

Project Summary

Adoption UK: Development of theory of change models for key service areas

Commissioned by Adoption UK (2013-2014)

Policy and practice background

Adoption UK is one of the UK's leading adoption support agencies, established as a charity and rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted. It is adopter-led and has over 40 years' experience of innovation in, and delivery of, adoption support services. Its services include a parent support programme *It's a Piece of Cake*, a parenting mentoring service, seminars and workshops, parent-led support groups, a web-based forum and an information and advice service.

Adoption UK has a longstanding culture of using research actively to develop its work. As an organisation with high ambitions for the effectiveness of its services for parents and children, Adoption UK commissioned the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation to carry out a scoping exercise focused on strengthening the connection of their services and implementation models with relevant theory and evidence. The scoping work, undertaken with senior staff and key stakeholders in summer 2013, identified a strategic programme of activities, including the work described in this Project Summary. The scoping work coincided with a renewed emphasis on adoption support as part of the coalition government's Adoption Reforms. Of particular relevance is the development of a national Adoption Support Fund to stimulate the market for adoption support and enable smoother parent-led access to appropriate therapeutic provision when families face higher levels of difficulty, which the Colebrooke Centre is evaluating for the Department for Education, with Adoption UK (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-193-million-support-fund-for-adoptive-parents> and <http://www.cevi.org.uk/projects.html> - *The Adoption Support Fund - Market Review and Implementation Evaluation*)

Background to the project

The Colebrooke Centre's scoping work recommended that the first stage in a strategic programme

of work should be the development of an explicit and co-constructed 'theory of change' for key aspects of Adoption UK's services. This reflects the recurrent finding from research that interventions, programmes and services that have a clear understanding of their underlying theory of change are generally more effective than those that do not. Theory of change refers to the connections, in any individual initiative, between *what* is done, *how* it is done, and *why* the work carried out is expected to achieve its intended outcomes. It involves surfacing, challenging and elucidating the assumptions that underpin a programme or initiative. Our approach, which we are continuously co-developing with a range of family support organisations, provides the foundation for further work including validating emergent theory of change models against international evidence. It is intended to inform organisational thinking about new service development, implementation quality assurance and evaluation strategies.

Project design

The Colebrooke Centre has been commissioned by Adoption UK to develop theory of change models for four of its key service areas, including the parent support programme *It's a Piece of Cake*.

The project involves four workshops, each focused on one service area and involving a wide range of Adoption UK's stakeholders including staff, service users, trainers and volunteers. The project involves:

- exploring participants' understanding, assumptions and aspirations for a given service area
- capturing a summary logic model expressing these assumptions
- documenting the emergent logic models with explanatory commentary
- stimulating further discussion and refinement with a group of senior stakeholders

Adoption UK plan to use the learning from this work as part of a wider programme of activity to strengthen service development and implementation.

Publications and outputs

The main reports (produced in Spring 2014) are primarily for internal use within Adoption UK, but both Adoption UK and the Colebrooke Centre are committed to discussing the work and the learning that has arisen from it in the public domain.

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See also: <http://www.adoptionuk.org/>

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