



Department
for Education

Practice and improvement fund

Adoption services

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Introduction

This document sets out the vision, themes and criteria for applications to the Practice & Improvement Fund for adoption services. Up to £14 million will be available for the programme in 2016-17 and 2017-18.

The fund aims to inspire the transformation of adoption services and those services that adopted children and families rely on at a regional and national level. It will help ensure that regional adoption agencies (RAAs) have practice excellence at their heart, with voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) leading the way, and will support the voluntary sector to develop its national offer, either through new ways of working or through targeted projects, particularly for harder to place children. We want all adoptive families to have access to integrated, supportive, timely services which deliver better outcomes to some of the most vulnerable children in our society. This is an ambitious programme that seeks to do that, whilst also ensuring that adopter and adoptee voice is heard and informs practice and decisions at all levels.

The first round of bidding is open to VAAs and other voluntary sector organisations (VSOs). Future rounds will be open to RAAs once the current bidding round for RAA transition plans has been completed. We expect RAAs to use feedback on their transition plans to target future applications to this fund. **In the first round, we are particularly interested in bids from VAAs which will help them to develop their role as leaders in practice excellence within RAAs; to transform their business and build their capacity; and to develop products and services which can be marketed to RAAs and at a national level.**

Applicants are invited to submit bids to develop and test new, innovative ideas, or to spread existing excellent practice. There will be up to three rounds to bid for funding across the two years. Further information about future rounds will be published in due course.

In the first round, we are open to bids across the adoption system, but are particularly interested in bids in the following areas:

- Driving improvement in recruitment and the way adopters and children are matched
- Speeding up stable placements by use of early placement schemes
- Support for adoptive families

In assessing the bids, we will compare those within each of the areas to ensure the highest quality projects in each area are funded, as well as a good spread of projects across the adoption system. We would also be interested in bids which cut across two or more areas of the system. Further detail about each of these areas is outlined on pages 6 and 7.

The grant requirement

This section focuses on what the department requires from applications to the Practice & Improvement Fund.

The programme is designed to help ensure adopted children, adopters and children for whom adoption is the right decision get the best possible service through RAAs and at a national level. Organisations should aim to improve outcomes for adopted children and adoptive families far beyond the period for which DfE funding is available. We want services to make a real difference to adoptive families over the long term.

In supporting the achievement of these objectives, we value applications which will encourage innovative approaches to improving matching, recruitment and the support adopted children and their families receive. We hope projects will improve our understanding of what really works and contribute to new ways of working throughout the adoption sector, as well as helping to spread existing excellent practice. We are seeking proposals which can help deliver solutions to complex problems, provide new approaches to adoption services, and deliver reforms that help to inform the development of national policy.

We want to see VAAs supporting practice development and improvement in RAAs. We also want the Practice & Improvement Fund to support the development of an effectively functioning national market, underpinned by evidence-based practice.

Overarching criteria

All bids must be able to demonstrate how they will support or make a difference to the adoption system on the ground, either through RAAs or at a national level.

We are seeking applications which meet some or all of the following high level criteria:

- Improve outcomes for adoptive families;
- Have the potential to inform national delivery by being replicable and scalable;
- Are innovative, having the potential to provide untested and novel approaches where action is needed;
- Where organisations can clearly demonstrate a move towards a marketable service in the future;
- Have adopter voice at their heart;
- Provide good value for money;
- Will be developed in partnership with a named RAA project;
- Will help VAAs to develop their innovative practice 'offer' to RAAs; and
- Can be delivered and sustained over the longer term.

We will also score applications more highly if they meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Show a clear commitment to match-funding with their own funds and/or get match-funded from other sources, for example corporate sponsorship;
- Are evidence-based and can clearly demonstrate making the best use of public funding;
- Involve joint or consortium working – across the voluntary and community sector or across different sectors, for example with schools; and
- Build the dissemination of what works, and does not work, into the project.

Grant awards

Up to £7 million per year is expected to be available for the programme in 2016-17 and 2017-18, with a maximum of three rounds of applications for funding during this period. Funding will be available for up to two years (until 31 March 2018), though applicants may apply for funding for a shorter period. We expect that organisations will progressively develop alternative sources of funding to become self-sustaining.

The exact number and size of individual grants will depend on the range and quality of bids received. There is no specific minimum or maximum amount of grant award, but we would not expect to fund any single bid over £500,000. In the first round of applications, we will allocate no more than 50% of the funding available in each year to successful bidders. This will ensure there are sufficient funds to award to the best innovative ideas in future rounds.

Grants will be awarded for all eligible direct project costs (revenue funding). Capital expenditure (e.g. building work) will not automatically be eligible, but may be considered.

The department will consider paying a small proportion of the funding upfront to successful organisations which would not otherwise have the means to deliver their project and will agree a suitable profile for the remaining funding. The department will claw back any money for which the organisation does not provide adequate evidence of being spent as agreed.

Further information on what we are looking for

We are open to bids across the adoption system and so encourage agencies and organisations to think about the overarching sector, as well as the specific areas of interest set out below. Organisations are eligible to bid for grants in more than one area, and a single bid may cut across several areas. Each bid will, however, require a separate application form and should be emailed separately.

When thinking about overarching systems and practice, we want projects to develop, test and spread a diverse range of innovative practice with the potential to radically improve adoption services on a wide scale.

We are particularly interested in applications in the following areas:

1) Driving improvement in recruitment and the way children and adopters are matched

The government is committed to improving the timeliness of adoption matches. We know that delay reduces the chance of a match, and that the greater the delay, the greater the likelihood of disruption following placement. We want to see adoption agencies recruiting and working with those already approved to meet the needs of harder to place children and address the mismatch between adopter preferences and children waiting. Through RAAs, we want to ensure that there is an effective system for matching children and adopters at a regional or national level. We also want to support and challenge social workers to help them avoid delay associated with finding the 'perfect match'.

A number of improvements have been made to the ways in which adopters are recruited and children are matched with adoptive parents over the past five years. These include improving the adoption support offer to allow parents to consider harder to place children; the introduction of the inter-agency fee fund to reimburse LAs for the fee, to ensure children who are hard to place have access to the widest possible pool of potential adopters; and the provision of exchange days and the further development of activity days to improve adopter-led matching.

Following on from these successes, we would particularly like to see bids which address the following questions:

- How can we develop targeted and strategic recruitment strategies which are more responsive to the needs of the children waiting to be adopted? How can we better work with those adopters who have been waiting to help them find a match?
- How can we improve the timeliness of adoption matches and prevent case drift?
- How can we ensure certain factors like unconscious bias and risk aversion are not driving matching decisions?
- Are there any further innovative ways we could improve matching?

2) Speeding up stable placements by use of early placement schemes

We have challenged local authorities to double the number of children placed with their new adoptive families at the earliest possible point – halving the time they are waiting in care for the full process to be completed. This is when children are cared for by foster carers who will go on to adopt them if adoption is decided to be the best option for the child. It means children avoid delay while waiting for decisions about family reunification, and court processes, to be finalised: if the decision is not for adoption, the child has benefited from a high quality temporary placement, and if the decision is to adopt, the child has the benefit of having already lived with their adopter.

Early placement can be transformative for children, allowing them the stability and security of an early placement which is planned to lead to adoption, if adoption is in the best interests of the child, while decisions are being made about their future. However, to work well for children, adopters, and birth parents, it needs to follow the best, tested practice to support everybody involved.

To support local authorities in this, we will develop and spread best practice to increase the use of early placement, working with experts in the field. We will also ensure early placement practice is embedded within RAAs.

We would particularly like to see bids which address the following questions:

- What are the effective elements of early permanence practice?
- What effective practice currently exists and how can this be disseminated?
- Given that we are moving to regionalised structures, how could early permanence processes be effectively embedded within these new structures? For example, what tracking systems would a RAA need to adopt to ensure the child's journey is seamless between the agency and each LA? Would there be a lead organisation?
- Are there any more innovative ideas in increasing the use of effective early permanence?

3) Support for adoptive families

Good, timely support can make the difference between whether an adoptive family thrives or flounders, and can dramatically improve adopted children's long term life chances. It is, therefore, vital that they can access what they need, when they need it.

The Adoption Support Fund has provided thousands of adoptive families with access to therapeutic support and extending it to allow families to access it from the point the child is placed with the family means they can get support much earlier. A family now accessing therapeutic parenting through the ASF pre-order said: *'It has been a huge support emotionally and practically. We are still in the early stages but feel a difference already. We feel much more relaxed and 'normal' now.'*

We encourage bids that focus on using funding to fill gaps in the support offer and that develop evidence which can then be commissioned via the Adoption Support Fund or provided within RAAs, rather than to directly fund provision of these services. We will not directly fund provision of services which could already be commissioned through the Adoption Support Fund.

There are a number of areas in which we would like to encourage bids:

Adopter Voice – we are clear that the voice of adopters should be heard locally, regionally and nationally. It is their voice that is driving change nationally through the Adoption Support Expert Advisory Group and User Group and we want to ensure that it is a key driver for change across the board. Bids for ensuring that adopter voice is heard at all levels are welcomed.

Expanding the Adoption Support Market – one of the major issues is gaps in the adoption support market, both geographically and in terms of capacity to deliver. We know that many providers are now operating waiting lists and families sometimes have to travel significant distances to access the support they need. We welcome bids that address gaps in the market and particularly those in relation to the key issues for adopted families, including support for child to parent violence and short breaks. We will accept applications for the development of support for all children and families who meet the eligibility criteria for the Adoption Support Fund.

Improving access to specialist mental health services – adopted children have some of the most complex mental health needs in the community. There is a tendency to focus on the issues of attachment but other issues – genetic, pre-natal (exposure to alcohol, drugs, trauma and stress) and post-natal (maltreatment, neglect, removal from birth family) – mean that children may have multiple layers of challenge in terms of their biology, neurodevelopment and psychological development. We would like to see more children adopted from care getting access to specialist assessments to ensure that the support provided is addressing their needs. We welcome bids for the expansion of existing specialist services and the development of new services in parts of the country that do not currently have access to specialist services. We are particularly keen to see the development of services that work across health, education and social care.

Improving support for adopted children in schools – adopted children are now entitled to a free early education place from the age of two; priority admission to the school that can best meet their needs; and additional funding for their education provider through the Early Years Pupil Premium and Pupil Premium Plus at school. Adopted children may have difficulties forming trusting relationships with adults, developing and maintaining relationships with their peers, coping with transitions and change, managing their strong feelings, such as shame, sadness, anxiety and anger, and managing their behaviour when they feel anxious, overwhelmed or unsafe.

At times children may display acute difficulties at school, whereas at other times they may be more settled. Some children do not display their difficulties at school, adopting a mask of 'compliance' to get through the school day, with their stress spilling over at home. Transitions between schools and even between lessons, break times and playtimes can be particularly tricky aspects of the school day for some adopted children.

In short, school can be a source of major stress for children and adoptive families. We are keen to see bids that address these issues, helping to spread awareness and understanding of the impact of trauma and loss across schools and providing them with tools to enable them to better support children that are struggling to engage in education and fulfil their potential.

The application process

Organisations must prepare applications in accordance with this document and the application form. All information requested on the application form must be provided to enable your application to be fully considered.

Your application is not an agreement or contract. Meeting the selection criteria does not guarantee funding. Funding is limited and applications will be assessed and prioritised according to the extent to which they meet the selection criteria. Only high quality applications are likely to be considered for funding.

How to apply

Eligible organisations must submit a bid using the application form available on GOV.UK alongside this guidance. The application form must be submitted in a format that is compatible with Word 2003/ PDF Adobe x. The maximum size for attachments is 5MB.

Supporting documentation

Please submit your application form by e-mail to Adoption.PIF@education.gsi.gov.uk.

Your proposal must arrive by noon on 3 June 2016. You will receive an automatic email response letting you know that your bid has arrived with us. Late proposals will not be considered so please factor in the time it takes to receive your e-mail. We will aim to announce the final results of the competition by the end of June 2016 (see timetable below for key stages of the application process). This is a guide and, whilst the department does not intend to depart from the timetable, we reserve the right to do so at any time.

Timetable

Set out below is the proposed timetable for organisations interested in bidding. This is a guide and, whilst the department does not intend to depart from the timetable, we reserve the right to do so at any time.

Fund opens for applications	20 April 2016
Deadline for organisations to submit proposals to DfE	Noon 3 June 2016
Applicants notified of results of bids	By 15 July 2016
Work plans negotiated and agreed with successful bidders	July 2016
Grant Funding Agreements agreed and signed	By 29 July 2016
Funded activity begins	July/August 2016

General guidance notes

If you are submitting applications under more than one theme, you will need to complete a separate form for each application.

Proposals will be rejected if the information asked for is not provided in your proposal.

Inducements

Offering an inducement of any kind in relation to obtaining this or any other grant with the department will disqualify your application from being considered and may constitute a criminal offence.

Costs and expenses

You will not be entitled to claim from the department any costs or expenses which you may incur in preparing your proposal whether or not your proposal is successful.

Feedback

Following the award of grants, feedback will be available to unsuccessful bidders on request.

Freedom of information

The department is committed to open government and to meeting its responsibilities under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Accordingly, all information submitted to the department may need to be disclosed in response to a request under the Act. If you consider that any of the information included in your proposal is commercially sensitive, please identify it and explain (in broad terms) what harm may result from disclosure if a request is received, and the time period applicable to that sensitivity. You should be aware that, even where you have indicated that information is commercially sensitive, we may still be required to disclose it under the Act if a request is received. Please also note that the receipt of any material marked 'confidential' or equivalent by the department should not be taken to mean that we accept any duty of confidence by virtue of that marking. If a request is received, we may also be required to disclose details of unsuccessful proposals.

Management information

The successful grant recipients will be asked to provide management information to meet the needs of the department. These will be subject to further negotiation but the department's minimum information needs are:

- Quarterly written reports on achievement of key outputs and milestones as set out in the Delivery Plan; and
- Two meetings per grant-funded year with DfE policy leads to review overall performance, including progress the grant-funded organisation is making towards securing financial sustainability for the project once DfE funding ends.

The department will specify the format for providing management information as part of the process of issuing the grant agreements. The department will also expect applicants to set out in their proposal how intended outcomes will be measured. Organisations which are subsequently awarded a grant will be required to agree on the approach to measuring and evaluating the project and the expected impact of planned outcomes. The department may wish to evaluate formally some projects and, if requested to do so, you will be expected to participate and cooperate in the process, including in the implementation of the methodology.

Grant funding agreement

We will provide all organisations which are successful with the DfE grant funding agreement. This agreement will set out our expectations of all successful applicants and all bidders will be required to accept the final version in full. A grant funding agreement with each successful organisation will be finalised in July 2016.

State aid

State Aid rules must be adhered to. State Aid is a European law term which refers to forms of financial support from a public body or publicly-funded body, given to organisations engaged in economic activity on a selective basis, which has the potential to distort competition and affect trade between member states of the European Union. Unauthorised State Aid is unlawful aid and if public authorities award State Aid in breach of the rules, the European Commission has the power to require repayment with interest from the aid beneficiary. State Aid may be permitted if it falls under a certain threshold. This is known as de minimis aid. Currently the total de minimis aid granted to any one organisation must not exceed €200,000 over any period of three financial years.

We consider it unlikely that the funding to be provided under this scheme would be considered State Aid. However, applicants should form their own view, taking advice if necessary, as to whether the funding they receive is unlawful State Aid. Furthermore, if you have received State Aid from any public body in the previous three financial years you must let us know on the application form. If your organisation has received State Aid in the previous three financial years below the de minimis threshold, this could possibly limit the amount for which you are eligible.

Government efficiency controls: marketing and advertising and consultancy

As part of the Government's commitment to deliver value for money in public spending, bidders should be aware that there are restrictions on what grant funding can be used for in relation to all paid-for communications, marketing and consultancy activities. The controls apply to most communications activity including printing and publications, events, PR and digital communications activity, and engagement of consultants. Exemptions may be granted for essential activities where cost-effectiveness can be evidenced and where other no cost or low cost options have been exhausted.

Marketing and advertising

Exemptions for expenditure under £100k can be approved within DfE where proposed communications related activity is judged to be critical to delivery of the project and meeting agreed national priorities for the Government.

Exemptions for expenditure over £100k require clearance within DfE and also the Cabinet Office in line with the Government's Marketing and Advertising Efficiency Controls. Therefore organisations whose proposals fall into this category may need to provide further information which might result in a delay in clearing funding.

Consultancy

Consultancy exemptions under £20k can be approved within DfE. Consultancy over £20k may require DfE and Cabinet Office clearance.

Cabinet Office guidance on the controls can be accessed at:

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/cabinet-office-controls-guidance>



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