

*Learning from Past Practice: Maintaining Client Records and  
Providing a Service to Adults who as Children were in Foster Care*

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***"Learning from Past Practice: Maintaining Client Records and Providing a Service to Adults who as Children were in Foster Care"***

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**Context**

The material for today's address has been drawn from my practice experience as the Coordinator of Heritage and Information Services of MacKillop Family Services. MacKillop Family Services was established on 1 July 1997 and continues the works of seven child and family welfare agencies previously managed by three Catholic religious congregations: the Christian Brothers, the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of St Joseph. The founding agencies have histories dating back to 1854 and are significant organisations in terms of the historical development of Catholic Child Welfare in Victoria. MacKillop Family Services operates in metropolitan Melbourne and the Barwon region of Victoria.

The Heritage and Information Service is a specialist service to assist adults who were in care as children to access information about their childhood history, their family of origin, their time in care and to then search for separated family members should they desire. The service is responsible for the maintenance, preservation, storage and release of client records. Client files held by MacKillop Family Services relate to institutional care, foster care, adoption, family group home care, educational and family support services. At the time of formation of MacKillop Family Services, there was an estimated 170,000 client records originating from the founding agencies.

**Introduction**

The importance of the need to know and to understand one's personal and family history is strongly acknowledged. Each of us has a fundamental yearning to know of our origins. More significantly, it is well understood that childhood experiences and memories of childhood significantly contribute towards our emotional well being, and can influence our actions as adults. If we are unable to resolve childhood difficulties or trauma, these difficulties can erupt into personal crises that come to the surface at significant times in our adult lives. Current practice in the area of adoption and permanent care endorses the need to know about one's origins and ensures that access to information and records is available for children reared in substitute care, to their care givers and to be accessed by the child, when they reach a certain age, usually 18 years. Of course, children entering foster care or other forms of out of home care in contemporary times, as compared to past eras, are more likely to be aware of who their biological parents are, as opposed to substitute parents, adoptive parents or other care givers.

Such an open way of sharing information has not always been the case in the field of institutional care and foster care. There are many adults who as children were raised from birth or early childhood in institutional settings or with foster parents who know little about their origins. Children who were legally adopted have had provision through legislation in all states of Australia and overseas to enable them, as adults, to access their records and to know their origins. Where legal adoption did not occur, as in boarding out and fostering, it is usually a more complicated process to know where and how to look for information in order to research one's origin and history of care. People often do not know where to go to look for records. The name of the organisation that arranged the placement may have changed, or ceased to exist, or the building may have been demolished. Even when the appropriate organisation or its successor is located, it may only be, to discover that records have not been retained from a previous era, or that records may have been destroyed, accidentally or intentionally.

This point has already been made by other researchers, eg. Phillip and Shurlee Swain's, 1992 publication, To Search for Self, the experience of access to adoption information.

Some arrangements for boarding out and fostering were made through government child welfare services, or by authorised agents. Others were private or quasi-private arrangements made through non-government children's homes or between the individuals themselves. Many of these arrangements were made to ensure the solution to a problem of disposing of an unwanted child. This phrase is not meant to minimise the trauma or distress that a birth mother faced at the time of arranging her child's future care, but in fact is the language used in many of the records from previous eras.

Anecdotal evidence and research data would suggest that much secrecy surrounded many of the earlier arrangements for the fostering of children. Children were not always informed that they were not their foster parents' birth children. They may have been told that they were orphans, hence the need to be placed with foster parents or in an institution. Often this was untrue. The reason for placement was most likely to be illegitimacy. Others reasons by which children came into care were: the death or incapacity of one parent, break up of a marital relationship or child protection matters relating to abuse or neglect which required statutory intervention.

Past practices in children's homes and organisations that provided foster care did not usually encourage or provide services for adults who were seeking information about their childhood history. Adults who were in care as children were not encouraged to find answers to questions, such as:

- Who placed me in care and why?
- Why did no one visit me?
- Who were my real parents?
- Who arranged for my foster parents to care for me?
- Was the child welfare department involved,  
and how were decisions made to keep me in care?

In the past, there were no requirements for non-government services to maintain records of client information, let alone records that provided comprehensive and detailed information. Many of the entries in the client admission registers now held by MacKillop Family Services are simply one line entries with only the child's name, perhaps date of birth or age at the time of admission, date of admission, date of discharge and who discharged to, usually the name of the foster or adoptive parents' name. Even when the management and decision-making for the foster care of children became the domain of professionals, with social workers writing case notes (and often in copious quantities), this has been for case management and accountability purposes, rather, than as a potential source of archival information to be accessed in the future.

In order to try and give some depth to this paper, I would like to discuss the experiences of four women who applied for their client records. The women were aged in their sixties at the time of applying. Each had been placed in the care of the same foster mother, Mrs Jones, a widow with grown up children.

#### **DESCRIPTION. (SEE OVERHEAD)**

Between 1935 and 1950, Mary, Rosie, Dorothy and Theresa were placed with Mrs Jones. None of the children were related by blood or birth.

1. Mary was placed with Mrs Jones at 14 years of age after absconding from her orphanage placement and refusing to return. Mary had some vague memories of a woman visiting her at the orphanage and always wondered if this was her birth mother. Mary left the care of Mrs Jones at 20 years at the time of her marriage.

2. Rosie was 8 years of age when she was placed with Mrs. Jones after being placed 'on trial' with a series of potential foster parents, all of whom decided that she was not suitable because she was too 'sickly'. Mrs Jones proved to be the turning point in terms of restoring Rosie's health and introduced a special diet for her. Rosie remained living with her foster mother until the time of the foster mother's death.
3. Dorothy was placed with Mrs Jones at three years of age from a babies' home as the foster mother asked for a 'baby' for the family. It is likely that Dorothy may have remained in institutional care had not Mrs. Jones made this request. Dorothy left her foster mother's care at the age of 20 years to commence nursing training.
4. Theresa was placed with Mrs. Jones at 5 years of age as her then foster mother who was very elderly became seriously ill and could no longer care for her. Theresa left home at 21 years to marry.

The circumstances by which each of these four women was placed with Mrs Jones were different, all came from different founding agencies of MacKillop Family Services, all were placed at different ages and for different reasons. The common connection appears to have been that Mrs Jones had a reputation as a good Catholic woman and was recognized by the Child Welfare Department as a competent caregiver.

Mary, Rosie, Dorothy and Theresa have remained firm friends to this day and regard their relationship with each other, as that of sisters. The intensity of their feelings for each other seems to assume greater significance as the years go by. In the absence of a relationship with their birth families, it is their connection as foster sisters, which continues to nurture and sustain them as adult women. All are emotionally close to each other, despite the fact that they live geographically distant from each other.

All four women describe Mrs Jones as strict and firm, all speak with regret as to always feeling different from her own children and not being included in extended family outings and activities. All have individual personality traits, which from their reminiscing appear to be long standing. Dorothy is outgoing and friendly, Mary 'stirs the pot' and likes to get things done, Rosie is shy and the others protect her, Theresa accepts things as they are. All accept Rosie have married and say their marriages are very strong and happy. Theresa is a widow. All describe themselves as being close to their children.

When I asked each woman why they were applying for their records, their responses were:

I've now got some time to myself to do what I have wanted to do for a long time,

My children and grandchildren want to do a family tree

Before I get too old, I need to know who I am

I need to know why my mother abandoned me.

All said that they needed to wait until their foster mother died as to search while she was alive could hurt her feelings. None of the women expressed a particularly close relationship with Mrs Jones but all expressed gratitude for the physical care that she had provided. All feel her attitude towards them lacked emotional warmth. None the less all remain very loyal to the memory of their foster mother and are of the view that care with her was preferable to remaining in institutional care.

All four women had given considerable thought prior to embarking on their journey of discovery. Each of them was able to talk about what the search meant to them, what they hoped to find, what the risks might be for them to uncover information about their past and, whether they actually wanted to look for family members, whether family would still be alive and whether they would be accepted or rejected when they did make contact.

## **RECORDS LOCATED (SEE OVERHEAD)**

1. Mary established that she was the second illegitimate child born to a single woman who worked as a waitress on the railways. Her birth mother had been disowned by her own family at the time of the first pregnancy. Mary had been placed in care as a young child and had initially been a private placement. When financial payments ceased, she was made a ward of state.
2. Rosie was the only child of a single woman who placed her daughter in care from birth. Sadly, after her marriage, Rosie's birth mother came looking for her daughter only to be told that she had already been adopted, which was in fact not true. The name of Rosie's birth father appeared on her records.
3. Dorothy was the child of a single woman. Her birth mother attempted to care for Dorothy for the first few months of her life. Dorothy's mother did not sign a consent for her adoption but she did sign an authority for Dorothy to be 'boarded out'. Dorothy's mother later married, at which point Dorothy was made a ward of state.
4. Theresa's birth mother was a young single woman who placed her daughter in care at the time of birth. An adoption consent was signed but Theresa was never legally adopted.

Once each woman had received her records, each one decided that they wanted to find their birth mothers or their relatives, if possible. All realised that the likelihood of their birth parents being alive was not great, given their own ages at the time of searching. All were very clear that any outreach to their birth families was done in the context of only seeking a reunion, if the other person was agreeable. None of the women wished to intrude on the lives of those they hoped to locate.

## **OUTCOMES OF SEARCHING FOR FAMILY MEMBERS (OVERHEAD)**

1. Mary located her birth mother who was living in a nursing home. Her birth mother was not prepared to disclose to Mary the name of Mary's father. Shortly after this contact the birth mother died. Mary also discovered that her older brother who had been reared in an institutional setting had died as a young adult. Mary is still looking for information about her father. Mary feels that searching for her family was the best thing that she ever did.
2. Rosie's birth mother died many years ago but she was able to locate her birth mother's husband. This proved to be a very fruitful contact as he was able to share with Rosie lots of information about her birth mother, including how they had gone to the babies' home to look for Rosie after their marriage. There were no children of this marriage. Rosie found her first cousins and she enjoys a very close relationship with them. Rosie recently met the son of her birth father. She is very pleased with the outcome of her searching.
3. Dorothy found her very elderly birth mother. She refused contact on the grounds that she had never told her husband when he was alive and she had not been able to speak with any of her children about Dorothy. Dorothy was greatly distressed by her birth mother's reaction but still feels that it was better to search than not to.
4. Theresa's birth mother is deceased but she found her two half sisters and enjoys a good relationship with each. The sisters were overjoyed to meet Theresa and although they never knew of her existence prior to the meeting, each had sensed that their mother carried a great deal of sadness with her and now feel this was due to her unending grief about relinquishing her first child. Theresa feels a strong sense of fulfillment with the search process.

## WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED

Most adults have memories of their childhood and often these memories become the stories of family folklore which are then handed down from generation to generation. What we remember about our childhood may be happy, sad or a mixture of both, our memories may be rich in content or sparse in detail, sometimes we may recall events easily, sometimes we may need assistance to do so. As adults we can test out our memories by speaking with parents, siblings, extended family, looking at photograph albums and other pieces of memorabilia. However, if you grow up in foster care, or institutional care, you are not as likely to have such connections with your extended family or significant adults, so you look to other sources for information to aid your memories.

Organisations that provide or arrange care to children have a responsibility to maintain their records for future access. It is difficult to always predict when the need to access records will occur and the reasons why people decide to access information vary from individual to individual. My experience has been that it is important for people to be emotionally ready to undertake the search. This usually means that they are older, rather than younger when they decide to commence their search for information.

People are also older, because in the past there was little encouragement to search for records. There was also a lack of easily accessible information as to how and where to start searching. It is vital that organisations holding historical client records appreciate the significance of the records to former clients and their families and that such appreciation translates to a preparedness and encouragement to make records available.

People who make the decision to apply for their records are on a journey of self discovery. They are dealing with the unfinished business of their childhood. Organisations that were involved in the placement of children have an enduring role to support these children as adults to assist them to know and to understand their past. People searching want to understand more about the circumstances that led to their placement in care, who their parents were and whether or not they have brothers or sisters. In addition some people have recollections about their time in care, and are keen to see if there is any verification of the experiences they remember. We have an obligation to assist in this journey and to help these adults complete what has been unfinished for them, often for many years.

There are a number of issues that are worth considering. (SEE OVERHEAD)

### 1. *MAINTAINING RECORDS FOR FUTURE ACCESS.*

Organisations that provide a range of child and family services, including foster care, need to consider the importance of the maintenance, preservation and storage of client records and how records will be released to clients. In some instances, in Victoria, organisations that have closed down or changed auspice have made the decision to archive their records with a public library or with a government department. Sometimes these records are on public access, sometimes on closed access.

A major issue to be considered is ownership of client files. The organisation releasing client information may not be the original agency that made the arrangements for the care of the child. That is, the original agency no longer exists, there has been an amalgamation, or the agency has changed its name. At MacKillop Family Services, client files remain the property of the three religious congregations, MacKillop Family Services is the custodian, not the owner of client files. Policies for access by former clients have been agreed to by the religious congregations.

There has been cooperation between MacKillop Family Services and the religious congregations in terms of the development of the access policy. From time to time, tension does arise where different practices for the release of information have operated in the past, and where these practices are not the same as the current policy of MacKillop Family Services.

The MacKillop Family Services access policy is guided by the spirit of the Victorian Freedom of Information Guidelines, and in this regard has a more liberal interpretation about what should be released, than what may have been the case in the past. Sometimes the view of withholding information, rather than releasing information relates to a fear of what a former client may do with the information, or that the information may be too distressing for a former client to read. However, it also relates to protecting past practices, which may have been regarded as appropriate and perhaps even enlightened at the time, but by the standards of today would not be.

At MacKillop Family Services, records are only released to the person to whom they refer, unless their written permission to authorise another person to access their records has been provided. Information can be released to relatives of a deceased person, providing the relationship of the person seeking the information to the deceased person can be established. Typically, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren apply for the client records of their relatives.

Because of the likelihood that the original agency no longer exists or the original foster care service no longer exists, or the name of the program or service has altered it is vital that there be some simple mechanism established for persons searching for records to know where they are located. The recently published, New South Wales [Guide to Searching for Records for Children placed in Care](#) is an example of a comprehensive listing.

## *2. STORAGE AND ARCHIVAL FACILITIES.*

Client records need to be stored in a way that aids their preservation and is safe from destruction by disasters such as flood or fire. This requires significant financial investment.

In addition to client records, photographs and other memorabilia need to be labeled and stored with client information or indexed on a database. If these records are not stored on the original client file, it is important that they are cross-indexed, otherwise, it is easy to lose information. This requires an investment in time and resources.

Former clients are usually keen to look at photographic memorabilia and sometimes are even able to recognize themselves in photographs that have survived over time. Unfortunately for MacKillop Family Service and I would suggest other similar organisations, our photographic collection is largely unnamed and undated so identification of individual photographs is difficult. Other records that an agency may hold are baptism records, sacramental records, school reports, birth certificates, certificates of achievements, and children's life books.

## *3. WHAT TYPE OF SERVICE TO PROVIDE.*

It is important to consider the type of service to provide to former clients. It is not simply a matter of storing client records and developing policy and procedures for the release of client information, but providing a commitment to interpreting the content of the records and assisting with searching for additional records.

It is also important to be able to provide an understanding of the social, political and economic history of the times in order to place a person's time in care in a historical context. People searching for their records usually have lots of questions that need to be answered. They need to understand and clarify why some children were adopted, some were placed in institutional care and some were fostered.

Many of the client records from earlier times are written in a manner, which may appear harsh or judgmental, by the standards of today. Terms used to describe intellectual functioning that I have come across have included, imbecile, idiot and dull. Such terms were the language of standard psychological assessments of past eras which determined whether a child remained in institutional care or was placed with a foster parent. When I used the term 'disposal of the child' earlier in this address, this was indeed a direct quote from the institutional records that I frequently release. This would be the term that people accessing their records view as the most offensive because of the connotation of reducing a child's life to a that of commodity that can be disposed of like something that no longer has any worth.

Former clients appear keen to try and reconstruct the daily routines of their life in care, to match their memories with recorded information and to question particular procedures and practices. Most are very keen to try and understand the social history of the times, the involvement of the church in the placement of children, to talk about the shame and secrecy associated with becoming pregnant when not married and most have a great capacity to express their feelings about the difficulties their birth mothers were likely to have experienced at the time of placing their babies in care.

For others who came into care as a consequence of child protection intervention, much of their focus is on trying to understand the reasons why they were placed in care, how their circumstances came to the attention of the child welfare authorities and why they remained in care for so long.

For some of the people who contact us, it comes as a shock to discover that their parents or parent was alive at the time of their admission. Many people have assumed they were orphans and recall that this was the explanation given to them throughout their childhood by their foster parents. Equally, others are shocked and amazed to discover that they had siblings admitted with them but had never known of this until they commenced their own search for records. This level of secrecy may have been maintained out of genuine regard for an individual child's welfare but like many other practice areas in child welfare, the long term ramifications of such denial and secrecy were never fully thought out.

#### *4. PROVISION OF MEDIATION AND SEARCH SERVICES*

Once people have obtained their client records, many will be keen to search for separated family members. It is important to decide if your organisation is able to provide such a service, or whether you will link the person to another service which is able to do this. Services available are usually self help services that have been set up to assist adopted persons. It is also important to understand that many former clients will prefer to use an intermediary to make the initial outreach contact with their biological relative. Some people may need time to prepare for this phase of their search and it is important to be mindful of this fact.

## 5. *SUPPPORT TO WORKERS.*

It is important to consider how to support the workers to provide the service. This work can be difficult and challenging and will often be with older people and with people who need considerable assistance with the interpretation of records. In many instances, people will disclose their innermost feelings about their abandonment as a child and will raise issues about their time in care which they may have never previously disclosed to another person.

The very nature of this work is not for the faint hearted or the inexperienced. In my experience the work requires great skill, sensitivity and an appreciation and understanding of past practices in child welfare and an ability to put past practices in a social context.

Many of the persons seeking information will present in a distressed state, some people will have been coping with their distress for many years. What I have consistently found, is that many of the people that I work with aged over fifty years bring much wisdom and life experience with them which enables them to cope with a detailed and frank discussion about the time that they were in care. People require that information be disclosed to them in an open and honest way. Sometimes the very nature of the information will be confronting and difficult to deal with. However it remains my view, that if people ask a question about the past, then we have to try and help them find the answer, not shy away from assisting. People are often more resilient than we think.

The other important aspect to be aware of is that persons seeking access to information, have individual needs and expectations about the search process and it is vital to be able to recognise their needs and to proceed at their pace. Many people will need to search over a period of time and at a pace comfortable to them, so as not to be overwhelmed by the information that is being uncovered.

## 6. *POLICY AND PROCEDURES TO DEAL WITH DISCLOSURES OF ABUSE.*

From time to time, people seeking information, will make disclosures of abuse when they were in care, so it is important to have a policy in place to respond to such disclosures. Many of the people who contact our service express a certain level of complacency and acceptance of physical punishment shown to them or to others, and speak with some degree of wisdom and experience as to the acceptance in society of physical punishment to children in past eras and do not appear to see what happened to them in foster care as particularly out of the ordinary. Most people that I have spoken with describe a very clear distinction between what they perceived as physical punishment compared to abuse.

For others who contact, their memories of their time in care, are characterised by ongoing cruelty, physical and sexual abuse to themselves or to others. For some people, their experience of some form of abuse or cruelty remains very real to them today and continues to affect them. What I have learned from speaking with past clients is that you can never predict or have preconceived ideas about what they may disclose. Each person's story and experience is unique and each will have dealt with a similar form of care in a different way. Some people have a proud sense of their heritage and of how they grew up, others are ashamed and embarrassed by the fact that they were brought up in a home. For some, their childhood care has not been a subject that they have been able to discuss with their own partner or children.

People who make disclosures of abuse, may have repressed their memories of the abuse for many years. Some may have not spoken with their partners or another person about their experiences, except in a fairly superficial way. MacKillop Family Services is mindful of the responsibility to provide assistance to persons who make disclosures and has developed a policy for dealing with disclosures of past abuse.

#### *7. FUTURE STORAGE INCLUDING ELECTRONIC RECORDS.*

Many children who enter out of home care or foster care today will have multiple placements, multiple service providers and multiple caregivers, thus it appears to me that there is a greater need than ever to ensure that attention is given to the importance of keeping accurate records and to their safe storage. Adults accessing their records in the future are likely to gain access to a much greater volume of material, but the trail they may need to follow to locate and access their records is likely to be across different organisations and services.

It is important to develop practices to ensure, not only the preservation of historical records, but also the preservation and storage of current and future records. This is particularly important with an increased use of technology such as computerised client databases, digital recording for photographs and electronic file storage. This requires the development of additional security and disaster prevention planning to ensure preservation of records for the future.

Organisations operating today are also governed by additional requirements relating to the protection of privacy. The recently introduced Privacy Principles in the state of Victoria ensure that client information is collected, recorded and stored in a way that protects the privacy of the person to whom it refers. There are also additional requirements for the release of client information. Client records are not for the present but can and are likely to be accessed at any time in the future. This means that significant consideration needs to be given to the quality of case recording so that what is recorded is accurate at the time of recording but also is in a form that enables interpretation in the future. Decisions that we make today and actions that we take on behalf of children will continue to be interpreted in years to come.

Present practice with children in foster care, encourages the use of life books and this is commendable but what happens when the life book ends up in the archives, how is this to be accessed by the person whose story it refers to in the future?

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me assure you that client records, no matter how minimal in content, are valuable tools to assist adults who were in foster care or institutional care as children to learn about their childhood history. For many adults, the only record/s about the arrangements made for their care from the time of birth will be held by the agency that arranged their foster care placement. It is vital that we continue to encourage and facilitate access to our historical records to people who are searching for information about their childhood. Equally, it is important to value the way we record information in our agencies today as a tool for access in the future by the children currently in our care. Our records, whether they be case notes, reports, letters or other forms of documentation including school reports and personal pieces of memorabilia tell the story of someone else's life. We have an obligation to care for and ensure the preservation of these records for the future and to encourage access by those to whom they refer.

Between 1935 and 1950, Mary, Rosie, Dorothy and Theresa were placed with their foster mother, Mrs. Jones, a widow with grown up children. Mary, Rosie, Dorothy and Theresa regard themselves as sisters although none are related by blood or birth. All are emotionally close to each other, despite the fact that they live geographically distant.

1. MARY aged 12 years, placed after absconding from an orphanage and refusing to return. Left at 20 years to get married.
2. ROSIE aged 8 years, placed following series of potential adoptive parents deciding that she was unsuitable due to being a 'sickly child.' Remained until foster mother's death.
3. DOROTHY aged 3 years and placed from a babies home as the foster mother asked for a 'baby' for the family. Remained with Mrs. Jones until she commenced nursing training at 17 years of age.
4. THERESA aged 5 years of age and placed as her then foster mother became seriously ill and could no longer maintain her care. Left at 21 years to get married.

### **OUTCOMES**

MARY found her birth mother and one older sibling who had been reared in an institutional setting. Birth mother not prepared to disclose name of Mary's father. Birth mother died shortly after contact. Mary feels that searching was the best thing she ever did.

ROSIE'S birth mother died many years ago but she located her birth mother's husband. There were no children of this marriage. Rosie found cousins with whom she enjoys a very positive relationship. She recently met the son of her birth father. Rosie is pleased with the outcome of searching.

DOROTHY found her birth mother who refused contact on the grounds of never having told the children of her subsequent marriage. Dorothy greatly distressed by this but still feels it was better to search than not to.

THERESA'S birth mother is deceased but she found her two half sisters and enjoys a close relationship with them. Theresa feels a strong sense of fulfillment with the search process.

1. MAINTAINING CLIENT RECORDS
2. STORAGE AND ARCHIVAL FACILITIES
3. TYPE OF SERVICE TO PROVIDE
4. PROVISION OF MEDIATION AND SEARCH SERVICES
5. SUPPORT TO WORKERS
6. POLICY AND PROCEDURES TO DEAL WITH DISCLOSURES OF ABUSE
7. FUTURE STORAGE REQUIREMENTS

### **RECORDS LOCATED**

MARY established that she was the second illegitimate child born to a single woman who worked as a waitress with the railways. Her birth mother had been disowned by her family at the time of her first pregnancy. Mary was a ward of the state.

ROSIE was the only child of a young single woman who placed her in care from birth. Rosie discovered that her birth mother had returned to the babies' home to look for her but had been told she had been adopted. This was untrue.

DOROTHY'S birth mother attempted to care for her daughter for the first few months of her life. She then placed her in care and later married. Dorothy was made a ward of the state.

THERESA'S mother was a single woman who placed her in care at the time of her birth. An adoption consent was signed but Theresa was never legally adopted.