

# Adoptees and relatives who wish to contact one another: the Adoption Contact Register

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**The article describes the background to the introduction of the Adoption Contact Register, what it does, and the numbers of adoptees and relatives who have used it since 1991. The article also considers the profile of relationships of the relatives to the adoptees – and compares the profile of these relationships amongst successful matches with the profile of relationships amongst all relatives on the Register.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Children Act 1989<sup>1</sup> made provision for the setting up of the Adoption Contact Register which was introduced in England and Wales on 1 May 1991. The Register is operated and maintained by the Registrar General of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for adults who were adopted in England and Wales; those born in England and Wales but adopted overseas; and the birth relatives of these two groups of adoptees. For the purposes of the Register, “relative” includes the adopted person’s birth parents and anyone related to him or her by blood, half-blood or marriage; it does not include those who are relatives as a result of adoption. Separate arrangements apply to people who were adopted in Scotland or Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

This is the first of two articles on the subject of the Adoption Contact Register in England and Wales – the present article will describe the background to how it works, and give some summary results of its operation; the second article will provide fuller statistical analyses and results.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE ADOPTION CONTACT REGISTER**

Adoptions were arranged privately up to 1926, when adoption was first instituted legally. From then up to the 1976 Act, that is, during the next 50 years, it had been understood that, on adoption, the new ties with the adoptive parents completely replaced those with the natural parents. The most important implication was that birth mothers – and other birth relatives – had been assured that there was no prospect of the child being able to trace or contact them – and that the child’s link with his or her birth family had been permanently broken. In 1976, the situation changed completely. Reflecting changing social attitudes – in particular the greater acceptance and expectation of openness in such matters – the 1976 Act changed the ground rules. For the first time, an adopted

## Box one

An original birth entry is the entry held in the register at the local register office; what the Registrar General holds is a quarterly certified copy (so-called because registration officers send him their returns in three monthly batches); on adoption, the original birth entry is annotated with “adopted” in the margin (as subsequently is the copy held by the Registrar General) – and both are superseded by a new entry made by the Registrar General in the Adopted Children Register, containing the adoptive details extracted from the court order.

Any certificate issued from either the original entry, the Registrar General’s copy of that entry, or the entry in the Adopted Children Register, is a **certified copy** of the birth entry in the register – and has been referred to as a ‘certificate of the original birth entry’ throughout the article.

adult could apply, and obtain from ONS, a certified copy of their original birth entry (see Box 1). This entry contains their name at birth – rather than at adoption – as well as the names, address and other identifying information of their natural mother, and, on occasion, of their natural father, too.

However, all those adopted before 12 November 1975 are required by law first to receive professional counselling – arranged either by local authorities or the Registrar General – before they can receive a certificate of their original birth entry. The reason for the counselling is to ensure that adoptees appreciate all the potential sensitivities and possible reactions not only of their birth relatives, but also their own, should they trace and get in touch with their birth relatives. For example, the birth mother may not have mentioned to members of her current family that she had a child many years ago who was subsequently adopted. If she, and her new family, were to be suddenly faced with this revelation by direct contact or an unannounced appearance of the former adopted child, then shock, tension and emotional upset could affect everyone involved and jeopardise a successful reunion.

The Adoption Contact Register was a further extension of these provisions. The main purpose of introducing it was to allow informal expressions of interest – and actual attempts by both adoptees and their birth relatives to contact one another – to be placed on a legal basis. Hence the Adoption Contact Register provides a means for both adoptees and their relatives to make contact – *where both parties wish it*. Birth parents and other relatives who do not wish to be contacted by the adoptee need not be concerned that the Register will make an unwanted approach more likely; the Register cannot help the adoptee with information on his or her birth mother or other relative, unless that person has chosen to put themselves on the Register. The Registrar General can only pass on a name and address if and when that name and address are supplied to him *with the express intention of facilitating contact*.

The introduction of the Register has not affected the ability of an adopted person to obtain a certificate of their original birth entry and, if they wish, to try to trace their birth relatives themselves. Quite apart from using the Adoption Contact Register, other provisions of the 1976 Act, or trying to find their birth relatives by their own research, adoptees can receive assistance from the Adoption Agency or Social Services Department who arranged their adoption. Each of these methods – and other informal contact Registers maintained by post-adoption bodies – can result in the adoptee successfully obtaining a

certificate of their original birth entry and making contact with their relatives. There is a risk, therefore, that some birth mothers and birth relatives will be contacted, even though they may be resolute in not wanting it. Recognising this difficulty, provision is being made in the current Adoption Bill to register a request *not* to be contacted (and consideration is being given to noting the deaths of those previously adopted).

One particular consideration needs emphasising. Apart from contacts made by means of the Adoption Contact Register – the subject of the present article – ONS has no systematic record of the contacts made by any of the other methods mentioned above, so results from analysing the Adoption Contact Register refer solely to this source, rather than giving the complete picture.

### USING THE ADOPTION CONTACT REGISTER

Adopted persons who want to be entered on the Adoption Contact Register must be at least 18 years old and have sufficient information for them to complete the application form – a copy of which is reproduced in Appendix 1. Those who do not have all the details need to apply for a certificate of their original birth entry.

Birth relatives who wish to make contact via the Register are required to complete a separate application form – reproduced in Appendix 2 – giving details of the adopted person and their relationship to that person. Documentary evidence of the precise relationship to the adopted person is required, which can be established by providing identifying information in the form of certificates of the appropriate birth and marriage entries. A Table of which certificates are needed for each of the possible relationships is printed on the application form – which has been reproduced in Appendix 2.

### THE FORM OF CONTACT

As may be seen from the two separate application forms in Appendices 1 and 2, the arrangement is that if both the adopted person and the birth relative place themselves on the Register, resulting in a successful match of their records, the name and address of the relative is sent to the adopted person, *but not vice versa*. The onus is on the adopted person to make contact if he or she so wishes. It is worth noting that relatives are able to give a third party address – an important facility, because although the relative may wish to make contact, they might not want to be contacted *directly* – or at least not initially. If the purpose of this third party address is for correspondence, a friend’s or relative’s address will suffice, but the friend or relative should be fully aware of the possible implications – and will be advised of the services provided by post-adoption agencies. For actual meeting arrangements, it is preferable to use a counsellor or social worker who has agreed to act as intermediary. Details of organisations providing advice and counselling are given in a booklet accompanying the relative’s application form.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

Great care is taken over all aspects of confidentiality with respect both to the adopted person and to the birth relative. The confidentiality of the details provided to ONS to enter on the Register is given the highest priority and a number of strict physical and administrative security procedures are observed within ONS to preserve this confidentiality.

### INFORMATION STORED ON THE REGISTER

The Register records of adoptees and relatives are held on a stand-alone computer system operated by staff in a secure environment using high-level security passwords. Part I of the Register consists of the records of the adoptees, and Part II the records of the relatives. These two Parts are created and maintained as two separate databases, and are updated daily

with new entries. In addition, after new records have been added, a program is run to test whether there are any matches between records of the two Parts of the Register. If there are, the details of the adoptee record are added to those of the relative record and the name and address of the relative is sent to the adoptee.

**THE PRESENT STUDY**

In this study, interest centres solely on whether a successful match of records was made – and the pattern and characteristics of all such “successful matches”. This term, should not be taken to imply that the adoptee actually *contacted* the relative once the relative’s details had been forwarded to him or her – unfortunately, that outcome is not known, and certainly not recorded on the Adoption Contact Register. Also, as mentioned earlier, there are a number of ways in which adoptees can obtain a certificate of their original birth entry and trace their birth relatives. Successful matches of records on the Adoption Contact Register therefore represent a set of *potential* contacts which form an important element of all contacts which are *actually* made.

To investigate the number, characteristics and pattern of the “successful matches” between adoptees and relatives on the Register, copies of the Part I and Part II files were taken, after removing all their identifying information such as names, addresses, etc. They were then used solely for statistical analysis.

The application forms for adoptees and relatives do not request much demographic or statistical information – although of course, they collect the essential details which are needed in order to make a link. As the basis of the match is the identity of the *adoptee*, only a few details of the *relative* are collected.

The two Parts of the Register are cumulative – that is, the records of the adoptees and the relatives are added to continually – in fact on a daily basis as completed application forms are received. Even once a successful match has been made between an adoptee and a relative, the two records are retained on their respective datafiles. It is possible, of course, that another relative will wish to add their name to the Adoption Contact Register – and the adopted person may well wish to keep his or her name on the Adoption Contact Register in case this happens. Either an adopted person – or a relative – on the Adoption Contact Register can request that their name be removed, but this rarely occurs.

At the time when a copy of each datafile was taken – on 2 November 2000 – there were 18,276 adoptees and 8,007 relatives on the Register, and 490 successful matches made since the start of the Adoption Contact Register on 1st May 1991, that is, during a period of 9½ years.

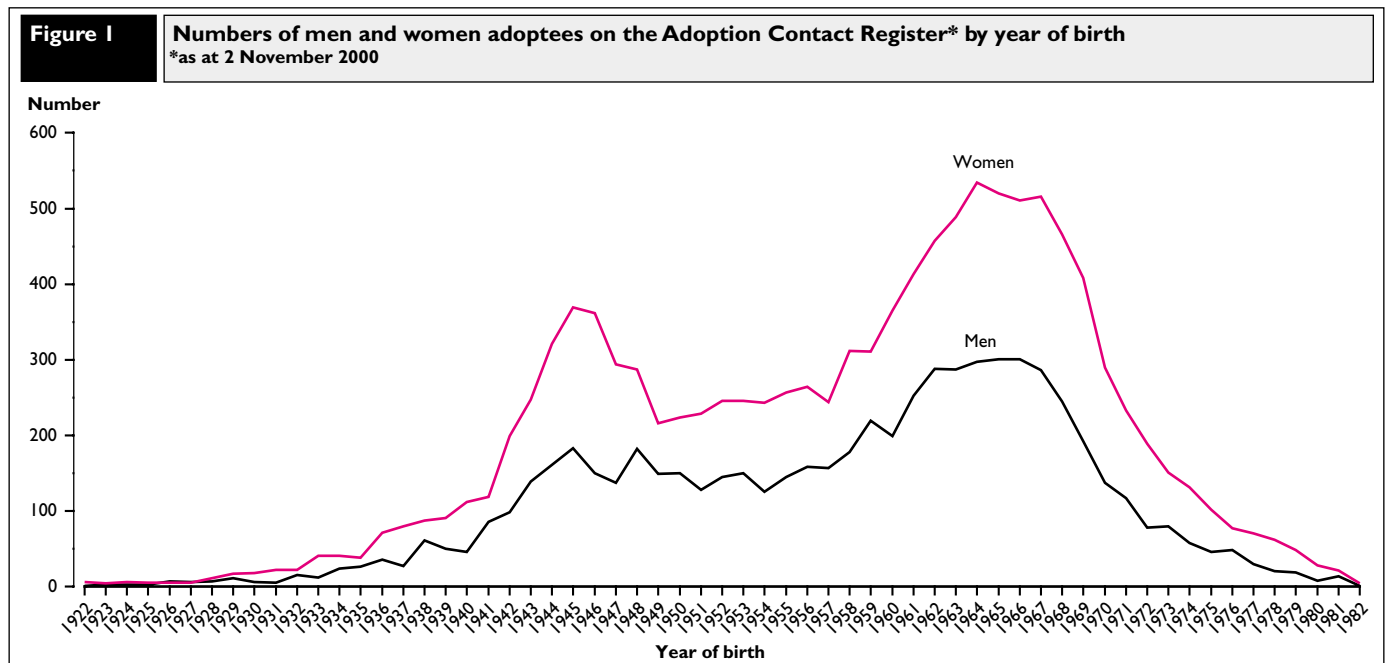
**CHARACTERISTICS OF ADOPTEES AND RELATIVES ON THE REGISTER AS AT NOVEMBER 2000**

In sheer numerical terms, it is adopted men and women who wish to contact their relatives, rather than vice versa. There are more than two adoptees for every relative on the Register. This is, perhaps, not surprising, but if one considers that the average adoptee may well have, at a conservative estimate, five close birth relatives – say a mother, father, brother or sister, and grandparents – the difference between two to one, and one to five is a factor of ten to one in favour of adoptees more frequently placing themselves on the Register than their birth relatives.

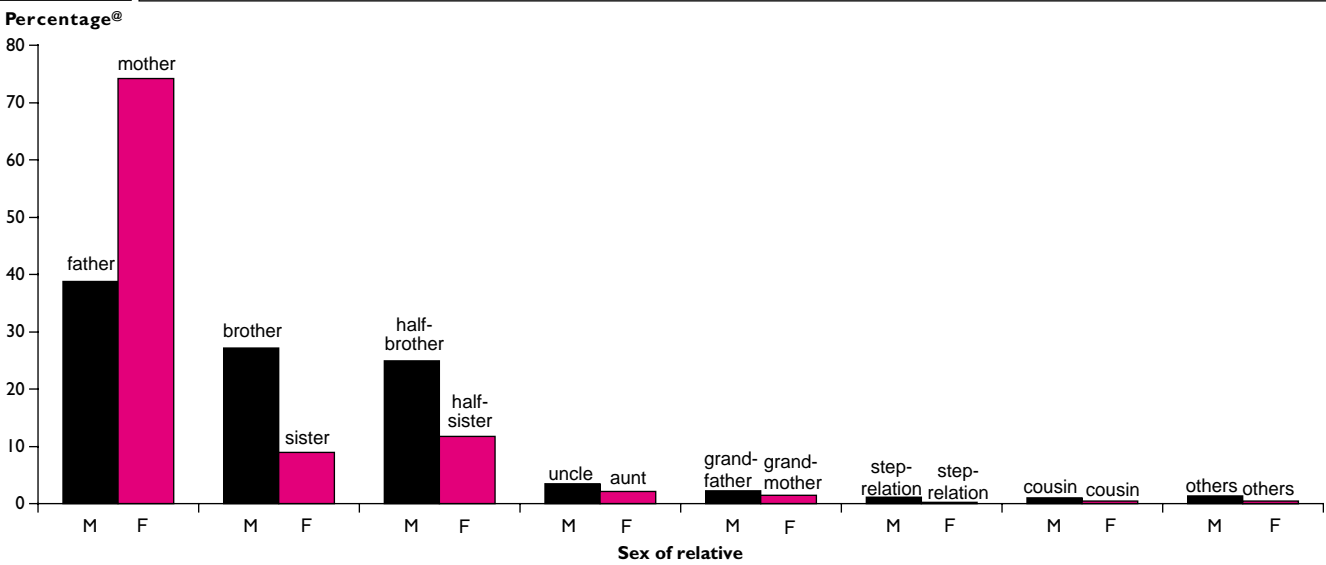
One notable feature of the adoptees and relatives who place themselves on the Register is that the majority of them are women; about two thirds of the adoptees are women, and an even higher proportion, around 85 per cent, of the relatives. As will be seen, mothers who want to contact their children are predominant amongst relatives on the Register.

Most of the men and women adoptees who registered on the Adoption Contact Register were born in the 1960s (see Figure 1); a not unexpected finding since adoptions ran at their highest post-war level around the late 1960s in England and Wales. The effect of the increased number of adoptions after the Second World War may also be seen in Figure 1, there being a peak in the number of adoptees placing themselves on the Register who were born in the late 1940s. Also, although women adoptees outnumber men adoptees, their profiles of birth years are very similar.

The profile of ages of the adopted men and women on the Adoption Contact Register will obviously influence the profile of the different kinds of relation with whom they hope, or might expect, to be able to make contact. Indeed, the pattern of relationships between the relatives on the Adoption Contact Register and their adopted relatives is a particularly interesting one, and is fundamental to answering the question: “who wants to get in touch with whom?” (It is also essential background to the even more important question of “who is successfully matched with whom?”)



**Figure 2** Profile of relatives\* by their relationship† to adoptee, for men and women relatives separately  
\*who registered between 1991 and 2000



@ 100 per cent = all relationships of men to their relatives who were adopted, and similarly for women.

† Note: the relationships analysed are those as originally stated on the application form by the relative. Some may have stated their relationship to be brother or sister when it should have been half-brother or half-sister (or even stepbrother or stepsister). Similarly, many gave the answer "step-relation" many of which are likely to have been step-siblings or step-parents (which were seldom so identified).

Amongst the relatives on the Register, the profiles of relationships to the adoptee are very different for men and women – as is shown in Figure 2. Three quarters of all women relatives on the Register are mothers trying to make contact with their child, whilst fewer than two in five men relatives are fathers trying to contact their children. Men relatives are much more likely than women relatives to be attempting to contact their brother or sister – or half-brother or half-sister. Table 1 gives details. Interestingly, men are proportionately more likely to want to contact their grandchildren, nephews/nieces and step relations than women, but in terms of absolute numbers, of course, more women are trying to contact each of these kinds of relative than are men.

**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ADOPTEES AND RELATIVES WHO WERE SUCCESSFULLY MATCHED UP TO NOVEMBER 2000**

One simple way of considering the relative success rates of matching with different kinds of relative is to compare the profile of relationships to the adoptee amongst relatives successfully matched with that amongst all relatives on the Register – that is, whether successfully matched or not. These two profiles are, of course, each informative in their own right – one giving the proportion of relatives actually matched by their relationship to the adoptee, and the other giving the proportion of those hoping to be matched with their relative who had been adopted.

These two profiles are shown in Table 2. Amongst all men relatives who were successfully matched, just under two in 5 were linked with their child – almost exactly the same as the proportion of all men relatives on the Register who were fathers. Amongst women relatives, successful matches of mothers were slightly more frequent than would have been expected on the basis of the relative number of mothers on the Register. The proportion of mothers amongst successful matches of women relatives is large – virtually four in 5 of all matches. Undoubtedly many, probably the vast majority, of adoptees wish to contact their mother (and, most likely, their father as well), although it must be remembered that adoptees do not have to specify on their application form which relation – or relations – they are hoping to contact, so that relationships can only be analysed from the relatives', rather than the adoptees' perspective.

**Table 1** Profile of relationships†, 1991–2000, inclusive

Relationship to adoptee	men relatives	women relatives	relationship to adoptee
father	39	74	mother
† brother	27	9	sister } †
half-brother	25	12	half-sister } †
uncle	4	2	aunt
grandfather	2	1.5	grandmother
† steprelation	1.1	0.2	steprelation
(of which stepfather)	0.1	0.01	(of which stepmother) } †
cousin	1.0	0.5	cousin
nephew	-	0.04	niece
other	1.2	0.5	other
total – percentage	100	100	total – percentage
total – number	1,156	6,849	total – number

† Note: the relationships analysed are those as originally stated on the application form by the relative. Some may have stated their relationship to be brother or sister when it should have been half-brother or half-sister (or even stepbrother or stepsister). Similarly, many gave the answer "step-relation" many of which are likely to have been step-siblings or step-parents (which were seldom so identified).

As was mentioned in the footnote to Table 1, siblings and half-siblings are best grouped together because of the possibly variable way in which half-brothers and half-sisters might describe their relationship on the application form. For both brothers/half-brothers and sisters/half-sisters, the actual number of successful matches with their siblings is smaller than the relative numbers on the Register would lead one to suppose – the observed numbers being some 90 per cent of the expected. However, brothers and half-brothers together comprise just over one half of all men relatives seeking contact and just under one half of all those that are successfully matched. The corresponding proportions for sisters and half-sisters are just over, and just under, one in 5. The ratio of observed to expected numbers varies more for the other relationships – such as aunt/uncle and grandparents – but these are based on smaller numbers – particularly for men relatives.

**Table 2**

**Profiles of relationships for successful matches, and comparison with the corresponding profiles for all relatives on the register, by sex of relative**

Relationship to adoptee	amongst successful matches (a)	amongst all relatives on register (b)	ratio a:b as a percentage	Relationship to adoptee	amongst successful matches (c)	amongst all relatives on register (d)	ratio c:d as a percentage
father	38	39	98	mother	79	74	107
brother	21	27	78	sister	8	9	21
half-brother	26	25	103	half-sister	10	12	86
uncle	8	4	214	aunt	2	2	77
grandfather	2	2	70	grandmother	1	1	48
all others	5	3	175	all others	1	1	509
total – percentage	100	100	100	total – percentage	100	100	100
total – number	66	1,156		total – number	424	6,849	

† See footnote to Table 1

**SECOND MATCHES OF ADOPTEES**

It was mentioned earlier that there were 490 successful matches between adoptees and their relatives up to November 2000. However, for 8 of the adoptees, a *second* match was made – that is, with another relative. To avoid double-counting, the foregoing results have concentrated upon the *first* relative to which the adoptee was linked. In six of the 8 double links, the adoptee’s *mother* was the first relative to be matched to the adoptee, and the second relative to be matched was: the *father* (2 cases); a *half-sister* (1 case); an *uncle* (1 case); and a *brother* (2 cases). Consequently, just under 2 per cent of adoptees who were given details of a relative who had placed themselves on the Register were subsequently given details of a *second* relative.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

It is evident that the number of successful matches made over the 9 1/2 years is relatively small compared both with the number of adoptees, and of the relatives, who have placed themselves on the Adoption Contact Register. Self-evidently, the proportion of successful matches depends on *both* the adoptee *and* one of their relatives registering themselves; the fact is that, in the vast majority of cases, only one party does. Nevertheless, as has been mentioned earlier, there are a variety of alternative methods for establishing contact, so that the *overall* level of contact is bound to be higher than that made possible by the Adoption Contact Register alone.

Judged by the numbers of those who have entered their name on the Register, there is certainly a demand amongst adoptees for the facilities which the Register provides. The smaller number – though still appreciable – of relatives using the Register may indicate, for some, a reluctance or definite wish not to contact the adoptee – or possibly lack of knowledge over how to go about it.

Regular and consistent publicity via the mass media is commonly recognised to be the most effective means of promoting awareness of statutory services – such as the facilities provided by the Adoption Contact Register. A poster advertising campaign was mounted just over two years ago – in doctors’ surgeries, libraries, Social Services Departments, Citizens’ Advice Bureaux and Register Offices – and is judged to have had an impact.

While the Adoption Contact Register is administered by the General Register Office, ONS, the Department of Health (DH) has responsibility for the legislation on which it – and other matters of adoption – are based. Policy issues are therefore jointly discussed between the two Departments; the promotion and publicity of the Adoption Contact Register is just such an issue. Scarcity of public funds has made it difficult to promote the work of the Adoption Contact Register using different forms of publicity, including the mass media, which are now recognised as necessary.

However, the Adoption Contact Register has quickly established itself in linking records, particularly between mothers and their children – an understandable finding. The Adoption Contact Register also performs a valuable service in facilitating contact with other relatives, and, after mothers and fathers, it is most used to establish contact with brothers and sisters. However, given that an appreciable proportion of the adoptees on the Register are in their 40s, 50s, 60s, and some still older, it is likely that besides brothers and sisters, they are also hoping to contact relatives of a younger generation.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Particular thanks are due to Professor Roy Parker who made very helpful comments on improving the text, and to Liz Carrigan of GRO Adoptions who provided practical information on, and extracted data from, the Adoption Contact Register.

**REFERENCES**

1. The Children Act 1989 created a new section 51A of the 1976 Adoption Act.
2. If the adoption took place in Scotland, information can be obtained from:

Adoption Contact Register for Scotland:  
 Birth Link  
 Family Care  
 21 Castle Street  
 Edinburgh EH2 3DN  
 Scotland

If the adoption took place in Northern Ireland, enquiries should be made to:

Adoption Contact Register for Northern Ireland:  
 The Registrar General  
 Oxford House  
 49/55 Chichester Street  
 Belfast BT1 4HL  
 Northern Ireland

If the adoption took place in England and Wales or the birth of someone who was adopted abroad was in England and Wales, information can be obtained from:

The General Register Office  
 Adoptions  
 Smedley Hydro  
 Trafalgar Road  
 Birkdale  
 Southport PR8 2HH

## Appendix 1

ACR105

### ADOPTION CONTACT REGISTER

#### APPLICATION FOR ENTRY IN PART I OF THE REGISTER BY THE ADOPTED PERSON

I .....

of .....

.....

(enter your current full name and address) wish to have my name and address entered in Part I of the Adoption Contact Register and give notice that I wish to contact any relative of mine. I declare that I have attained the age of 18 years.

#### DETAILS RELATING TO MY BIRTH

Name and Surname .....

Date of Birth .....

Place of Birth .....

Birth Mother's Name and Surname .....

Birth Mother's Maiden Surname .....

Birth Father's Name and Surname (if known) .....

#### DETAILS RELATING TO THE RECORD OF MY ADOPTION

Adopted Name and Surname .....

Adopted Mother's Name and Surname .....

Adopted Father's Name and Surname .....

Year of Adoption (if known) .....

I have read and accept the conditions relating to the Adoption Contact Register and request that my name and address is entered in Part I.

I request that the name and address of any relative for whom there is an entry in Part II be sent to me.

I understand that my name and address will not be disclosed to any relative in Part II.

If I wish my name and address to be removed from the Register, I will give 28 days' notice in writing to the Registrar General.

Signed .....

Date .....

*(continued over)*

## Appendix 2

ACR108

### ADOPTION CONTACT REGISTER

#### APPLICATION FOR ENTRY IN PART II OF THE REGISTER BY A RELATIVE OF THE ADOPTED PERSON

I .....  
of .....  
.....

(enter your current full name and address) wish to have my name and address entered in Part II of the Adoption Contact Register and give notice that I wish to contact an adopted person to whom I am related. I declare that I have attained the age of 18 years.

#### DETAILS RELATING TO THE ADOPTED PERSON

Original Name and Surname .....  
Date of Birth .....  
Place of Birth .....  
Mother's Name and Surname .....  
Mother's Maiden Surname .....  
Father's Name and Surname .....  
Year of adoption (if known) .....

I declare that I am related to the above adopted person.

Please state the nature of your relationship .....

#### \* THIRD PARTY ADDRESS

.....	<b>if this space is left blank your home address from the first paragraph will be inserted in the Contact Register</b>
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....	

\* To be completed only if applicable. Please refer to paragraphs 23 and 24 in booklet ACR110.

*(continued over)*

## Appendix 2 (continued)

TABLE OF EVIDENCE REQUIRED TO PROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

	your child's certificate	your own birth certificate	*your marriage certificate	your sister's/ brother's birth certificate	your mother's/ father's birth certificate and aunt's/ uncle's certificate	your mother and father's marriage certificate	your son's/ daughter's birth certificate
mother			✓				
father	✓						
brother		✓					
sister		✓	✓				
grandparent							✓
aunt		✓	✓	✓			
uncle		✓		✓			
cousin		✓	✓		✓		
half relation		✓	✓				
step relation		✓	✓			✓	

\* or change of name document

Photocopies of certificates are not acceptable