoption agenda".

Dr Valerie O'Brien, former board member, and social worker

During this study, a number of groups were referred to by participants: most frequently the *Adoption Rights Alliance*²⁴³, the *Clann Project*²⁴⁴, and Know My Own. The nature and properties of these Irish adoptee-led activist groups are bound by a theme of reclaiming control, through their use of language, a kinship-style closeness, and targeted modes of operation.

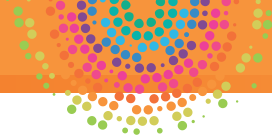
241. M. and M. V An Bord Uchtala and the AG (1977) I.R.287 (referred to as the McL case), see:

Department of Health, *Adoption: report of review committee on adoption services* (Dublin, 1984), 3-4, <https://www.lenus.ie/handle/10147/45641>.

242. European Court of Human Rights, *Case of Keegan v. Ireland* (Strasbourg, 1994). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng/?i=001-57881>.

243. "Home," Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

244. "CLANN," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.



13.2.3.3 Reclaiming control through language:

In analysing the interview data with activist and advocate participants, an interesting pattern emerged relating to language. In referring to themselves and others during interviews, the adopted activist participants frequently used terms often considered derogatory, or associated with official structures, such as academia and religion. Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes explained this phenomenon:

“Despite the public support, I have to say that adopted people are not understood by most people. Some people think they understand adoption, but most aren’t ‘fluent in bastard’. Taking a leaf out of the LGBTQ book, many of us in the adoption community have reclaimed the word ‘bastard’ and proudly call ourselves ‘bastards’. Indeed, the name of the US adoption rights organisation ‘Bastard Nation’ is inspired by that of the LGBTQ rights group ‘Queer Nation’.”

Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes, Adopted person and activist

Claire went on to describe how, in Ireland, non-adopted people who became allies were sometime referred to as “*honorary bastards*” – a title which had to be earned, and bestowed by their adopted peers. One interviewee was, in the first case, an adopted person, who then subsequently relinquished a child for adoption. She mentioned that nobody in her house was allowed use the term “*bastard*”, except her, but that, as an adopted person, she herself could use it liberally. She described introducing herself at a birth mother support group, and finding out she was not alone in being both an adopted person and birth mother. Realising what they had in common, this group chose a new term to describe themselves:

“There are loads in that exact boat [...] we are an elite group. “Double-standards” as we called ourselves, we were the double-standards group.”

Anonymous adopted person and birth mother

The adopted activists also chose to use a number of terms associated with power, and the church:

“The search angel was probably the best in the country. We called her ‘the Professor’, and she called me ‘the Bishop’.”

Martin Parfrey, Adopted person and activist

The term “*Search Angel*” is not particular to Ireland, and describes a person who assists somebody to navigate a search for birth information. While, in itself, this term has religious connotations, it is interesting to note the use of the terms “*Professor*” and “*Bishop*” within the Irish adoption activist community. Both of these terms are associated with power and status in academia and religion respectively. Academia and religion were undoubtedly powerful in Irish adoption. The former, to some extent, provided theoretical and conceptual frameworks which underpinned the legislation and training of those working in adoption. Religious organisations, meanwhile, had direct control of a large number of adoption agencies, and strongly impacted societal attitudes towards those involved in adoption. Through using these terms, members of the adoption activist community are conceptually reclaiming some control around adoption in Ireland.

13.2.3.4 Reclaiming Control Through Kinship-style Closeness²⁴⁵:

It was clear from the interviews that the adopted people involved in activism had a kinship-style closeness with their fellow adoptees. They described having very close relationships, supporting each other in practical and emotional ways that could often be associated with family members: helping out with transport, providing free accommodation, sharing meals in a family home, and giving emotional support. The following is an example from an adopted participant who chose to remain anonymous, speaking about her adopted friend:

“When anything happens, you know, if she can’t ring me it’s, ‘ring her and tell her to get up here now’. And if I get a phone call from her partner, her kids, I never question, I’m gone.”

Anonymous adopted person and birth mother

In the early 2000s, advocacy and support group *AdoptionIreland* set up a Yahoo Group, which was an online chat forum for their members. As Martin Parfrey commented:

245. With thanks to Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes for her assistance in formulating this phrase

"[It] was a support group more than anything - for advice, a shoulder to cry on, what have you. There was great camaraderie on it."

Martin Parfrey, Adopted person and activist

The culture of a kinship-style closeness among adoption activists in Ireland was notable in participants' descriptions of this forum. A disparate group of people was suddenly able to connect, anonymously, and discuss something that they had in common, which was generally impeded by secrecy and stigma on a wider societal level. Within the safety of the online chat site, early relationships were formed which, in some cases, persist to the present day:

"I believe the setting up of that Yahoo! group was a crucial moment. It was different to the in-person support meetings, in that people could be anonymous if they wished, so it felt safer. People joined who had never spoken about their adoption experiences before, who were very new to it, who didn't know how to express it, or who were nervous about expressing it. All sorts of really, really important discussions, on a support level and on a political level, cropped up on that group."

Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes, Adopted person and activist

The kinship-style closeness also extended to supporting people at difficult times when the secrecy around their adoption was particularly obstructive – banding together to provide practical help and support. In one case outlined in their interview, a participant described how a member of a support group wanted to attend the funeral of a birth relative, without being identified by other birth family members on the day. The adopted group went to great lengths to help: in addition to emotional support, one member provided transport to and from the funeral, while another "scoped out" the church in advance of the funeral, to brief the attendee on the best door to use to gain access, and the best place in the church to stand for privacy. In

this way, the adopted group were stepping in and providing the type of support one might usually expect from family members at a difficult personal time.

13.2.3.5 Reclaiming Control Through Activism:

A key goal of the *Adoption Rights Alliance*²⁴⁶, the *Clann Project*²⁴⁷ and Know my Own is for adopted people to have full access to their birth information and records. In order to achieve this, the activists and their allies developed a very strategic approach. This involved educating themselves, and their fellow members, on the finer details of adoption and family law and how it operated, ensuring that they were always represented at government consultations and committees around adoption-related decisions, and raising awareness of their cause through mass media or social media campaigns. They wrote and submitted alternative bills to the Government, populated their websites with information about their cause, and devised leaflets and other documents to help inform those seeking adoption related information. They also described initiating and balancing sensitive relationships with the media, government and legislators in an effort to further their goals. Yet all of this voluntary work took a huge amount of time and effort. It took a physical and emotional toll on those personally affected by adoption, which did not go unnoticed by themselves or by their peers. Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes recalled the 2003 Consultation²⁴⁸ on the proposed new adoption legislation:

"We went for the entire thing, and we were utterly burned out after it. It took an awful lot out of us, because we literally had to go from scratch. We had to give so much of ourselves in the face of people who were frankly looking strangely at us at first. Eventually though, they started to get it, but it took a lot of energy to achieve that, and it took a personal toll on everybody."

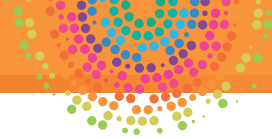
Dr Claire McGettrick, born Lorraine Hughes, Adopted person and activist

Martin Parfrey spoke of his own tiredness after a long day of campaigning:

246. "Home," Adoption Rights Alliance, accessed February 12, 2024, <http://adoption.ie/>.

247. "CLANN," CLANN: Ireland's Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.

248. Department of Health and Children, *Adoption legislation: 2003 consultation and proposals for change* (Dublin. 2005). <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/46683/1739.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.



“One day I was really tired and was asked to do an interview with RTÉ. I was hoping to get someone else to do it but the presenter had heard me on another show and didn’t want anyone else to do it. I didn’t feel like it, but I did it anyway. It needed to be done. We need to get our message out.”

Martin Parfrey, Adopted person and activist

In addition to impacting statutory organisations, the activists themselves commented on an increase in public support in recent years, most notably via an email campaign started by the Clann Project²⁴⁹ in October 2020:

“We conducted a targeted campaign on the Dáil on budget week with a deluge of emails saying “do not seal those files”. That was more than adopted people and Irish parents. That was Irish people saying; “we see you”. I tweeted a link, and thousands of people retweeted it and liked it within hours. It just flew.”

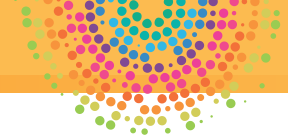
Prof Katherine O’Donnell, Academic, Activist and Ally

For some participants, including Katherine O’Donnell, this email campaign represented a tipping point: the start of a social movement. Many acknowledged an overall increase in public support in recent years, and a greater general understanding of the rights issues affecting adopted people in Ireland. Yet, notably, the activists felt that Ireland was still very much behind the times in terms of adoption generally, in comparison to other countries and to other recent social movements such as LGBTQ.

249. “CLANN,” CLANN: Ireland’s Unmarried Mothers and their Children: Gathering the data, accessed February 9, 2024, www.clannproject.org.

Chapter
14

Revisiting the
Research
Questions



14.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain nuanced insight from the reflections of 14 different participants, all of whom had a long-term connection to domestic adoption in Ireland, on either a voluntary (through activism or advocacy) or a professional basis (service providers, social workers, solicitors, board members etc). The findings in relation to each of the five research questions outlined at the start of the study are summarised below.

It is important to first acknowledge this study's strengths and limitations.

14.1.1 Strengths

This study captures the feelings during a period in history when there was public anger around the issue of adopted people's rights to their birth and early life information. As such, the timing of this study, with interviews conducted in the run-up to the enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022²⁵⁰ could be considered a strength. Furthermore, the participants' willingness to engage with the in-depth interviewing process led to the generation of rich, meaningful data, the thematic analysis²⁵¹ of which provide a clear overview of the key challenges and experiences of working in this area. The fact that much of the data collection took place during a full or partial lockdown was also a strength of sorts, in that it possibly led to participants engaging with the study more than they might have done in different circumstances.

14.1.2 Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. The Irish domestic adoption field is small, and the sampling was purposeful. While every effort was made to ensure that the study contained a wide breadth of voices, as these participants were recruited through the AAI Board, current and retired executive, research subcommittee and a small number of other known stakeholders (recruited through other participants), the findings likely contain an element of bias. Some key individuals may have been overlooked or not contacted. Furthermore, the more disenfranchised voices in this area may not have been represented. This includes the "people in the middle ground" as described by Christine Hennessey – those who are personally affected by

adoption, but choose not to get involved in advocacy or activism. Those who were interviewed had worked in domestic adoption for a long period of time – on average, 3-4 decades. Adoption numbers fell dramatically across that period, and, as many commented, various elements of adoption changed and improved. Thus participant interviews may have naturally focused more on key developments in the past, with less reference to more recent years. It is important to note that the large numbers of people adopted in the 60s and 70s were progressing through the lifespan as the participants became more experienced in their adoption-related roles. There was a natural pattern of progression, therefore, for those who worked in assessments or placement in those early years to move into the area of information and tracing in later years. This made sense for two reasons. Firstly, the demand for information and tracing services increased as time went on and greater numbers of adopted people reached adulthood. Secondly, information and tracing work required experienced social workers, so naturally, it made sense that those who had been in the area for a number of years, and worked in assessments/placement during a busy time in Irish adoption history, would move into this area of work. However, this may have led to an element of bias in the findings, in that some participants remained with roughly the same cohort of domestically adopted people and birth mothers throughout their working life.

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in that sample sizes are generally smaller. While this study's sample size is considered more than adequate for qualitative research, the findings must be considered as representative of these participants' experiences only, and thus caution

250. "Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022," Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

251. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).

should be taken when applying the findings to a wider population. The generation of the narrative chapters was an iterative process, requiring the researcher to make some decisions around editing, and asking participants for additional context relating to certain parts of text. As such, while the researcher made every effort to avoid influencing the participant, and to edit only as required, there is likely a small element of bias in how these chapters were shaped. This was addressed through a constant back and forth and check-in with participants, and also through checking that the chapters generally represented the themes found through the analysis of the raw data.

14.2 Research Question 1:

What are the individual experiences of professionals and volunteers working in the area of domestic adoption in Ireland?

All participants in this study; activists, allies, advocates, service providers, legal professionals and Board members, across multiple decades, reported their experience of Irish domestic adoption work to be *all-consuming; busy, ever-changing and under-resourced*. It was emotionally challenging and frustrating at times, requiring people to be resourceful, strategic, and both reactive and proactive in order to meet their professional or activist goals. Thereafter, however the voices diverged. For activists, a sense of relentlessness to the work took a personal, physical and emotional toll.

Those professionally engaged in adoption work typically noted that, to them, adoption work was *more than just a job* – it was difficult to switch off from after working hours, and they thought about some cases for many years afterwards. In addition, however, they generally reported that their work was rewarding and interesting. They enjoyed it, they sought opportunities to make improvements where needed, and many were interested in keeping up to date with any developments, even after retirement. It was notable that this group of participants frequently cited personal reasons for taking an interest in adoption, or for how they managed their long-term careers in the area. One participant used the word “formation” to describe this phenomenon, and its impact should not be underestimated. Early experiences of home and family life, of interactions with adopted people, the adoption system, or with the spheres of context in which domestic adoption

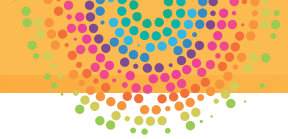
operated, seemed to spark an interest and drive that led to professional adoption work being all-consuming on a personal level.

For activists the positive elements mentioned by others – i.e. that it was rewarding, interesting work - were notably absent. Instead, their overall experience was described as one of repeated *frustration and anger*, with participants often feeling emotionally and physically spent from their activist work. The general sense was that they would and could not rest until their goals had been achieved, even at personal cost. Yet there was a distinct, and very unique positive side to their work. The activists reported experiencing a valuable kinship-style closeness with their activist peers. They formed close alliances, through which they exchanged emotional and practical support. Their use in some cases of specific language, particular to their group, provided further evidence of their self-definition as a unique, discrete cohort.

The allies and advocates who worked alongside activists played a very specific, key role. They did not describe experiencing the same kinship-style closeness, and were defined respectfully as a distinct group by the activists too. Their contribution did not take the same physical toll that they reported noticing in their activist friends. The allies supported activists through their knowledge, contacts, and communication skills, helping them to navigate various systems, where necessary. They were usually armed with a useful set of skills and resources, and were willing to upskill or challenge themselves when necessary, in order to provide support. The allies typically spoke of the activist group, and those affected by adoption, with huge respect, consistently downplaying their own contributions in comparison. They expressed frustration at Ireland’s handling of adoption, very much taking an informed, sympathetic outsider perspective. There was a sense that the allies felt both morally obliged and humbled to help the activists and the groups they represented.

The individual experience of professional or voluntary Irish domestic adoption work at any given time over the past 70 years was strongly influenced by those in authority. The composition of this group in authority itself changed over time, and the experience for participants, both professional and voluntary, changed accordingly as discussed below.

In the 1950s and 60s, religious authorities had a strong influence over domestic adoption, and



this in turn impacted individual experiences of domestic adoption work. The high level of religious involvement has decreased substantially, yet the historical effects of their association with adoption persist for those who were adopted at that time, in the legacy of dealing with the emotional and practical impact of growing up with stigma and secrecy around their early life and birth family, alongside the consequences, for them, of poorly kept or inconsistent record-keeping. The Catholic Church in particular managed many Irish adoption agencies. This meant that trained social workers were sometimes managed by religious personnel. While there were reporting and supervisory mechanisms in place in such agencies, social workers sometimes had to seek out alternative forms of peer support, through peer groups or informal working relationships.

The small number of Protestant-run organisations were in the minority, and those who worked for or with them noted that they typically were less pressurised and open to new ways of working, though it is important to note that this does not represent all of the Protestant organisations. Rather than being over-run with cases, participants felt that the specific Protestant organisations they worked for or with had the opportunities and resources to be proactive, positioning themselves where they felt there was a need, and considering how best to support those affected by adoption.

The adoption elements of provincial State services were typically given a religious name, which illustrates how elements of religion penetrated every aspect of this type of work, even in statutory services. Purely statutory services were in the minority, and reportedly dealt with the more challenging cases. The social workers employed in these agencies had a generic caseload, with adoption referrals simply one of many elements of their day-to-day work. This was a challenge in itself.

Activists' experience of their own work in relation to domestic adoption was also strongly impacted by those in power. They felt that they had to seek ways to have influence if they wanted to create change in Irish adoption. Religious organisations and personnel had often impacted their early life or their efforts to seek birth information. More recently (from 2002 onwards) any perceived progress made by the activists to advance their rights-based goal of access to birth and adoption information tended to be interrupted by changes of government, or changes of ministers. They frequently felt



The adoption elements of provincial State services were typically given a religious name, which illustrates how elements of religion penetrated every aspect of this type of work, even in statutory services.



disenfranchised, and felt that they needed to arm themselves against being left out of discussions, misrepresented or misunderstood. Yet activists also reported having a wealth of peer support to draw on, via the aforementioned kinship-style closeness. This was a very unique, positive aspect of an otherwise difficult role in interacting with authorities. They spoke of spending time helping each other navigate various methods of tracing, dealing with complex familial issues, or working closely on campaigns. Furthermore the activists gained huge strength and support from key allies and advocates alongside whom they worked. These relationships were very valued and respected on both sides.

All participants generally reported a high degree of personal agency in their given roles, whether in a workplace or an activist/ally/advocate position. This came through as a strong theme in the data analysis (outlined in the previous chapter). The participants who were working within known hierarchical structures (religious or statutory organisations) from the 1950s to the 1980s spoke about the restrictions of the oppressive societal culture of the time. Yet many also paradoxically reported having quite a lot of freedom in their own roles, and were either given, or took, the opportunity to be constructive and progressive. However, this must be interpreted with the strong caveat that those who took part in this research were invited to do so because they had a long career in adoption. It is possible that others did not receive the same support or encouragement, did not feel they had the same degree of personal agency, and therefore moved away from adoption as an area of work after a shorter period.

While those employed in the area of adoption utilised existing support structures to help further their work, or alternatively created their own peer

support systems, the activists, allies and advocates had to be *very proactive* from the very outset, even when, by their own admission, it went against their nature. Ultimately motivated by a sense of injustice, they needed to rapidly upskill in the law, practices and policies around adoption. They also needed to build networks, attend support group meetings, develop close relationships and seek ways to engage with existing structures in order to get their message across. Allies and advocates, while also motivated by the injustice, typically did what they could with the resources and structures available to them via their professional roles, pushing themselves beyond their comfort zones and working voluntarily to further the argument of the activists.

14.3 Research Question 2: What Were the Main Challenges of Working in this Field, and How did they Change Over Time?

All participants mentioned a number of challenges, but their nature varied depending on participant backgrounds. The majority of these challenges, past and present, were rooted in the key themes of secrecy and information (discussed in the previous chapter). The enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022²⁵² represented a watershed moment in Irish domestic adoption. While the legacy of the challenges outlined below remains for those affected, they now have a formal process through which they can access the files pertaining to them. Furthermore, it is important to note that Irish societal norms and values changed dramatically across the 70 year period which this report considers, and the positive impact of this change was commented on by participants, noting for example improvements in language and a reduction in stigma. This both *impacted* and was likely reflected in *changes* to Irish domestic adoption over the years. Irish domestic adoption as it currently stands is radically different in terms of the profile of children and families involved, and the processes, procedures and legislation underpinning it.

14.3.1 Illegal Birth Registrations, Falsified Information, US adoptions

A number of issues of grave concern affecting Irish domestic adoptions in the 1950s – 1970s were actively raised by some participants. These included

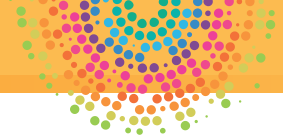
illegal birth registrations²⁵³, reported generalisation of birth information by some agencies, and the large number of adoptions from Ireland to the USA. For the participants, whose experience is the focus of this study, these issues raised significant challenges.

While illegal birth registrations were raised by participants and noted in the findings, these were illegal acts which, because of their very nature, were *always external to the legal adoption mechanism which is explored by the present study*. However, the findings indicate that the act of illegal birth registrations, besides having substantial negative implications for those personally affected, may have also indirectly negatively affected legal Irish domestic adoption. If people discovered that their birth had been illegally registered, the findings indicate that sometimes they made contact with post-*adoption* services or related services in an effort to seek information about their family of origin. Yet, in the first few decades of legal domestic adoption in Ireland, it was apparent from the interviews that some post-adoption service providers had no knowledge of the phenomenon until service users alerted them to it. This put the service providers in a difficult position as they could not meet the needs of these particular service users, given that they had not, in fact, been legally adopted. Thus services were working hard to keep up with developments for their services users as they arose. Service providers found themselves with nowhere to turn for further information about illegal birth registrations, and this was frustrating not only for the service user, but also for the service provider whose role it was to provide support and assistance.

While the gravity of the impact of illegal birth registrations is clear, is also important, in this report, to consider the reputational damage that illegal birth registrations may have caused to Irish domestic adoption. As it was a perceived solution to stigma, Irish domestic adoption was historically connected to various mechanisms, some of which have since been associated with abuse, neglect and illegal actions: Magdalene laundries, mother and baby homes, and religious organisations are all examples. Illegal birth registrations are not adoptions, because they operated fully outside of the law. There is no

252. "Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022," Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

253. Illegal birth registrations are addressed in the new Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022. For further detail, visit the following: "Additional Provisions Relating to Persons the Subject of Illegal Birth Registration," n.d., accessed February 12, 2024, <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/n9nwhk/bk/october/72ec4457fe472fa1ba7ec3aec5477f372aa94afe.pdf>.



The adoptions of Irish babies to the USA came into public debate in the 1990s, through media coverage and the release of government documents.



adoption record, there was no formal process, and they are a different entity. However, the lack of clarity around this distinction may have had negative connotations for the *legal Irish domestic adoption process*.

Where it was available, and where a legal adoption had taken place, information about birth parent occupation sometimes raised questions for service providers and services users, with some participants mentioning that files often contained very similar information for parent occupation across multiple adoption records, or that such information was exaggerated. Again, this practice has created a number of challenges. Finding out that information was inaccurate could have been personally distressing for the adopted person and their adoptive and birth families, and it would also have required careful, informed handling by the service provider relaying this information to them. In addition, however, this practice effectively created a reputational challenge for the Irish domestic adoption process. This report's findings indicate that birth and early life information held huge value and meaning, and created a difficult power imbalance in Irish domestic adoption between those who had access to the information and those who did not. The falsification of any information on those records, once discovered, created an additional layer of mistrust around domestic adoption.

The *adoptions of Irish babies to the USA* came into public debate in the 1990s, through media coverage and the release of government documents. With no targeted training or preparation in how to deal with such matters, those employed in adoption had to decide how best to support their service users on a case-by-case basis, building more generalizable strategies in reaction to user

needs. This sense of being essentially uninformed, and not in a position to provide the support needed, was frustrating. Underpinned by an overall lack of resources, and limited or no records, service providers often felt helpless in dealing with these cases, simply providing whatever support they could in a reactive manner.

A number of the activists, allies and advocates raised these issues – illegal birth registrations, inaccurate records, and adoptions to the USA – as examples of why their work in this area was so important. They spoke of needing to educate people at all levels about Ireland's history – from schoolchildren to stakeholders at consultations on new legislation. They were frustrated and, much like the service providers, had to work to inform themselves as these developments occurred, so that they could provide individual support to those affected.

14.3.2 Social Stigma

The *social stigma* around lone pregnancy and “illegitimacy” had implications for adoption, and this was a significant challenge for all participants across multiple decades. A number of participants used the word “forced” in terms of adoptions in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. They felt that birth mothers were effectively forced in that they had little option other than adoption, given the societal norms of the time. Others pointed to accounts of Magdalene Laundry and Mother and Baby Home survivors already in the public domain, which they felt provided evidence that some women were pressurised into relinquishment. Dealing with the fallout from the lack of reasonable choice for birth mothers at the time was an ongoing challenge for all adoption stakeholders, particularly those who worked directly with birth mothers.

In earlier years, for social workers, much of their day-to-day work was taken up with the *practicalities* of the adoption process. The large numbers of babies being adopted annually reflected the social stigma around lone pregnancy and the lack of any kind of social or statutory support for the women involved. Services were stretched, resources were limited, and domestic adoption was incredibly busy, almost to the point of overwhelm. Participants spoke of not having time to reflect on the work that they did, or on the experience of birth mothers at the time of relinquishment, because they were so busy. As the stigma abated and supports such as the unmarried mothers' allowance were put in place, the numbers fell, and the focus of services

changed. However the challenges brought about by that under-resourced, busy period, and the stigma underpinning it, remained. Arguably, they continue to have an impact today, and this is why the theme of secrecy was so pervasive in the data. The interview data suggest that birth mothers who had placed a child in previous decades started presenting at services in larger numbers around the 1990s, seeking information and emotional support. New challenges emerged for service providers as they worked to understand the ongoing psychological impact of adoption for these women. Interestingly, social workers who had directly dealt with birth mothers in the 50s, 60s and 70s described knowing the emotional and psychological importance, for the child, of keeping children and birth mothers together. In fact some of those who worked in the 70s and 80s had a sense of best practice in this area from their own international training or education, and they understood the concept of adoption loss and grief for birth mothers. Yet it seems, from the interviews, that service providers actively supporting birth mothers in their grief only began when the stigma started to abate, from the 1990s onwards. So for many years, there was no such support for these women. This gives a sense of the strength and power of social stigma in Ireland at the time.

The social stigma was also a huge challenge for activists, allies and advocates. Interestingly, the activists who took part in this study seemed to defy the stigma, becoming leaders in the area of adoption rights, and working hard to reduce its impact. Social workers from the earlier decades commented that the focus of the stigma was very much on birth mothers, and the child would be granted a clean slate via their adoption. Yet it was clear from the findings that the stigma *did* impact the adopted people, as children and as adults. This is clear in how the impact of secrecy continued to be felt by many. Some activists and allies spoke of how adopted people worked to manage multiple relationships and protect the feelings of others, for example, and in this way it seems that they were reacting to their own challenge of stigma. Furthermore, the stigma, and its impact on their own rights, had galvanised the activists into action. As a clear example, a number in particular mentioned the proposed criminalisation, in the early 2000s, of adopted people for attempting to make contact with birth relatives.

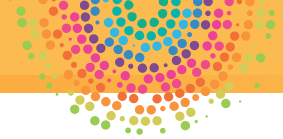
A number of participants also mentioned that the stigma around domestic adoption has changed over

Social work was a relatively new area in Ireland in the 1950s, and as adoption changed in the years since 1952, so too did the social work profession.

time. However, it is interesting to note that they had differing views on the level to which it has abated, with some stating that it had gone. As service providers, Christine Hennessey and Patricia White worked with the people whom they felt occupied the “middle ground” – service users, people affected by adoption, but not activists. They commented that the level of secrecy and shame, though greatly reduced, was “still there to a certain extent”.

14.3.3 Incomplete, Inadequate and Inconsistent Record Keeping

Incomplete, inadequate and inconsistent record-keeping has been a serious obstacle in Irish domestic adoption. Social work was a relatively new area in Ireland in the 1950s, and as adoption changed in the years since 1952, so too did the social work profession. Social work gained and lost favour within Irish society. A distinct level of public questioning came alongside high numbers of domestic adoptions in Ireland in the 1970s. In addition, amidst fluctuating resources, the locus of control around domestic adoption shifted between government and religious groups. Within this turbulent environment, the quality of adoption records kept by social workers, adoption agencies and government bodies was impacted in different ways. With a lack of standardised procedures, records were not kept consistently, were scattered and were often moved from one location to another as governing bodies changed. This has led to a huge amount of frustration for those working in adoption and for those personally affected by it. When files were examined by social workers helping with a trace, or received (albeit in redacted form) by adopted people, there was sometimes very little, inaccurate, generalised, or incomplete information to work with. Participants reflected on this with varying degrees of resignation, upset and frustration.



14.3.4 Information and Tracing

The lack of progress in the area of Information and Tracing, and its effects on adopted people and their birth relatives, was outlined as a major challenge and source of frustration. Irish domestic adoption was mentioned by a number of participants as being “behind the times” in this area, compared to other countries. Any work to change legislation was seen as extremely slow, frustrating, and outpaced by the progress made in other countries, particularly in the UK. Slowness of change was a key factor throughout the years covered by participants. The slow pace was compounded by changes of governments, and ministers, as the responsibility for adoption moved between different Departments, priorities changed, and bills lapsed.

It should be noted that the National Adoption Contact Preference Register, established by the Adoption Board in 2005, was cited by a number of participants as a positive development in Irish adoption, a watershed moment and a strong achievement by the Adoption Board in moving towards more openness in the area of information and tracing. Activists spoke of the myriad challenges to achieving their key goal of access to birth information. While there had been targeted and impactful advocacy work done by a number of different organisations since the 1970s, from the 1990s adopted people started to develop a unified activism agenda in Ireland, primarily focused on access to birth information for adopted people. For some the early days of activism work involved the challenges of learning how to campaign – finding out how to interact with the political system, and influence legislation and policy, so that they could achieve their goals. This concerned a lot of time and dedication in building relationships, preparing notes, informing and mobilising fellow activists, and interacting with the media and other stakeholders to ensure that their points were heard. The activists who participated in this study had gained reputations over the decades as “key players” and were certainly well-known in the adoption arena. Yet getting to that point had been hugely personally challenging. They felt compelled to take every opportunity to get their message across, often at personal cost. Furthermore, they were frustrated that, despite all of their work, their goal of full access to birth information had yet to be realised. They spoke of having to continue with their message in the face of successive setbacks,



Though historically perceived as a one-off intervention, adoption is now more readily acknowledged in practice and theory to be a lifespan experience.



often caused by people who they felt did not fully understand the details of the legislation. Allies and advocates noted the challenge of their own frustration about the repeated setbacks faced by their activist friends and colleagues in the area of information and tracing. They felt that the activists were marginalised and mistreated within Ireland, and they were disappointed and frustrated that this was (still) the case. The challenges changed over time for *service providers* as society, legislation and practice progressed, yet for the activists and allies, the challenge of access to birth information remained frustratingly static, and had in fact become compounded, and more frustrating, as the years have progressed. Activist reactions to the proposed (at the time of interview) Birth Information and Tracing Bill, now Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022²⁵⁴ differed, with some feeling it was “good enough”, and others feeling it needed to go further. An overall sense of despondence and frustration with the area of Information and Tracing persisted.

14.3.5 The Complexity of Adoption

Though historically perceived as a one-off intervention, adoption is now more readily acknowledged in practice and theory to be a *lifespan experience*. Similarly, the impact of every group who was involved in the adoption process in Ireland since its legal inception – religious, governmental, or service provider – is long term, and continues to be felt by all who are affected by adoption. For example, the issue around a right to information was only finally addressed by the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022, and those who receive records under this Act must still deal with the historical challenges of poorly kept, inconsistent or incomplete records.

254. “Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

Current domestic adoptions benefit from a modern and updated service, grounded in recent law, with accountability and other quality control measures. Indeed this was mentioned by a number of participants, who spoke of how much had changed. Key improvements included more children being able to avail of adoption if it was in their best interests, including children of married couples, and children in long term foster care. Additional improvements cited included the voice of the child in adoption proceedings, the requirement to consult birth fathers, and a general sense of a stronger system all round. The complexity and sensitivity of adoption work was acknowledged by many, with consideration given to the fact that, as much as huge improvements and strides have been made in many areas, any developments in domestic adoption will naturally raise further ethical and legal challenges that must be dealt with.

The profile of domestic adoption has changed hugely in recent times. Yet it is plausible that the child at the centre of a modern domestic adoption—whether infant, step-parent or from long term foster care—is, indirectly, possibly still impacted by the societal norms and structures around adoption in the past, as these would have likely influenced his or her adoptive and birth families’ perceptions of adoption. A number of participants made reference to adopted people as a minority group, with rights to be addressed, explaining that (at time of interview) Irish adoption rights were decades behind those of other minority groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. It is notable that, post-reunion, adoptees must learn to navigate the complexities of their birth families’ relationships – which may still involve an element of secrecy. Furthermore, children adopted from long-term foster care, or by a step-parent, may face a very different set of challenges in dealing with birth relatives, depending on the circumstances of their adoptions. Post-Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022²⁵⁵, it is important that Irish society is now sensitive to and considerate of its adopted community, and aware of adopted people’s existence as a varied minority group. This will help to ensure that, going forward, Ireland’s adopted community is safeguarded from the stigma, shame and secrecy which was associated with

adoption in the past. There was an overall sense that progress has undoubtedly been made, and the nature itself of adoption has changed, but there is still much work to do.

The interview data indicated that there are a number of spheres of influence on domestic adoption, compounded over decades, and they are not easily dismantled. Participants were clear in their assertions that the phenomenon of domestic adoption in Ireland is extremely complex, and must be explored within a wider social, historical and political context in order to be fully understood. Domestic adoption is one cog in a large and ever-changing mechanism, encompassing other types of adoption, different aspects of the family, and different forms of care, all influenced by social and legislative factors. This was evident in participants’ frequent references to Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Baby homes, religious organisations, and industrial schools.

14.4 Research Question 3: How did Legislative and Policy Changes over the Years Impact the Practice of Domestic Adoption?

As previously discussed, a thematic analysis²⁵⁶ of the interview data resulted in three key themes. Secrecy and the power of adoption-related information were two of these themes. Though undoubtedly reflective of historical Irish culture and societal norms, these elements of Irish adoption, as outlined by participants, both underpinned and were given an official grounding in the Adoption Act 1952²⁵⁷. While there were a number of changes, amendments and revisions in the years that followed, this Act was not formally replaced until the Adoption Act 2010²⁵⁸. Furthermore, specific Information and Tracing legislation was not enacted until October 2022, after the interviews for this study had taken place, and 70 years after the 1952 Act. It is reasonable to infer from the findings that, despite subsequent changes, the Adoption Act 1952 has had a strong and lasting impact on the practice of domestic adoption in Ireland.

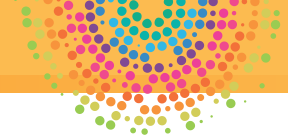
In practice, the law governing domestic adoption was continuously evolving after 1952 because of

255. “Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

256. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).

257. “Adoption Act, 1952,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1952/act/25/enacted/en/print.html>.

258. “Adoption Act, 2010,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.



successive legislative and policy changes, and the improvements were noted by some participants. However, from the participants' perspectives, such changes were in fact most keenly felt when they reflected, and were impacted by, *paradigm shifts in public attitudes*, as outlined below. The legislation often raised by participants as having a strong impact on adoption practice included the law that led to the introduction of the Unmarried Mother's Allowance in 1973, and the UK Children Act 1975. It is notable that neither of these laws directly addressed Irish adoption. This highlights the extreme sensitivity of adoption to context.

14.4.1 The Social Welfare Act 1973²⁵⁹

The introduction of the Unmarried Mother's Allowance in 1973 was frequently raised as a landmark moment for domestic adoption, as it both signalled and precipitated the beginning of a change in public attitudes towards lone mothers and their children. Participants noted that, as attitudes continued to slowly improve throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, women were seen to have more choice in terms of motherhood, and so adoption practice slowly began to change accordingly. It is notable that participants did not specifically mention the legislation that preceded the allowance (The Social Welfare Act, 1973): instead, they consistently pointed to the allowance itself as the tangible marker of a paradigm shift. This is notable, as it is indicative of how society might view areas such as adoption – the legislation itself, while effectively creating the change and signifying the paradigm shift, may be highly significant to those who work in the area, but is not generally remembered as clearly as the practical impact it has – in this case, paving the way for an allowance.

14.4.2 The UK Children Act 1975

In 1975, the UK Children Act²⁶⁰, allowing for the full opening of adoption records to those aged over 18, became an instrument of note to Irish adoption practice. It brought into sharp contrast the difference between the level of information now available to people adopted in either England or Ireland. When this study was conducted, Ireland

had not yet “caught up” with the UK legislation, and this was noted by social workers, service providers, activists and allies alike. The UK seemed to be a natural and easy comparison. This is perhaps due to its proximity to Ireland, a shared history of closed adoption, and a history of close links between agencies brought about by women travelling there to conceal pregnancies, arrange adoptions, etc. Many social workers in Ireland had been frustrated in the years after the UK legislation came into play. They could see the significance of these progressive ideas being given legislative grounding in the UK, as a number of them had trained or worked there. Activists, too, were impacted by this change because, as the years passed, they felt that Ireland lagged further behind in the area of information and tracing, and this frustrated many within the adoption community. The UK legislation of 1975 was referred to even by those still active in Irish adoption at the time of interviewing, more than 40 years after its enactment. It was a huge source of frustration for many.

14.4.3 The Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017

When asked about how domestic adoption had changed recently, a number of participants highlighted the adoption of children from long term foster care. The Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017²⁶¹ paved the way for this development, in addition to the adoption of children by single individuals or by co-habiting couples. This legislation was largely seen by participants as a positive step, and reflective of a changing, more diverse society. However, it again highlighted the complexity and sensitivity around adoption as an intervention. Some participants felt it needed more consideration, and described both positive and negative implications of children being adopted, in many cases, in their mid-late teens.

14.4.4 Test Cases and Legal Challenges: the Keegan Case

Similar to the Social Welfare Act 1973 and the subsequent Unmarried Mother's Allowance, it is important to note that participants generally spoke about the individual test cases which precipitated new legislation rather than starting

259. “Social Welfare Act, 1973,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1973/act/10/section/8/enacted/en/html>.

260. “Children Act 1975,” Legislation.gov.uk. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/72/contents>.

261. “Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/19/enacted/en/html>.

with the legislation itself. Regardless of their background, participants seemed to remember the human aspect of the story more readily than the legislation it either triggered or followed. There was often a general sense of caution or inertia around legislation, as it was so complex, slow to change and, when it did change, led to increased workloads, with mixed outcomes. Overall, there was a perception that, the legislators, and legislation itself, were very much removed from the day-to-day work of domestic adoption.

Many participants reflected on the lack of birth father engagement or involvement in the overall adoption process. Birth fathers were rarely discussed or considered in the adoption process prior to the 1990s. They were also notably absent on documentation, according to participants. This changed with the Keegan case²⁶², which was followed and recognised by The Adoption Act 1998²⁶³.

In the Keegan Case, one birth father, who had not been consulted on the adoption of his child, brought a case to the European Court of Human Rights (1994), arguing that, while he did not wish to veto it, he had a right to be consulted on the adoption of his child. The subsequent Adoption Act 1998 required social workers to make every effort to contact the birth father before an Adoption Order was granted. This was acknowledged by many as an important turning point in Irish domestic adoption practice. It was seen as progressive, indicative of social change, timely and appropriate. A number of participants commented on the lack of the birth father voice prior this point, recognising thereafter just how important birth father involvement was for all parties concerned. Yet this legal change, as with many others, also had a challenging side effect. In protracted situations, communication with birth fathers slowed things down for everyone, most notably for the child at the centre of the adoption, and this was noted as a potential risk factor to the child's development.

14.4.5 Looking behind the impact of the law

It is unfortunate that the locus of control of adoption in Ireland, and the laws that underpinned it,

It is unfortunate that the locus of control of adoption in Ireland, and the laws that underpinned it, jumped frequently across various Departments and ministers throughout the years since its legal inception.

jumped frequently across various Departments and ministers throughout the years since its legal inception. The general sense from the interviews was that those in practice and activism often felt compelled to take matters into their own hands, due to repeated frustrations with those in charge. Pressure groups such as Children First, and, later, adoptee-led activist groups, were established to push for legislative change in a focused and systematic way. Having the opportunity to feed into new legislation impacted people and helped them to form ideas and practices. One such example was the Adoption Review Group (1984), who raised many of the issues eventually addressed by the law in subsequent years. Another example was the 2003 consultation²⁶⁴ on what would eventually become the Adoption Act 2010²⁶⁵. This galvanised activists, focusing their approach and their key messages. However, a number mentioned their disappointment when their suggestions from such consultations were not addressed in legislation.

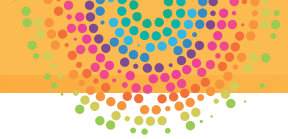
Overall, while various changes impacted the day to day practice of those formally working in adoption, activists and allies calling for information and tracing legislation were repeatedly frustrated, and saw little evidence of real change brought about by any new adoption legislation. One activist expressed complete despondence, stating that any law regarding information and tracing would always be conditional, while another said that no Irish legislation had made any difference to the information and tracing issue to date (interviewed in

262. European Court of Human Rights, *Case of Keegan v. Ireland* (Strasbourg, 1994). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57881>.

263. "Adoption Act, 1998," Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/10/enacted/en/html>.

264. Department of Health and Children, Adoption legislation: 2003 consultation and proposals for change (Dublin, 2005). <https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/46683/1739.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

265. "Adoption Act, 2010," Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.



The work of the Adoption Authority in ensuring that the quality controls set out by the Act were adhered to was noted and respected by a variety of participants – activists, allies, advocates and those professionally engaged in adoption.



2021, prior to the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022²⁶⁶).

14.5 Research Question 4: How did these Experiences Differ Pre- and Post- the Changes Brought About by the Adoption Act 2010?

The Adoption Act 2010²⁶⁷ brought about substantial changes to Irish domestic and intercountry adoption. Once it was enacted, the 2010 Act was seen by a number of participants to be particularly positive in the area of *Intercountry Adoption (ICA)*, in that it ratified the Hague Convention²⁶⁸, ensuring that clear standards of quality control in relation to ICA were now enshrined in law. This had an immediate dampening impact on the number of children adopted into Ireland through ICA. Yet one service provider expressed concern about this, pointing to the needs of children who then lost ICA as a route out of a very challenging early life situation. While the focus of the present study is on domestic adoption, many participants were keen to emphasise that domestic and intercountry had a symbiotic relationship, so when changes were made to one of these types of adoption, they naturally impacted the other.

There was a sense, overall, that domestic adoption grew hugely in professionalism over the years, and that this was very much cemented with the Adoption Act 2010. One participant described

the Act as “really important”, commenting on the different environment and the increased sense of openness around the topic of adoption after the Act for all parties involved. For Adoption Authority Board members, in practical terms there was more governance after the 2010 Act. This meant a significant increase in the volume of papers that needed to be read and assimilated before hearings. Service providers noted the immediate challenges that the new Act posed to many adoption-related organisations on its enactment, while they worked to re-register their organisation, and choose a specific direction (e.g. placement, tracing, mediation) to continue their work in the area of domestic adoption. Yet they, and others, acknowledged that the Act was nonetheless a very important step, which ultimately led to a clear improvement in adoption services and standards post 2010.

The work of the Adoption Authority in ensuring that the quality controls set out by the Act were adhered to was noted and respected by a variety of participants – activists, allies, advocates and those professionally engaged in adoption. One participant mentioned that the Act reduced stigma around adoption. Another participant commented that it brought higher standards in terms of assessments, with adoptions carried out after the Act noted as being a more positive experience for all involved. Furthermore, the positive impact of the various subsequent legislative changes which came about after the 2010 Act were noted – in particular the Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017²⁶⁹.

However, the activist, ally and advocate group generally reported feeling even more disenfranchised or frustrated by the 2010 Act from their own perspective. They commented that the Act made little or no difference to the groups they represented, and was once again a missed opportunity to address the contested and time-sensitive issue of information and tracing. This was reflected in the narrative of a social worker, employed in the area of information and tracing (known at the time as search and reunion), who said that the 2010 Act made little difference to the work of her team. This is notable given the strong

266. “Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

267. “Adoption Act, 2010,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/act/21/enacted/en/print>.

268. HCCH, *Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (The Netherlands. 1993). <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>.

269. “Adoption (Amendment) Act 2017,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), Accessed February 8, 2024: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/19/enacted/en/html>.

impact that the Act had in many other areas. In ways, the Act seemed to compound the activists' frustration that, despite bringing their voice to the table directly on every occasion, their key messages were still apparently not being heard or factored into legislative change.

Perhaps what is most notable about the 2010 Act is how rarely it was spontaneously raised in the interviews. Unlike other legislation, it really only arose when participants were directly asked about it, and even then it rarely generated much nuanced insight. Yet most of the participants were actively employed, or working on a voluntary basis, both before and after its enactment. To them, the main impact of the Act was on Intercountry adoption. Its impact on domestic adoption was less keenly felt, and perhaps less obvious due to the smaller numbers, and the huge focus on Intercountry adoption at the time. This drives home the message that these two main types of adoption – domestic and intercountry – do impact each other. With limited resources, if stakeholders are focused on one type of adoption, they have less capacity to consider or interrogate the other. In practice, the 2010 Act did in fact make a number of practical changes to domestic adoption, but it is notable that this was largely not reflected in the interview data.

14.6 Research Question 5: What Issues do we Need to Consider in Irish Domestic Adoption Going Forward? What can We and Other Countries Learn from Ireland's Adoption History?

In order to best answer this final research question, it is important to consider the AAI's current aims. The mission of the Adoption Authority of Ireland is:

"To ensure the provision of the highest possible standards of adoption related services, throughout the lifelong adoption process, with the best interests of children as the first and paramount objective."

This final section of this chapter examines the study's findings from the perspective of working to achieve this mission.

The domestic adoption of children in Ireland is a highly complex and sensitive area, with long-term implications for all involved: the children

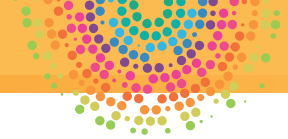
The most important issue requiring consideration is that of addressing the culture of secrecy that, according to the findings, still affected many adopted people in Ireland at the time of the interviews.

at its core, their adoptive and birth families, the professionals who oversee the legal and practical elements of the adoption itself, and the activists, allies and advocates who campaign for change. The entrenched culture of secrecy and ongoing lack of information has led to disharmony in the area of Irish domestic adoption, with activists, allies and advocates still feeling disenfranchised and frustrated, despite, in some cases, having had opportunities to feed into policies and legislation. Domestic adoptions continue to take place in Ireland, but the profile of those involved has changed remarkably over the years. Learning from Ireland's adoption history can ensure Ireland continues to focus fully on the child at the centre of the adoption and support a high standard of domestic adoption practice. Key learnings here include understanding the impact of a long-held culture of secrecy, the importance of accurate documentation, and of ensuring all stakeholders get an opportunity to comment or feed into the legislation and policies that affect them.

14.6.1 Changing the Culture of Secrecy around Irish Adoption

The most important issue requiring consideration is that of addressing the culture of secrecy that, according to the findings, still affected many adopted people in Ireland at the time of the interviews. It is clear from the present chapter, and from the thematic analysis²⁷⁰ presented in the previous chapter, that information, and the secrecy that has traditionally surrounded it, has been a huge obstacle for all involved. Adoption information holders have a certain amount of power, and the flow of adoption-related information in Ireland has consistently been fraught with difficulty. While Irish

270. Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke *Thematic analysis: a practical guide* (London: Sage, 2021).



society changed incrementally over the years since 1952, the way in which adoption-related information was managed remained relatively static. The advent in recent years of new legislation in relation to data protection and freedom of information added an extra layer of complexity, and extra controversy, to this already challenging area.

Domestic adoption, as it currently stands, has changed substantially in terms of the numbers and profile of children and families involved, the way in which the adoption is managed both before and after the Adoption Order is signed, and the legislation and policies underpinning it. The small number of children domestically adopted in Ireland each year are now most often adopted by a step-parent – in these cases, the child has typically been living with one biological parent, and is then adopted by that parent’s partner. In adoptions from long-term foster care, the child will also have been living with the foster family for a number of years before the adoption takes place. Infant domestic adoptions – which are similar to historical domestic adoptions in that the child is adopted in infancy, by a parent or set of parents to whom there is no genetic link – currently comprise less than 10% of annual domestic adoptions, with fewer than ten per year on average since 2010. It is important to note that there is *no current data available* about the experience of secrecy for this cohort of children and their families, and this is an area on which future research could focus. For the most part, the participants interviewed for this study spoke about secrecy relating to *historical adoptions*. While 3 of the 14 participants had retired, 11 were still actively working, either on a voluntary or professional basis. Thus they had experience of domestic adoption post-2010, and had the opportunity to discuss it at interview. Where they referred to secrecy, it was connected to current secrecy about historical adoptions – how adults, adopted in Ireland, (alongside their birth and adoptive families) were still dealing with the fallout of the stigma and secrecy around their adoptions, and how in ways that secrecy is still very much part of the landscape around adoption. The secrecy did seem to affect people in different ways. For some it was devastating. For others it led to a lifelong involvement in activism and advocacy in order to seek change. Christine Hennessey and Patricia White spoke of the people in the “middle ground” – a reminder that not every experience was negative.



It is clear that dismantling the culture of secrecy in which this power imbalance was founded and took hold will be a more difficult challenge.



The enactment of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022²⁷¹ represented a watershed moment in Ireland’s adoption history. The Act is undoubtedly a step forward because it finally provides a clear legal mechanism for people to access information and to commence a trace – a right denied to them for many years. It bears the weight of huge anticipation. Its sensitive implementation can form a strong foundation for a more positive, open environment around Irish domestic adoption as we move forward. This creates an opportunity, and fertile ground, for cultural change.

It is clear that dismantling the culture of secrecy in which this power imbalance was founded and took hold will be a more difficult challenge. *Withholding* adoption information was a way of *upholding* society’s core value of secrecy around adoption, and this was the case for many decades. It is essential that legislators and policymakers now work to build a more *communicatively open* environment around adoption in general, encouraging discussion. All stakeholders must be allocated adequate resources and targeted training so that they have a clear understanding of the nuances around adoption, enabling them to have informed, progressive conversations to build a much more supportive environment for those affected by adoption in the future. Changing the culture of secrecy and information requires a paradigm shift to a value system based in openness, embracing transparency across systems, where the norms and assumptions underlying all decisions regarding adoption, from all stakeholders, are named, considered and challenged where necessary.

271. “Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022,” Irish Statute Book (ISB), accessed February 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

14.6.2 Standardisation of Documents, Processes and Practices Relating to Domestic Adoption

One clear lesson to be learned from the experiences of those who took part in this study was around consistency of practice. For example, the historical lack of direction, training, legislation and resources across agencies and staff members meant that record-keeping was not standardised in the past, and although the process has since changed, this legacy led to huge challenges for all involved today. Even with a right to access birth information, the quality of files continues to be a challenge, as the following extract²⁷² from www.birthinfo.ie illustrates:

“The information available will vary from person to person, depending on the type, quality and number of records held by the Adoption Authority or Tusla. For some, this could mean there are detailed records available, while unfortunately for others, there may be little or no information available”

The core work around domestic adoptions has developed to involve a set number of steps, taken in a certain order (see <https://www.tusla.ie/services/birth-information-and-tracing-and-adoption/what-is-adoption/> and <https://aai.gov.ie/images/Steps-in-the-Adoption-Process.pdf>). A variety of different parties work with both the birth and adoptive families to ensure the appropriate placement of each child via the Irish domestic adoption system. Assessments, conducted by social workers working for either Tusla or an accredited adoption agency (e.g. *Pact*) typically take a minimum of 18 months, and involve a number of interviews and home visits. There is a set structure and a clear reporting hierarchy. Thus it is clear that the core structures are now in place with capacity to continuously reconsider, revise and improve documents, processes and practices, informed by international best practice, utilising both a ground-up and top-down approach.

From the ground up, the findings of this report – in particular, the importance of record keeping, of maintaining good standards of practice and of working ethically with the best interests of the child as a core focus have clear implications for those who implement adoptions as part of their daily work – namely, social workers, civil servants and administrators. The provision of evidence-based,

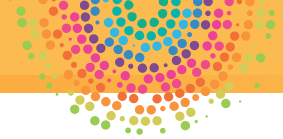
certified training in Irish domestic adoption, and its implications for all involved (legal, practical, psychological and familial) would help protect against vulnerability to repeating the mistakes of the past. Furthermore, the staff implementing adoption-related services must have in place a structured peer-support network, as this has been documented as an area of weakness in past practice. It is important for the providers of adoption and adoption-related services to seek regular feedback from those who use adoption services – adoptive and birth parents and the individuals at the centre of adoptions – and feed this into practices.

From a top-down perspective, regular analysis of assessment and placing practices, with a particular focus on documentation and record-keeping would ensure that there is a consistent, high quality and standardised approach across adoption services in Ireland. As the profile and statistical trends around adoptions continue to change, it is important that this approach is regularly reviewed and amended accordingly, to ensure that the needs of the child are met in a consistent, high quality and appropriate way.

14.6.3 Irish Policymakers and Legislators Must Utilise a Pro-active Approach

In order to “ensure the provision of the highest possible standards of adoption-related services”, the findings suggest that legislators and policymakers must be pro-active in predicting adoption-related need. This can be achieved through combining regular, ongoing stakeholder engagement with an evidence-based approach. This study indicates that highly motivated individuals have persisted in finding ways to make progress in Irish domestic adoption. Examples included individuals taking test cases that prompted a change in the law, social workers implementing innovative practices to address gaps in the system, Adoption Authority Board members consistently highlighting the need for change in key areas with government officials and travelling to meet families and service providers via circuits, and activists finding new ways to challenge policies, e.g. with an email campaign. All of these actions represented moments of progress. Participants also spoke of some colleagues and managers being resistant to change. In spite of this, each individual who prompted a change worked to leverage the practical support of others – managers, solicitors, or volunteers. While this is commendable,

272. “Access My Birth Information,” Birth Information & Tracing, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://www.birthinfo.ie/what-options-do-i-have/access-my-birth-information>.



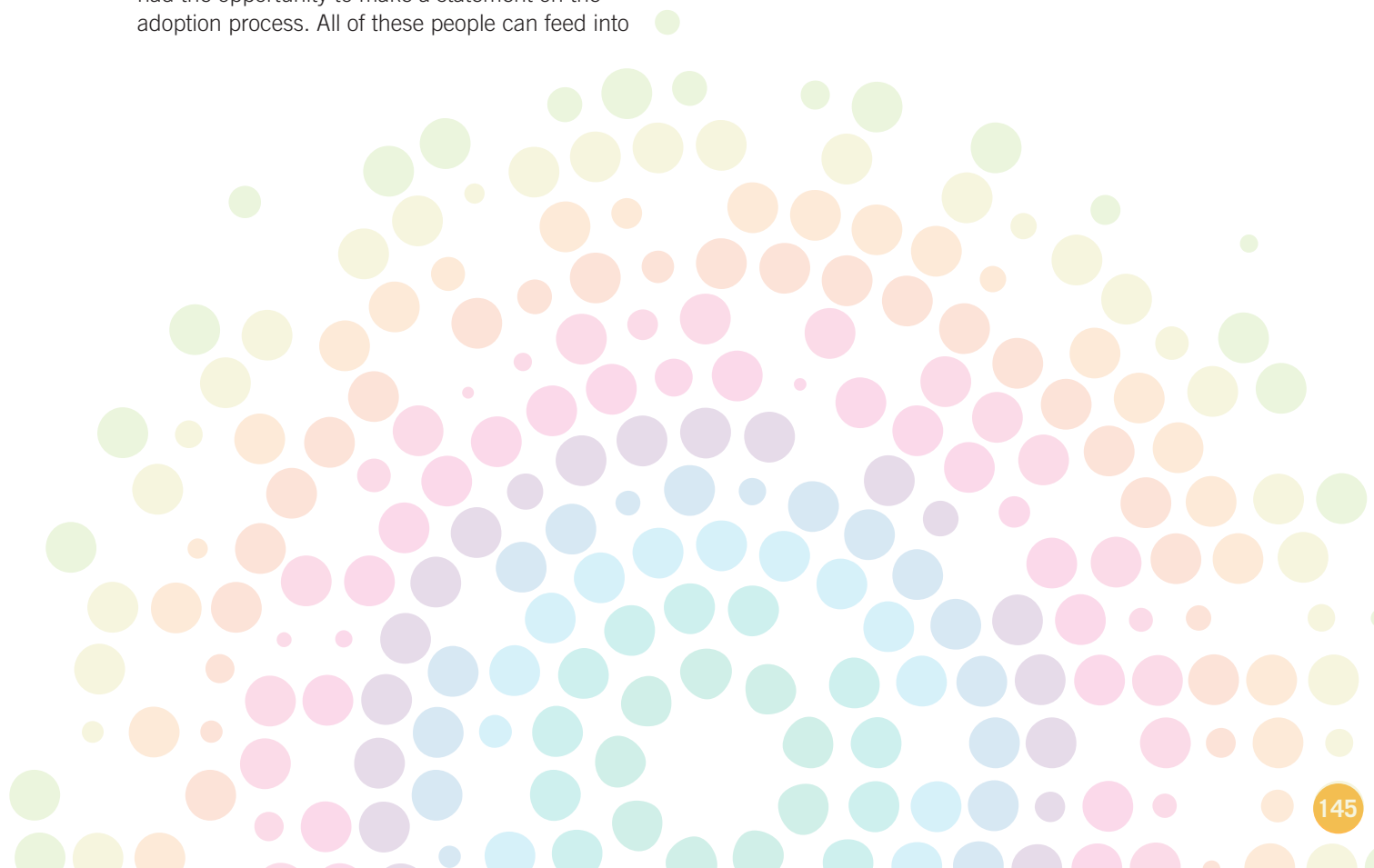
in terms of learning and futureproofing, it is notable that these individuals were implementing change in response to a service-user need, a gap in the system, or a gap in the legislation.

The anticipation of these needs by policymakers and legislators would reduce the pressure on those working in or personally affected by adoption to effect changes themselves. This could be achieved through analysing Irish adoption trends in detail to predict future patterns, engaging regularly with activists and other stakeholders, and collaborating with similar international service providers.

The pro-active approach could begin with an analysis of the current profile of domestically adopted individuals and their birth and adoptive families. Rather than being a one-off intervention, adoption is now known to affect individuals in different ways throughout their lives. Domestic adoption has changed, as has the profile of those affected by adoption. The full range of individuals impacted by domestic adoption and the variety of their needs could be addressed with support services tailored to meet their differing requirements across the lifespan. The overall population of people impacted by adoption is extremely varied, ranging from birth mothers, birth fathers and people adopted at infancy, to teenagers adopted from long term foster care or by a step-parent, who have had the opportunity to make a statement on the adoption process. All of these people can feed into

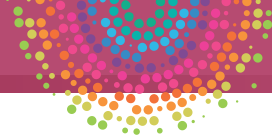
the development of practices.

Once the current profile of those impacted by domestic adoption is known, a detailed investigation of international evidence and models of best practice around domestic adoption in countries with similar profiles would be beneficial, alongside a systematic evaluation of current Irish adoption support services. Many participants spoke of contributing to consultations, reviews, or campaigns. A number reflected on times when they had been singled out for positive feedback about their contribution, or when their opinion was specifically sought on what they felt was a significant issue. It is clear that participants liked to engage with the overall development of policies and legislation. They felt that they knew their subject matter, and had something to contribute. They were passionate about the area and wanted to help improve it. Furthermore, when individuals made changes, it is apparent that their changes typically did work, and did improve things for others. It is therefore essential that policymakers and legislators seek new ways to collaborate, and for experienced, informed stakeholders to have their expertise recognised, allowing them to systematically feed into practice and policy decisions around adoption. Through working proactively, changes could be made to the adoption system that would benefit those who engage with it now and in the future.



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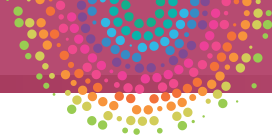
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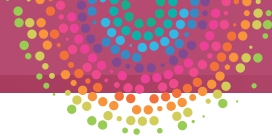
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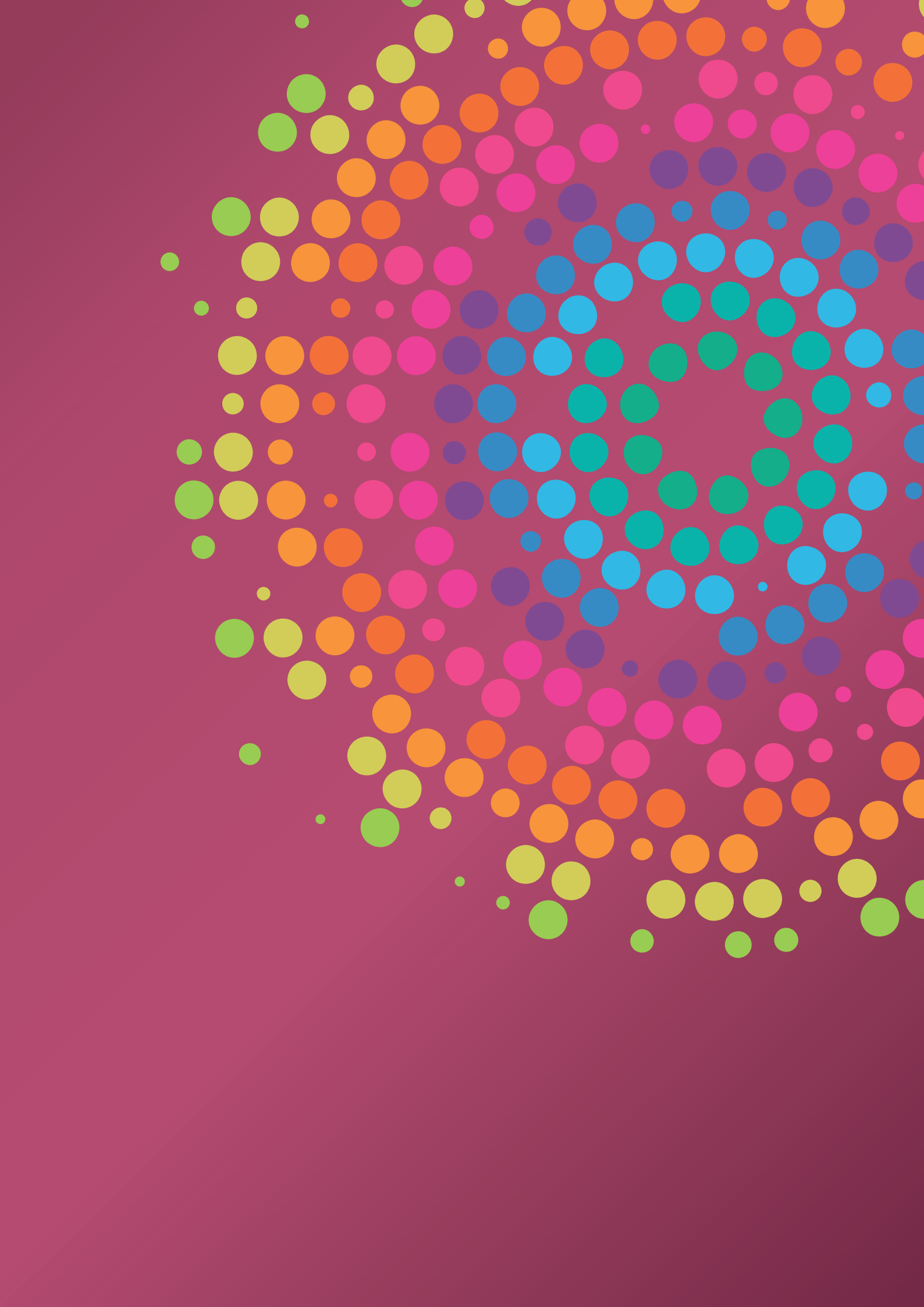
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ÚDARÁS UCHTÁLA na hÉIREANN
THE ADOPTION AUTHORITY of IRELAND