



Department  
for Education

# **Adoption strategy**

**Achieving excellence everywhere**

**July 2021**

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## Summary

### Adoption strategy - achieving excellence everywhere

This adoption strategy document sets out a bold vision to deliver excellence in adoption services across England.

The government will work with adoption agencies to ensure that best practice becomes the norm. This will help to ensure that every adopted child and their family can access the services and support they need wherever they live, and maximise children's outcomes in the short and long term.

The strategy sets out how we will fulfil our vision so that:

- All adoptive children are found permanent loving families as quickly as possible where they will be safe and secure.
- Adopters are recruited from all communities so that we have a range of approved parents able and well prepared to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted. Prospective adopters are never deterred from pursuing an opportunity to adopt because of their ethnicity, sexuality, age or social background.
- Prospective adopters from every walk of life are warmly welcomed and supported in a system that is never threatening or judgemental.
- Unnecessary barriers and bureaucracy placed in the way of those seeking to adopt are removed, systematically, across the country.
- Children are supported to bond with their adopted parents from the first time they meet.
- Professionals understand the profound impact of care and adoption on children's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.
- All adoptive children are supported to achieve their full potential.
- Children and families get the support they need when they need it.

## **Expiry or review date**

This strategy will be reviewed before April 2023.

## Who is this publication for?

This strategy is for:

- Local authorities
- Regional Adoption Agencies
- Voluntary Adoption Agencies
- Social workers
- Health care
- Virtual School Heads, Designated Teachers, and teachers
- Adoptive families, birth families and special guardianship families

## **Foreword by Gavin Williamson MP and Vicky Ford MP**

Every child, no matter their background or circumstances in which they grow up, should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Children thrive in loving, stable families.

However, some face challenges which most of us can only imagine. They will often have experienced abuse and neglect. Some will carry trauma for the rest of their lives or have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

Where a child cannot live with their birth parents the best alternative home will often be with other family members or within loving foster families. That is why we are committed to improving the support we provide to these families.

This strategy is focussed on adoption, where a child goes to live with a new permanent family. We cannot overestimate how important a new family is to an adopted child. Their security comes from knowing that they are safe and cared for, that they will get the love and support they need and will be supported to make the most of life's opportunities.

We want to take this opportunity to thank all those wonderful adoptive parents who come forward to open their hearts and homes to children. We are grateful for all that you do.

Over the last ten years we have improved support for adoptive children and families. We introduced the Adoption Support Fund in 2015 to help children who have experienced abuse and neglect to get the therapeutic support they need. Over 36,000 individual children have been supported and had their lives transformed.

We have developed 31 Regional Adoption Agencies, that are creating a system where children are matched with adopters as quickly as possible and are helping to ensure that there are a range of high-quality support services available nationwide. Regional Adoption Agencies have been able to operate by combining the resources and expertise of individual local authorities with more effective strategic management of services and fewer organisational barriers. These reforms have led to improved services and better support for children and their families.

But there is still much more to be done. Last October I spoke about barriers that too many families face when they try to adopt a child. Too many have been put off by a system that can be too judgemental if you are not the right skin colour, do not have a big house, are too old, or practise the wrong faith. It is, frankly, an outrage that black children still fare so poorly in the adoption system. Some local authorities and adoption agencies have not done enough to tackle prejudice and to deliver excellent support for all children in the adoption system. I want to change that.

We must attract people from all communities to come forward to adopt. The only qualification that people need to worry about is whether or not they can love and care for a child. The adoption system should not expect adoptive families to be middle class, have a certain income, own their own home or have a spare room. These are all

irrelevant to the ability of adoptive parents to provide a safe, loving family for a child who needs one. The system should rigorously and ambitiously focus on providing adoption for as many children as possible where that is the best outcome for those children. In order to do this and match our ambition, we need the system to step up and embrace this challenge, which will require us all to work harder and more creatively, tackling old ways of thinking that can get in the way of adoption placements.

Our ambition is to deliver adoption swiftly and effectively when adoption is the right path for the child. The new national adoption framework will mean services delivered to the same high quality across the country. It means that best practice becomes the norm and offers a culture of continuous improvement which breaks down barriers. Adoption should not be a lottery for children or adopters because of where you live.

Adopted children wherever they live in the country should be found a new family without undue delay and where they will get the love and support they need to have good outcomes in their childhood and as adults.

Today we are delighted to be publishing the government's adoption strategy and our plans for 2021-22 to start to build a stable foundation for the future.

We must strive for excellence in all adoption services, which meet the needs of every child waiting for adoption and for all adopted children who need support.

That is what all children and families deserve.



**Gavin Williamson MP**



**Vicky Ford MP**

## Adoption: our future vision

Our ambition for this Parliament is to reform the adoption system, so that:

- Adoption is considered a positive opportunity for children of all backgrounds. All children put forward for adoption are found permanent loving families speedily.
- Adopters are recruited from all communities so that there are enough parents able and well prepared to meet the different needs of children put forward for adoption.
- The adoption system is open-minded and actively encourages prospective adopters from all walks of life rather than discriminating on grounds of income or social class or other irrelevant lifestyle issues.
- All adopted children get the family support they need to experience a full and happy childhood. Children are supported to build strong attachments and to bond with their adopted parents from the first introductory meeting.
- Adopters are given support to understand the impact abuse, neglect and trauma have on children, to provide the sensitive and reflective parenting their children need, and to thrive as a family.
- All adopted children have their needs prioritised throughout the process of adoption. From matching to introductions, and from their first weeks to adulthood, children have professionals that understand the profound impact of adoption on their physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. Children feel confident to voice their worries and concerns and get ongoing therapeutic support for their needs as they change.
- The voice of adopters and their children is at the heart of local policy decision making and delivery of services. Their views are demonstrably used in the shaping and co-production of local services.
- All adopted children are encouraged to achieve their full potential and experience positive outcomes in education. Designated teachers work closely with children, adoptive parents and other professionals to ensure appropriate interventions, smooth transitions, and additional support throughout the entirety of a child's education.
- Adopted children and their families are given support throughout their childhood and the transition into adulthood.

To achieve these outcomes will require services that are driven forward by dynamic organisations, designed with practice excellence and innovation at their heart.

We will therefore deliver:

- Recruitment campaigns which are successful in recruiting sufficient adopters from all communities, who can meet the range of needs of children who are put forward for adoption, especially those from disadvantaged groups (set out in chapter 3).
- A warm seamless supportive experience for all potential adopters in the registration and approval process, which builds on their strengths and enables the development of new skills to support their adoptive children (set out in chapter 4).
- A service where children are matched seamlessly across organisational boundaries with families that can provide a loving home without unnecessary delay, maximising attachment and bonding (set out in chapter 5).
- High quality adoption support to all families which meets their child's needs from the moment a match has been confirmed and continues throughout their childhood whenever it is required, so that children's outcomes are maximised (set out in chapter 6).
- Regional Adoption Agency leaders working collaboratively to provide high quality adoption services that mean children thrive and flourish in new families-where services are delivered to the same high-quality standards across the country within a framework of national standards (set out in chapter 7).

## Overview

Sometimes birth parents are unable to care for their children themselves. We must find these children permanent new homes as quickly as possible.

The right plan for a child will always depend on their individual needs and circumstances. What matters most is that children are able to grow up in the loving care of a family who offer a happy and healthy home environment so every young person can thrive in life. There are a number of options alongside adoption – living with a special guardian, in a kinship care arrangement or long-term foster care. All of these options can provide the love and the stable home that children need and improving support for these arrangements is a priority for government.

This is why we have set up the independent Care Review to take a fundamental look at the needs, experiences and outcomes of children that need local authority support, and what is needed to make a real difference to improving their lived experience and long-term outcomes.

Kinship carers, including special guardians, play a vital role in caring for children. The government will be improving support to them in 2021/22 by providing funding to increase the number of local kinship carers support groups, increasing funding to the Family Rights Group kinship carers helpline and including children in kinship care arrangements in the priority groups which local authorities must include in their school admissions Fair Access Protocols.

This strategy focuses on adoption, which can provide children with stability in a permanent home within a new family which lasts long beyond childhood.

In *Adoption: A vision for change* (2016) the government outlined its overarching vision for transforming the quality of adoption services by developing Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and delivering the Adoption Support Fund (ASF).

Nearly all local authorities are now in an RAA and they are making a real difference. We have seen progress with children moving in with their adoptive families more quickly and greater numbers of adoptive families getting the adoption support they need. For example, the average time between coming into care and being placed with their new family, was cut from 22 months in 2012-12 to 15 months by 2019-20.

However, the excellent practice developed by some is not consistently available everywhere and there remains variation in the quality and delivery of services.

Although there have been considerable improvements in most areas, 1,000 children are still waiting over 18 months to be matched; that is too long. There are four main reasons: insufficient adopters recruited, the adopters recruited are reluctant to adopt the children that wait longest, adopters not always receiving the supportive welcome they need, and

matching processes that take too long. Some families are also still missing out on vital support services that can make a huge difference to their lives.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also inevitably impacted on the adoption system: slowing down court orders; reducing the ability to train and approve adopters and match them with children; and placing more stress and strain on families. To alleviate the latter the government introduced the Adoption Support Fund Covid-19 emergency scheme which resulted in some £6.5m being spent to support around 61,000 families.

This document sets out the government's strategy, a long-term vision and a clear plan for 2021-22 about how we will start to deliver the change we want to see.

During 2021-22 we will:

- Improve the recruitment of adopters and the adopter approval process so we have the adopters we need for the children waiting.
- Increase the number of children put forward for Early Permanence placements.
- Continue to support families through the Adoption Support Fund.
- Fund a new RAA strategic leader post and a support team of two project workers to progress collaborative RAA working.

Longer-term proposals we will consider for post 2021-22 include:

- Explore how to support the RAA leaders to trial and set a framework of national standards in all areas of recruitment, matching and support.
- Consider developing processes and procedures on family finding and matching including considering the value of creating a national matching service.
- Explore the value of national or pan-regional approaches to delivering and commissioning some adoption support services.
- Consider how to build on the success of the Adoption Support Centres of Excellence currently operating in two RAAs.

## Chapter 1: Progress to date and ongoing challenges

1. Children who are adopted deserve the best support we can give them. Excellent adoption services can transform the life chances of adopted children. Adoption can offer every child who has had a difficult start the promise of a brighter future – the kind of start that not only allows them to become successful adults, but gives them the happy childhood that we want for all our children.
2. Adoption agencies have made significant progress over the last ten years. Fewer children are waiting than in 2010 (2,000 compared with 5,000), children are moving in with adoptive families faster, and greater numbers of families are getting the adoption support they need.
3. The adoption system in 2015 was highly fragmented, with around 180 agencies recruiting and matching adopters. This caused delays in the recruitment of adopters and in the matching of children with approved adopters.
4. Government decided that to improve children's outcomes there needed to be structures and systems designed around the needs of children, free from bureaucratic barriers and that drew on the best of the statutory and voluntary sectors.
5. Our commitment to move to a regionalised approach has been successful. We now have 31 live RAAs, covering 145 local authorities out of a total of 151 (96%) and all local authorities remaining are now working to join one.
6. RAAs deliver local authority statutory duties on recruiting, matching, and supporting adoption services and are ultimately accountable to directors of children's services in local authorities. Local authorities have therefore been integral to supporting the development of the RAA programme. The transition to RAAs has required local authorities to think differently about how adoption services are delivered and the backing of senior local authority leaders has been imperative to the success of RAAs.
7. RAAs often deliver services in partnership with Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs). VAAs are independent, not for profit organisations which may be smaller than most statutory agencies and offer a personalised service to adopters from all backgrounds. VAAs place almost a quarter of all children adopted each year in the UK and have expertise in finding families for children who have specific needs, including sibling groups, older children and those from ethnic minority groups.

8. In some areas RAAs have set up contracts or agreements with groups of VAAs. The One Adoption West Yorkshire RAA has contracted with a local VAA alliance, led by Barnardo's and made up of four VAAs, to provide 30 placements a year for sibling groups, children from ethnic minority groups and disabled children. Adoption Now RAA based in the north west has an arrangement with their VAAs to secure 18 placements a year plus concurrent placements which is part of a regional commission. Coram Ambitious for Adoption RAA is led by the Coram VAA providing the RAA service for nine authorities across London and Slough.
9. RAAs are also beginning to improve services and support to adoptive families. The most recent evaluation report of RAAs<sup>1</sup> showed that:
  - There are improvements in the time taken to place children, including a reduction of 35 days to place those children who often wait the longest to be adopted (202 days compared to 237).
  - Increasingly, RAAs are taking a more strategic approach to marketing, incorporating targeted marketing activities, and developing inclusive websites to boost efforts to increase adopter diversity<sup>2</sup>.
  - They have also improved strategic commissioning of adoption support, resulting in improved early intervention and universal offers of support.

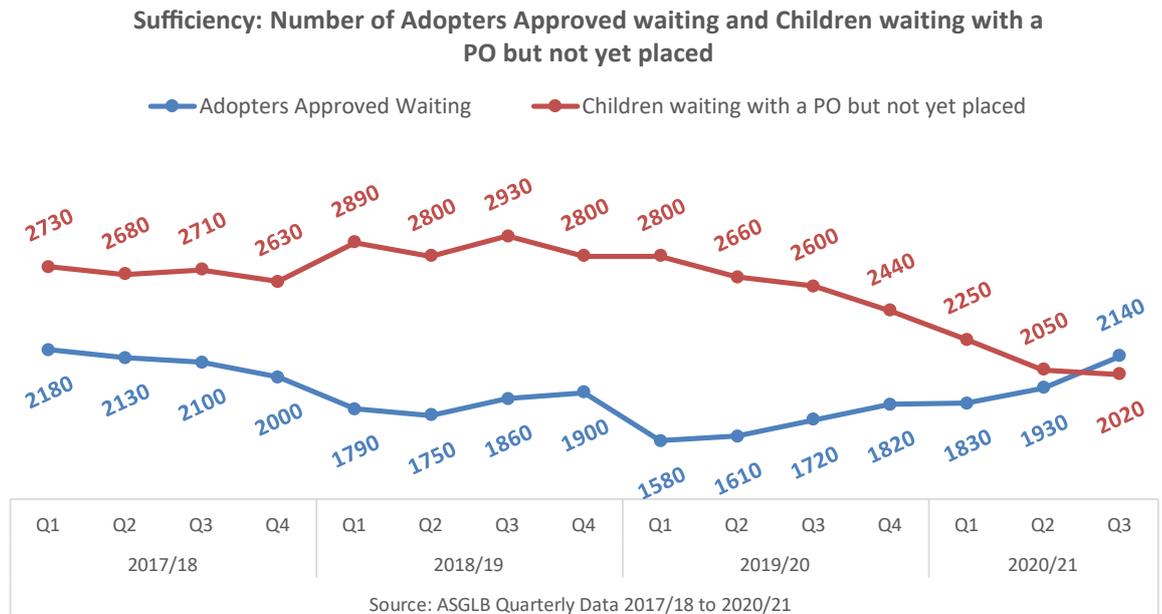
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<sup>1</sup> [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies second report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> One adoption has a pan regional approach with three RAAs – One Adoption West Yorkshire, One Adoption North Yorkshire and Humber and One Adoption South Yorkshire

What are the challenges?

10. In recent years there have been insufficient adopters for the number of children waiting with a placement order (PO). Recent recruitment campaigns have improved this situation; we now have more adopters (2,140) than children waiting (2,020).

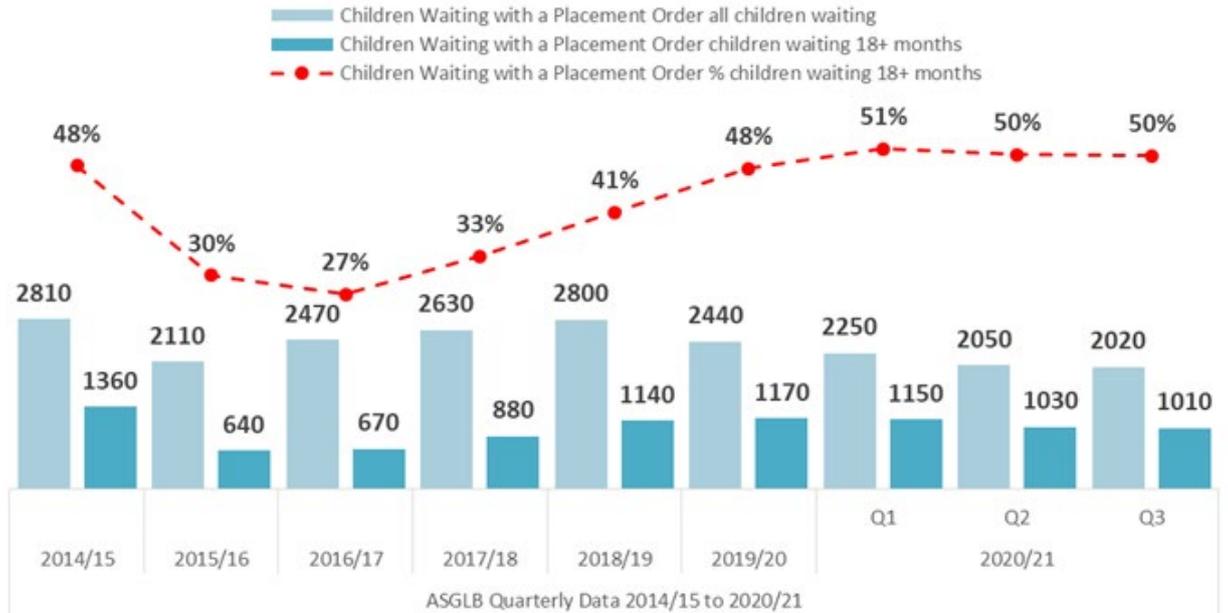


11. Although there are now more adopters than children waiting, we haven't always recruited adopters who are willing to adopt the children waiting for adoption or used all methods to promote early placement and all possible matches for every child including Adoption Activity Days and Exchange Days. That has led to a mismatch between the placements that children need and what approved adoptive parents can offer.

12. Some adopters only want to adopt a baby; others only want to adopt one child and not a sibling group; some want children of the same ethnicity as their own; some do not want children with complex needs. But the children waiting to be adopted will have a range of characteristics.

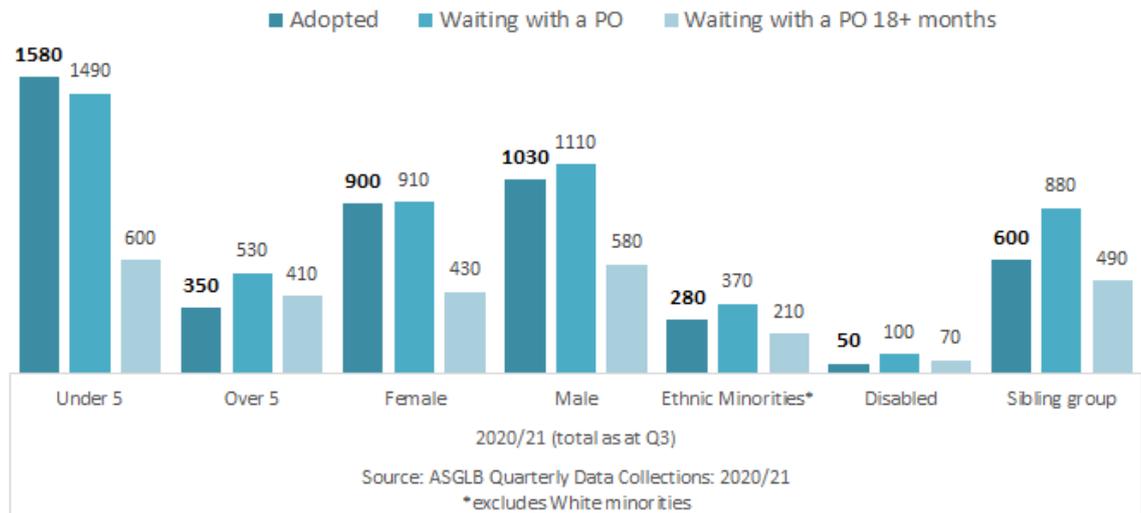
13. Therefore, whilst some children waiting for adoption will only wait a short time, 1,000 children have been waiting over 18 months to be matched and these make up 50% of all those who now wait. This is unacceptable. (Figures are as at 31 Dec 2020.)

### Children Waiting with a Placement Order

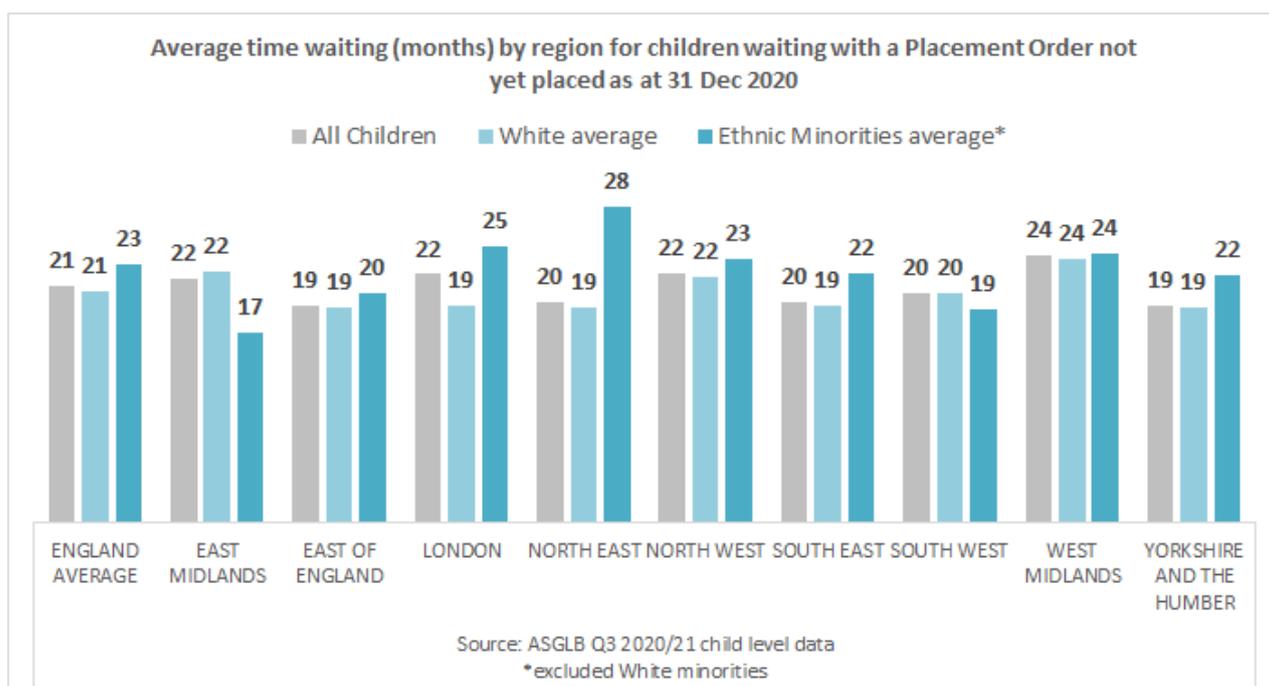


14. Some groups of children wait longer than others. Those groups who often had to wait over 18 months for a placement include: those aged over five years, sibling groups, children from ethnic minorities and disabled children.

### Breakdown of Children's Characteristics



15. And there is big variation between regions; some regions are better at recruiting a wider range of adopters or matching children than others. So the average time a child with a placement order is currently waiting ranges from 19 months to 24 months.



16. We therefore need to see an improvement in the recruitment, approval, and matching process so that we welcome a broad range of adopters and no child waits for years for their adoptive family.

17. We also need to understand and address why it is that children from some backgrounds do not get adoption as their plan and why early permanence approaches are not embedded in every area.

18. Adoption support has improved with recent reforms such as the introduction of the ASF and the development of RAAs. Research on the ASF has found that:

- children receiving support through the ASF showed small but significant changes in measures of impact, particularly, improved behaviour and mental health (a small reduction in the predicted prevalence of psychiatric disorders among the sample of children; and a small decrease in aggressive behaviour).
- The functioning of families in receipt of support through the ASF improved, with the greatest improvement being seen in parents' understanding of their children's needs and increased confidence in taking care of their children; and

- 84% of parents in families receiving support through the ASF saw modest but meaningful improvements in their wellbeing <sup>3</sup>.

19. Less positive experiences found in the same research were associated with delays in getting started with and completing an initial ASF assessment, and a perception that the child's difficulties were worsening during this waiting period. Timeliness of access must be a dependable element of support.
20. Children with a history of early life trauma often experience difficulties that can present a range of challenges in education. The government have therefore put in place additional support for adoptive families in schools. Since 2014, schools have been able to claim the pupil premium plus for the number of children adopted from care in their school. This is currently worth £2,345 per child, per year – although it's not an entitlement for specific children but can be used to support individual or groups of adopted children in the school. This is in addition to any funding available to support individual children's Special Educational Needs or disabilities via an Education Health and Care Plan. It is designed to help '...adopted children emotionally, socially and educationally by providing specific support to raise their attainment and address their wider needs.'
21. Since 2018 all maintained schools and academies must appoint a Designated Teacher who has the responsibility in schools to promote the education of looked-after children or those children previously looked after. We have also expanded the role of Virtual School Heads (VSHs) to include previously looked-after children. VSHs provide information and expert advice to adoptive parents and signpost to other services that offer guidance and support.
22. However, although at key stage 4 children who left care through adoption achieve better than looked after children and children in need, they still do less well than the overall pupil population, partly reflecting the proportion of Special Educational Needs or disabilities in the group, but also because they do not always get the support they need. In 2020 the average Attainment 8 score for children who left care through adoption was 35.5 compared to 21.4 for looked after children and 21.3 for children in need. The average Attainment 8 score for all pupils was 50.2.

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<sup>3</sup> [The evaluation of the adoption support fund wave 3 long-term follow-up \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

23. Too many families are still missing out on vital support services post-adoption. The latest annual survey results by the voluntary sector Adoption UK (AUK) show this challenge clearly.

AUK Barometer Report (2021)<sup>4</sup>:

- 71% of those who had obtained the adoption order did not have a written post-adoption support plan in place.
- 80% felt that their child needed more support in school than peers.
- 60% were satisfied with the quality of support we received from their adoption agency

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<sup>4</sup> [Adoption Barometer Report 2021 \(adoptionuk.org\)](https://adoptionuk.org)

## Chapter 2: Covid-19

24. Whilst there has been progress on adoption, this chapter sets out how the Covid-19 pandemic has put all children and families under severe pressure and has put the adoption system under strain. We appreciate the resilience that families have demonstrated and the determination of local authority staff who are supporting vulnerable children and young people. They have faced challenges that they have never had to before in these extraordinary times.
25. During the pandemic, RAA leaders and local authority adoption leaders met weekly to consider how to keep children and potential adopters moving through the adoption system. They set up groups to consider how to continue to recruit, assess, match and support adoptive families by maximising the use of technology – holding online information events and conducting some parts of the assessment process using online platforms. They discussed how to overcome barriers and shared best practice.
26. This collaboration meant that between April and December 2020, despite the significant challenges of operating in the middle of a global pandemic, 2,330 adopters were approved, 2,270 children and adopters were matched and 2,250 children were placed with their new adoptive families.
27. At the beginning of the lockdown the government announced that it would provide funding from the ASF to support adoptive and eligible special guardianship families during the pandemic. RAA leaders and local authorities responded to the challenge and within weeks over 450 applications were submitted which resulted in some £6.5m being spent to support 61,000 families.
28. The ASF Covid-19 emergency scheme encouraged RAAs and local authorities to work collaboratively, with Adopt London East, South, West, and North, for example, submitting most of their applications together. RAAs also worked with local authorities responsible for support for special guardians, to take a strategic approach to the commissioning of services. This led in some instances to RAAs being able to achieve better value for money by delivering services to multiple families through a single application, block booking and group-based support activities.
29. Many VAAs also responded with new approaches and online therapy. For example, Adoptionplus VAA provided a range of online therapeutic services to families. The timescale from initial enquiry to allocation reduced from a four month average to a two week average. Evaluation measures showed significant improvements in key areas of family functioning and stability.

### **Quotes from adopters and professionals on the Covid-19 scheme**

“[the Covid-19 scheme] was a lifeline after CAMHS discharged their whole waiting list. We had been waiting to see a psychotherapist for 8 months when we were discharged it was scary and devastating. This intervention by ASF probably saved my child from serious self-harm.” (Adopter)

“I just wanted to put in writing how positive we found the application process for the new ASF Covid-19 fund. We put in 9 applications and had them all approved within the week and most of them within 48 hours which has really enabled us to get the support out to families exceptionally quickly.” (RAA lead)

30. The government made it a national priority that education and childcare settings should continue to operate as normally as possible during the pandemic. The RAA Leaders’ Group (a collaborative group to help facilitate joint work) worked with the National Association of Virtual School Heads to plan support for adopted children who attended school during the national lockdowns and to support children returning to school after national lockdowns. They shared concerns raised by adoptive parents and supported children in their first few days and weeks in school.

31. The Covid-19 outbreak led to widespread delays in the completion of medicals for prospective carers and adopters, as other health work was necessarily prioritised to support the response to the pandemic. Following a request by the Minister for Children and Families, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association published in March 2021 a joint statement encouraging GP practice to undertake these medicals. This is helping ensure that sufficient safe placements are identified for vulnerable children and their wellbeing prioritised.

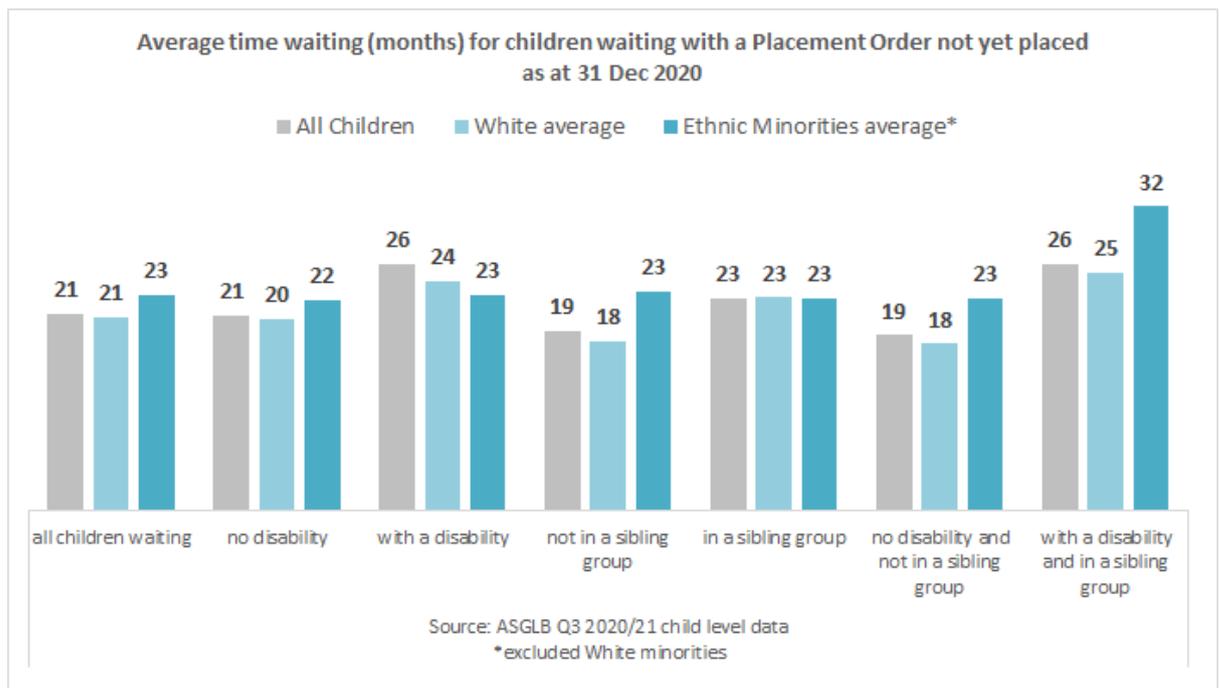
### **Covid-19 recovery**

32. As restrictions ease, RAA leaders are thinking about what they have learnt about practice through the pandemic and how they deliver their adoption services going forward. Many have highlighted greater efficiencies through working virtually. For example, adoption panels have been quicker to convene and it has been easier to get a diversity of panel members.

33. Some RAAs are working on a recovery roadmap based on learning from the last year and the RAA Leaders Group are sharing ideas with each other about what has worked well. For example, many RAAs have already expressed a desire to adopt a hybrid model of support: part physical meetings and part on-line and are consulting with adopters on the approaches that work best.

## Chapter 3: Finding families for children, not children for families

34. Where adoption is the right plan for a child, that should happen without delay. However, as can be seen from the graph below some children wait a long time to be matched with a new family. We need to recruit from a wider, more diverse, pool of adopters to care for children from a range of backgrounds often with complex needs. This chapter sets out our vision for recruitment.



35. Our vision for the future is to support RAA leaders to ensure:

- prospective adopters from every walk of life are warmly welcomed and considered, particularly those able to meet the needs of children likely to wait longer. No adopters are discouraged because of their ethnicity, sexuality, age or social background.
- recruitment campaigns have a particular focus on finding adoptive families who are willing to adopt, older children, sibling groups, ethnic minority children and children with additional needs.
- information for prospective adopters is continuously improved through regular mystery shopping and a relentless focus on service improvement.
- the dissemination of good practice across the country, either from other RAAs, VAAs or other organisations.

- enhanced support is given through online resources and adoption friendly websites, with the aim of helping adopters understand the needs of children.
- streamlining processes to encourage more applications and free up staff time.

### National recruitment campaign

36. During 2020, the RAA leaders set up a national, cross-sector steering group who collectively ran a government funded national recruitment campaign. In September 2020, the #YouCanAdopt campaign was launched to raise awareness of adoption and bust myths around who is eligible to adopt; ultimately to increase the number of possible parents registering their interest in adoption.
37. The national partnership brought deep expertise to bear – VAAs contributed half of the case studies used in the campaign – and contributed to the campaign’s success in reaching a wide section of the population.

#### National Recruitment Campaign 2020

- The #YouCanAdopt campaign saw a media reach we have not seen with previous campaigns. The click through conversion rate from the website landing page to agencies reached over 12% in comparison to previous campaigns reaching up to 6%.
- Some agencies reported a large increase in enquiries following the campaign. We estimate over 10,000 enquiries have been received overall during the campaign.
- Using real adopters and influencers with experience of adoption for the podcasts led to over 5,000 plays from the website, a large social media presence and a significant number of digital engagements.
- The smaller scale black adopters’ campaign has managed to reach new communities to raise awareness of adoption. They engaged faith leaders and used media outlets with a wide readership from black communities to do this. Their specific black adopters triage service has seen over 100 enquiries. 60% of those who attended information events from the pilots went on to be connected to agencies.

### "Front door" services

38. For prospective adopters, deciding to adopt is a huge decision. The prospect of taking on the responsibility of a parent can be daunting enough without being forced through an application process that some have described as too intrusive, judgemental and at times dissuasive.
39. The "front door" for adoption services should be welcoming and inclusive for all potential adopters. They should ensure that people are not being judged because of their social class, low income or other related socio-economic characteristics and that these characteristics are not made the norm, with prospective adopters who don't hold them made to jump through additional hoops to become approved to adopt. It is not relevant for example, if you rent your home rather than own it, or do not have a spare bedroom.
40. Other prospective adopters have felt they were turned down because they did not have the right skin colour, sexual orientation, practise the right faith, or being a member of the armed services.
41. This is unacceptable, and we must work to prevent any situation where a loving couple or single person who could provide a home to a deserving child is not turned away. The criteria for prospective adopters must always focus on the needs of the child, not any pre-conceived ideas of professionals working in the adoption system as to the 'ideal' adoptive family.
42. From the very first contact prospective adopters need to feel welcomed. Without such support we risk pushing away families for children. Age, faith, sexuality relationship status and family status should not be a barrier to adoption – we need people from all walks of life to meet the varied needs of children put forward for adoption.

ARC VAA and Adoption NE RAA, have taken forward an initiative to recruit more adopters from LGBT communities. This has included ensuring:

- recruitment initiatives are all inclusive and will explicitly state that they welcome applications from the LGBT community.
- proactively supporting initiatives such as LGBT Fostering and Adoption awareness week, through specific features and adverts on their websites.
- attending Pride events in order to promote adoption (there has been some notable success).
- routinely involving their LGBT adopters in their stage 1 and stage 2 preparation training as presenters.
- having an experienced LGBT adopter as a member of their adoption panel.
- experienced LGBT adopters trained to act as buddies to other adopters.

All of these initiatives have helped to make prospective applicants feel comfortable in coming forward to undertake and complete their adoption journey.

43. A court ruling in December 2019 found that a local authority had acted outside the law when they turned away a prospective adopter couple because they did not have children waiting to be matched with the same ethnicity as the couple. The attitudes that lay behind the local authority's decision are unacceptable. The government in January 2020, asked Directors of Children's Services to review their processes and procedures to ensure they were compliant with the legislation framework, and that all front-line social workers understood what the law said and operated properly within it.

44. With the support of their local authorities, RAA leaders took up this challenge and agreed to collectively review the 'front door' of their services. Their aim was to ensure that potential adopters across the country were given the same advice about who can adopt so people were not excluded unnecessarily. They agreed answers to common questions and trained their staff to always respond in a consistent way, giving all prospective adopters a warm welcome.

*“Their website just looked quite good, they seemed quite forward thinking. They had a lot about single adopters, or same-sex couple adopters, or older adopters and so they came across as being quite progressive.” – **Prospective Adopter**<sup>5</sup>*

45. They also commissioned mystery shopper evaluation to provide ‘critical friend’ feedback to individual RAAs and VAAs on their handling of adoption enquiry phone calls at the start and end of the 2020 National Adopter Recruitment Campaign #You Can Adopt.

46. The report identified positive practice but also highlighted areas of variation. RAAs will use this to drive future local improvements and create a nationally consistent approach. For example, collectively agreeing how much information agencies should ask for in the initial enquiry stage to avoid putting people off.

47. Findings from the evaluation of RAAs suggest that those interviewed have been working to reduce the perceived barriers faced by prospective adopters, and support the vision of the national adoption campaign.

*“For ourselves, the major changes have been recognising that blanket bans are unacceptable. So, we have focused on the individual and if there are gaps [in the support we provide to prospective adopters], we look at how we can help them develop.” – **RAA Manager***

48. Going forwards, we believe that a national and targeted approach to recruiting adopters may help to ensure that we recruit the adopters we most need for children waiting the longest. The government will provide £1m to RAA leaders in 2021-22 to improve recruitment and the adopter approval process.

49. The RAA led National Adopter Recruitment Steering Group has developed a three-year strategy that builds on a commitment from all those involved in the adoption system to ensure that every child with adoption as their plan is found the right adoptive family to meet their needs in a timely way.

50. More specifically, and building on the success of the last campaign, we want to go further to raise awareness of adoption. That will involve clear messages about the needs of children who are waiting, and continuing to dispel longstanding myths around who is eligible to adopt. For example, you can adopt if you are single or live in rented accommodation. You can adopt if you are in your 50s, have a lower income, already have children or plan to have them later in life.

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<sup>5</sup> [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies second report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

51. Using the best practice from the 2020 targeted ethnic minority campaign will allow us to spread this practice elsewhere. We will work with the sector to further roll out this targeted approach to recruiting adopters for all children who wait the longest for homes, including those in sibling groups, and disabled children. This will include cross sector working groups, which include external experts and academics as well as targeted live events, workshops, podcasts, webinars and Q&As.
52. We will challenge agencies to consider the profile of the children waiting and work with local authorities to build tailored support packages to encourage potential adopters to step forward. For example, systemic links and exchanges of information between RAA adoption professionals and specialist disability organisations can have positive effects on the recruitment and approval of adopters for disabled children.
53. We want to continue to attract people who want to start a family; but also those whose already have children and those who want to adopt before having their own children. We want to dispel the myth that adoption is only for people who cannot have their own children.
54. Our ambition is to increase the number of people registering their interest in adoption, to target recruitment around the needs of those children waiting longest, improve the quality and responsiveness of adoption services and support the adoption workforce so they are supporting adoptive families in the best possible way and achieving better outcomes for those children.

#### **How we will measure progress**

- Greater numbers registering an interest to adopt, from all walks of life including from all social classes, ethnic groups, and sexual orientation.
- Numbers of approved adopters against the numbers of children waiting to find an adoptive family.
- An improvement in finding families for children who wait the longest and a reduction in their waiting times – i.e. ethnic minority children, siblings, children over 5 years old and disabled children.
- Ofsted inspection findings

## Chapter 4: A seamless approval process for prospective families

55. Many adopters have said they have found the adopter approval process challenging and intrusive. This chapter looks at how we can improve the experiences of prospective adopters so more are approved as adopters, to make the process as seamless as possible and to prepare adopters to meet the range of needs of the children waiting for adoption.

56. It covers how we will improve the approval process by working with RAA leaders and VAAs to trial and set national standards which will be informed by listening to the views of adopters and adopted children.

### Approval process

57. Our vision for the future is to support RAA leaders and VAA leaders to ensure:

- All RAAs and VAAs provide a consistent and culturally sensitive approach to assessing and preparing adopters. National standards are developed for all elements of the adopter approval journey to the point of matching, recognising the importance of providing flexibility to meet the specific needs of potential adopters.
- Staff in all RAAs have the relevant skills and experience to undertake high quality assessments and preparation of adopters, including awareness and understanding of ethnic minorities and faith groups.

58. Preparation groups aim to prepare prospective adopters for the process and realities of adoptive parenting. It is important these give adopters a good understanding of the impact abuse and neglect have on children and how to provide the sensitive and reflective parenting these children need.

59. Evidence from the evaluation<sup>6</sup> of RAAs shows that all have begun work to improve the quality and consistency of preparation groups and that this is an on-going theme in their work. Surveys<sup>7</sup> of prospective adopters in five RAAs found that overall prospective adopters spoke very positively about their experiences of the assessment process:

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<sup>6</sup> [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies second report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>7</sup> [The views and experiences of prospective adopters in five regional adoption agencies \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

*“Adopters always want to know how soon they can get on the preparation groups, if you’re saying you have to wait two-three months until the next one, you’ll probably lose them, whereas now you can offer them something within a few weeks.” – RAA manager*

*“They seem to know what they are doing and I feel really confident and comfortable having used them to go through this journey, it’s just knowing the support’s there all the time, it’s really nice.” – Prospective adopter*

60. However, some of the feedback provided constructive criticism: a small number of respondents felt that the training had been too ‘didactic’, they wanted more activities and more positive adoption stories. Respondents also asked for more information on early permanence, adopting children already in the family, the needs of disabled children or of a different ethnicity.
61. It is particularly important that adopters understand the support that could be provided if they adopt children where they can meet some, but not all of, a child’s cultural and ethnic needs.
62. Disability issues should be a standard component of all staff training and adopter preparation sessions. Prospective adopters who express an interest in adopting disabled children should be supported to gain insight and experience, for example, through children’s disability support groups.
63. Prospective adopters reported that factors during the approval process that contributed to negative experiences included feeling disliked, misunderstood, and judged by the assessing social worker. Others said there was too much focus on their own difficult childhood experiences without their worker considering whether and how those difficulties had been resolved.
64. Inappropriate judging can be a particular issue for prospective adopters from poorer economic backgrounds. Some feel they are judged on their lifestyle rather than whether they can provide a strong loving family to adoptive children.
65. We want all agencies to work collaboratively with families, making sure there is never a situation where prospective families feel sub-standard or that they are being judged.

*Voice of adopted children, adopters, adopted adults and birth parents*

66. Our vision for the future is to support RAA leaders to ensure:

- the wishes, feelings and views of children and their families are sought and considered by RAAs in development and monitoring of their services and contribute to shaping the preparation and training of new prospective adopters.
- information is available to children and young people describing the services available in appropriate language (including accessible information for disabled children and young people).
- all RAAs develop local partnerships that support and encourage adopted children to contribute to their support plans, and recognise and build on adoptive parents' expertise, in ways that are valued.
- RAAs have arrangements in place to allow adoptive parents to contribute their views and to influence the decision making of RAA Boards.
- the RAA Leaders' Group consult adopters about what they should include in their annual plan and in the national standards they set.
- all RAAs have peer support groups in place.

67. Adopters are best placed to understand the needs of their children and their insight is invaluable in shaping the services they use. The views and experiences of adopted children and young people as well as birth parents also need to be understood and taken into account.

68. Some RAAs and VAAs have a strong record in involving adopters and children in helping to shape services and getting feedback on how they are performing, and all engaged with adopter groups and children as they transitioned from local authority to regional adoption agency services.

69. Many RAAs have adopter representatives in their governance structures. To help adopters influence service delivery, RAAs utilise a range of sources. This includes feedback on adopter preparation training, adoption panels (several RAAs have panels which include an adopted adult sitting as an independent member) and adoption support audits focusing on adopter experiences of services and adopter led peer support groups which also act as a conduit to influence how services are delivered in the future.

**Adoption Counts RAA** has engaged Adoption UK (AUK) to develop their **Adopter Voice** service across their region to create a network of representation. This model includes:

- Adopter Voice Champions recruited, inducted and trained.
- Champions consult with their networks online or face to face.
- AUK hosts on-line forums and a closed Facebook group to post questions and promote adopter voice activities with links to information, surveys or bulletins.
- They currently have two adopters on the governing Board of Adoption Counts and three adopter representatives on the Adoption Support Sub Board.

70. However, more could be done to involve adopters and adopted young people in helping to shape services across the country and we will work with the sector to deliver on this as set out above.

#### **How we will measure progress**

- Prospective adopters' experience of the service they receive and their engagement—based on mystery shopper exercises and RAA annual user experience surveys.
- Conversions from Registrations of Interest to approved adopters.
- The time that all children wait for placement with a new family reduces.
- Independent reports such as the annual AUK Barometer survey of adopters report.
- Reports from regular RAA reviews of the quality of all information available for prospective adopters and children meet national standards. For example, easily accessible, informative and navigable websites and downloadable information packs.
- The development and monitoring of RAA national standards on approaches for adopter and child engagement.

## Chapter 5: Matching children with families

71. Every child deserves a stable and loving home, which gives them the security that comes from knowing they are safe and cared for. Stability forms the backbone of a child's life, providing the structure, strength and consistency that supports the child emotionally and psychologically. This chapter sets out our vision for improving matching timeliness and increase early permanence placements to reduce the number of moves a child might have.
72. Delay in finding a child a permanent home is a key factor which negatively affects their welfare and their future chances in life. Although our previous reforms have speeded up the process, we want to do more. The quicker we can help adoptive children feel secure and safe the more likely they will experience a happy childhood and have good outcomes.
73. Making a good match between a child and prospective adopter is a highly skilled task and is vital for both the child and the prospective adopter. A range of issues needs to be considered such as meeting the child's identified needs and the parenting skills of the prospective adopter, all while working quickly to avoid the damaging effect of delay to a child finding a stable and loving home.
74. Some prospective adopters report feeling judged by the system which conforms to narrow expectations of adoptive families. Anyone who can provide a safe and loving home can adopt, and the class, ethnicity, profession, gender, sexual orientation or marital status of prospective adopters should not stand in the way of adoption. Single adopters in particular should not face delay in their matching journey. Families who rent rather than own their homes, do not have a big enough house to give each child their own bedroom, or do not conform to other expectations of 'typical' adopters should not face any additional barriers to adoption. Matching children to adopters fully capable of providing them with a stable and loving home should be the sole, overriding objective of the system.
75. Ethnic minority children wait the longest to be found a new home. Maintaining continuity of the heritage of their birth family is important to most children; it is a means of retaining knowledge of their identity and background. However, social workers should avoid placing the child's ethnicity above other relevant characteristics when looking for an adoptive family for the child.
76. Agencies must not delay placing a child with the prospective adopter simply because they do not share the child's ethnic or cultural background. Many adopters provide brilliant love and care for children with whom they do not share the same ethnicity.

### Improving Matching Services

77. Our vision for the future is to support RAA leaders to ensure:

- new processes and procedures for matching are introduced which break down barriers happening across boundaries. This will include exploring the value of developing a national matching service and real-time information and access for all children who are waiting.
- use of all existing methods and tools including national Activity Days and Exchange Days to secure matches for children without delay.
- new processes and procedures are put in place to speed up the sharing of adopters across regions for children who wait the longest.
- improvements in data collection and information sharing between RAAs, which drives improvements in services for children and families.
- RAAs work with VAAs and other voluntary sector organisations to recruit and support the right adopters for the children who are waiting.

78. Some RAAs already work closely with their local VAAs to identify adopters for children who are likely to wait the longest to be matched.

#### **RAA and VAA Partnership Working**

Five RAAs in the Midlands, alongside Birmingham Children's Trust, looked at practices in family finding, adopter preparation and support. This led to the sharing of children and adopter profiles to support family finding and an agreed transfer protocol.

The most significant piece of work has been the production of the Midlands Adoption Sufficiency Statement. This report analysed placement needs and activity over a two-year period, identifying those areas of placement shortfall. It is now using this information to speed up the placement of children that used to wait the longest.

The group has started meetings with VAAs primarily from their region, to consider how agencies can work together to meet this placement challenge within the Midlands region.

79. The evaluation of RAAs<sup>8</sup> shows that the time taken to place a child in an adoptive family has improved within RAAs, including for those children who have often had to wait the longest, but for many the wait is still too long.

*“Family finding and matching when case holding from care and placement order has significantly reduced the delay for children [in placing them] and with the making of the [adoption] order application. The child and adoptive family social worker are one in the same.” – RAA team manager*

80. Some RAAs have adopted more strategic approaches to tracking children, which has allowed practitioners to identify cases early on and track children prior to placement or care orders being granted. This enabled them to find a potential match and conduct the necessary checks and assessments with the family earlier, reducing unnecessary delay.

81. Adoption Activity Days and Exchange Days where larger numbers of children and adopters who are waiting can find each other has a strong record in securing matches across boundaries. Some RAAs have embraced the approach regionally but the opportunity to attend an Adoption Activity Day or a national Exchange Day needs to be extended to all who could benefit.

#### **Coram activity day case study**

Laura lives with her birth son, adopted son Sam\* (aged 7) and an adopted daughter. Sam has a disability which affects his speech, swallowing and eye sight; he cannot walk or talk. Laura met Sam at the activity day when he was 19 months old and knew instantly that there was a special connection. Laura explains: “If you just read a child’s paperwork, you don’t really get a sense of who they are. And for children with disabilities it’s easy to focus on the disability and not actually see the child. Sam’s got his own set of challenges but he’s unique and he’s just perfect. I went down to interact with the children at an Adoption Activity Day, and as soon as I saw him, I just thought: he is my son. I didn’t know much about him at that moment but over the course of the day I could spend some time with him and it was just great. At an activity day you are able to see the children interact, smile, play and discover their little characters and their potential. If I had read my son’s Child Permanence Report instead of meeting him then I might have decided his needs were too great but as soon as I met him, I knew he was my son. Our paths crossed that day and I’ve got the Activity Day to thank for that.”

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<sup>8</sup> [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies second report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

82. However, the evaluation also showed that the experience of adopters was mixed, with some moving faster through the system and others who experienced unnecessary delays in the assessment process<sup>9</sup>. Some prospective adopters reported feeling disliked, misunderstood and judged by their social worker; others feel their expressions of interest in a child was overlooked.
83. Some adopters approved for a sibling group may be matched locally with a single child without being shared. If all adopters who were approved to take more than one child were matched with a sibling group, many more children would be adopted. We would like to see approved adopters who are able to take in three or more children shared across agencies so more sibling groups can be found a new family'
84. We want to modernise data collection and information sharing so that RAA leaders have access to national data which can be used to improve processes and ultimately the delivery of services to children and their families.
85. Currently RAAs charge one another a fee to use an adopter recruited and trained by another RAA or VAA. This can slow down the matching process. However, the inter-agency fee for placements with VAAs provides stability for the independent voluntary adoption agencies. We will work with sector leaders to consider over time the value of introducing a new national matching service to speed up the sharing of adopters across regions, including exploring alternatives to fees changing hands.

### Early Permanence

86. Early Permanence is an umbrella term used when talking about certain types of adoption placements for babies or toddlers. The placements enable a child in care, usually under the age of two, to be placed with foster carers who are also approved adoptive parents who are ready and willing to adopt the child if the courts decide to award a placement order.
87. A key benefit of these schemes is that they offer the child stability, reducing the negative impact of placement changes. The new carers are better able to

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<sup>9</sup> [The views and experiences of prospective adopters in five regional adoption agencies \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

build strong attachment and bonding with children, which will help to later reduce adoption breakdowns.

88. Our vision for the future is to support RAA leaders to use Early Permanence placements where it is in the best interests of the child.

89. We will support RAA leaders to deliver:

- the expansion of Early Permanence services to all RAAs, using the best tested practice to support everybody involved, with the aim of increasing the number of children being placed via Early Permanence placements where this is the best option for the child.
- raised awareness of the benefits of Early Permanence placements amongst wider stakeholders, including LAs and the courts, encouraging the use of such placements whenever appropriate.

90. Not all RAAs have strong arrangements in place for Early Permanence; some are still developing their approaches. However, there is some good practice and some RAAs and VAAs are working with the charity Coram to achieve a quality mark for their services. Those RAAs who formed earlier, have been proactive in sharing best practice and offering training to other RAA teams<sup>10</sup>.

91. Effective Early Permanence strategies include strong links with local authorities' social work and legal teams, plus local courts and health services in order to share knowledge of the benefits of Early Permanence. This has been key to ensuring more children who would benefit from Early Permanence are identified for such a placement. In several cases, where strategies have had longer to develop, this has led to a significant increase in Early Permanence placements, even at the height of the Covid-19 outbreak<sup>11</sup>.

92. In 2021-22 we will provide £500k to improve Early Permanence arrangements in RAAs and to increase the number of children put forward for an Early Permanence placement. This will include: training for both agency staff and prospective carers; training for the judiciary, local authority legal teams and CAFCASS; funding regional advocates to ensure that Early Permanence is considered as a potential placement type in every suitable case; encouraging RAAs to apply for the Early Permanence Quality Mark (a national standard developed by Coram); exploring support programmes for carers; and piloting

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<sup>10</sup> In the North West there is a commissioning arrangement for concurrent placements with its VAA partners. Four RAA's jointly commission that which ensures a range of EP placements are available at all times.

<sup>11</sup> In Adoption Tees Valley RAA, an Information Sharing Protocol has been developed, in collaboration with the RAA, LAs, and Legal/Judiciary, to enable better planning for the right family for the child. Adoption Tees Valley benefitted from peer support and mentoring from One Adoption West Yorkshire RAA.

an Early Permanence system for children aged 5-10 and sibling groups.

**How we will measure progress**

- Waiting times for children, particularly for children from ethnic minority groups, sibling groups, children over 5 years old and disabled children.
- The number of children waiting over 18 months.
- The number of Early Permanence placements being made.
- The number of adopters dually approved as suitable for Early Permanence planning.
- National data is being used to improve information sharing and service delivery.
- Ofsted inspection findings.

## Chapter 6: Post adoption placement support

93. This chapter sets out our vision for supporting adoptive families across health, education, and through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) and how we will measure progress.

94. The research report *Beyond the Adoption Order*, (2014) reported that the vast majority of adopted children will have experienced neglect or abuse, which will often cause enduring problems such as attachment disorders, developmental delays or challenging behaviour<sup>12</sup>.

95. They may have lost significant relationships in their lives. Most will have experienced abuse and neglect. Some will have been exposed to pre-natal drug or alcohol abuse, or exposed to poor maternal health and nutrition. Some will have inherited a predisposition to mental health problems or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. The child and their adoptive parents will need the support of a range of mainstream and specialist services to help with the children's recovery and any longer term needs.

96. As we consider how to improve support to adoptive children we will also look to improve the support for other children who leave under a permanence order, such those who leave care under a special guardianship order.

### RAA Adoption Support

97. Our vision is to support RAA leaders to ensure:

- the development of outcomes-based national standards for adoption support services with measurable aims.
- families have access to mainstream early support, and specialist support as soon as problems escalate to build resilience and stability for the whole family and a strong sense of identity and belonging for the child. This help is regularly reviewed taking into account best practice and research.
- the transition to living with the adoptive family is planned and carefully monitored to maximise attachment and bonding and minimise the risk of adoption breakdown.
- best practice on contact arrangements with adopters and birth families. The practice takes account of the latest research on contact arrangements and has a strong element around life story work.

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<sup>12</sup> [Beyond the adoption order: challenges, intervention, disruption - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

- a review of the “three year rule” on who is responsible for support to establish whether it is still fit for purpose.
- support is provided throughout childhood and in the transition into adulthood, whenever it is required.
- investigating whether support being commissioned nationally or pan-regionally would secure better value for money and greater consistency.

98. RAAs are well placed to strategically plan and commission support.

The evaluation of RAAs<sup>13</sup> also showed progress with

- A more strategic approach to delivering adoption support.
- Early intervention and improved universal offers are now becoming widely embedded involving new drop in ‘meet the team’ clinics, more opportunities for peer support, and information evenings.
- Where targeted support is needed, training has upskilled staff to provide this in-house.
- Benefits of economies of scale are allowing innovative practice to develop.
- Emerging approaches to addressing and managing high demand.

99. Whilst there are improvements, too many families do not get the support they need when they need it. Adoption UK’s Barometer report<sup>14</sup> (2021), found that adopters with newly placed children were mainly positive about the support they received but that there is still unmet need. There is inconsistency in the provision of support services across the country.

100. The Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) has developed a guide for what high quality adoption support looks like, which provides a tool to inform service improvements and system change.<sup>15</sup> We will consider this guide alongside RAA best practice examples to work towards national standards for adoption support services.

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<sup>13</sup> [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/614242/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies-2019-2021.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [Adoption Barometer Report 2021 \(adoptionuk.org\)](https://adoptionuk.org/adoption-barometer-report-2021/)

<sup>15</sup> <https://corambaaf.org.uk/sites/default/files/Blueprint%20for%20an%20adoption%20support%20service.pdf>

### Early help and support offer

101. Families need to get support before a child moves in with them. Normally there will be a transition period which will take place over many weeks. Moving to a new family will have a profound impact on the child's emotional and physical well-being. It therefore needs to be planned and monitored carefully, using the latest research evidence<sup>16</sup>.
102. We know from the evaluation of RAAs<sup>17</sup> that some RAAs have developed peer mentoring programmes and buddy schemes, including programmes of events, coffee mornings and groups for families to come together to develop support networks.
103. Providing support for families at an earlier stage before needs escalate to crisis-point is critical. We know that there are transition points throughout a child's life when they may need some additional help and support. Many local areas have established systems to support all children and young people during these critical periods in their life. For some adopted children, these transition points can be especially difficult. Where an adoptive child's needs cannot be met by the established system of support within a local area, the ASF has been created to fund specialist interventions.

### Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

104. The government introduced the ASF in 2015 to help adopted children and those who left care under a special guardianship order.
105. Since its launch, the ASF has provided over £200m to local authorities and RAAs to fund therapeutic support for over 36,000 individual children.

*"It has helped me a lot and it would help others. I don't know where I would have been today without it. The fund has helped me stop doing drugs, being violent, feeling suicidal and self-harming. I understand myself better now and I think other young people deserve the same chance<sup>18</sup>." T aged 17*

106. A survey of families who received ASF support<sup>19</sup> showed that most adoptive parents and carers expressed satisfaction with seeking and getting help through the ASF, for example the choice of provider available to them (85%), the location of support (82%) or the number of sessions offered (80%).

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.movingtoadoption.co.uk/>

<sup>17</sup> [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies second report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>18</sup> Quote from T aged 17 from the July 2019 APPG report on the Adoption Support Fund [Investing+in+Families.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-support-fund-baseline-survey-of-families)

<sup>19</sup> [Adoption Support Fund: baseline survey of families. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-support-fund-baseline-survey-of-families](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-support-fund-baseline-survey-of-families)

107. However, 39% of parents or carers participating in the current baseline survey thought that they had had to wait a long time for an assessment.

*“Get things sorted out more quickly so I could have known about my ADHD sooner<sup>20</sup>.” N, young person, aged 13*

108. In 2021-22, funding for the ASF will be £46m, more than double the initial budget of £19m in 2015.

109. The ASF provides much needed support to special guardianship families caring for children leaving care. Whilst their use of the Fund has increased, we believe there is still unmet need.

110. We will explore:

- whether some national or pan-regional or national commissioning would provide better value for money.
- working with RAAs and local authorities to minimise delays in initial assessments based on the best practice.
- consider how to ensure more special guardianship families know about and can access the ASF.

#### Support for birth families and contact services

111. Many birth parents of children in care will be grieving over the loss of their child or children from their care and may need support to process what has happened. Some may have substance addictions, mental health problems or have experienced abuse. Local authorities are required to make a range of services available to birth relatives, including counselling, advice and information and assistance in relation to ongoing contact with the child who was adopted. Most do this through RAAs who often provide support to birth families through arrangements with VAAs or other charities.

112. Where ongoing contact with an adopted child is to take place, support for birth parents or family members can help ensure that the contact is a positive experience for the adopted child. Having some contact with birth parents, grandparents and siblings may play an important role in helping children understand their past and identity.

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<sup>20</sup> July 2019 APPG report on the Adoption Support Fund [Investing+in+Families.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.squarespace.com)

113. Research *Contact after Adoption study* (Neil 2013)<sup>21</sup> found that adopted young people experienced benefits from contact which included gaining information about their birth family, building an open atmosphere with their adoptive parents and enjoying relationships with birth family members.
114. However, it also found that contact could be damaging, disappointing or emotionally challenging, particularly where this is unplanned, and it may not be right for every child. Its findings suggest that children's contact with birth relatives should be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis, and that where it is in the interests of the child and supported by the adopters, support should be available to help ensure that contact is a positive experience for children.
115. Decisions about contact should always be on a case-by-case basis and in the best interests of the child. Face-to-face contact between an adopted child and their birth parents has traditionally been rare. However, some adopters would like more support with face-to-face contact as children enter adolescence and start to raise questions about their birth family or try to find them via social media. In today's society contact might happen via social media without the consent of the family or adopted child and where this happens support also needs to be provided.
116. Currently there is often insufficient support available to make contact work for all parties. Any form of face-to-face contact needs careful planning and support. The child's needs should be central to any plan which must also take account of the adopters' views. Children's views and their needs for contact may change over time so any contact plans must be kept under review. All adopters should be offered support to consider what may be right for their child. Adopters and birth families will also need practical and emotional support to meet the challenges that often emerge both during and after contact.
117. We will work with the RAA Leaders Group to develop and trial what good practice looks like with a view to setting national standards in this area.

### Support throughout childhood and into adulthood

118. Some adopted children and their families may only need support at certain times of their childhood, for example, when transitioning to school, when wanting to start contact with birth parents or when they are entering adulthood. Adoptive families should feel confident that their child will receive any additional support they need as they move into adulthood and transitions

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<sup>21</sup> [Contact After Adoption. https://sites.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption](https://sites.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-adoption)

from statutory services for children and young people to those for adults will be seamless and well-managed.

### Three-year rule

119. Legislation currently says that where a local authority places a child with another local authority it is their responsibility to provide support for three years. After that, the responsibility lies with the local authority where the adoptive family lives. This can result in delays in them getting the support they need, or a drop in support after the three years. We will therefore review the three-year rule in consultation with RAAs and VAAs to see if it is still fit for purpose.

### Health

120. Our vision for the future is to support RAA leaders to ensure:

- joint local packages of care are provided by health, education and RAA services, possibly through the development of Centres of Excellence.
- care pathways within the NHS are built collaboratively with local authorities, health commissioners and providers so adopted families can access without delay assessments for conditions such as autism, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- evidence based services are provided to support families.

121. The research *'Beyond the Adoption Order'* emphasised that the complex and overlapping needs of many adopted children do not fit neatly within the tight criteria for support required by health agencies.

122. The evaluation of the ASF<sup>22</sup> shows the significant needs of adopted children; most have needs in the clinical or 'borderline clinical' range.

123. Adopted disabled children are more likely to have additional needs for support. These include access to health professionals, housing adaptations, and overnight services, short breaks, special education needs.

124. From November 2017 until March 2020, the government funded two RAAs to develop Adoption Support Centres of Excellence. These demonstrated how social care, health and educational partners can deliver a holistic package of assessment and support. Both RAAs are now receiving some NHS funding

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<sup>22</sup> [Evaluations of the adoption support fund \(ASF\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

for their Centres of Excellence, having demonstrated the positive impact on health outcomes.

125. We will therefore over time consider how we build on the success of the Adoption Support Centres of Excellence in RAAs to improve support to children in all parts of the country.

#### **RAA Centres of Excellence**

One Adoption West Yorkshire and Adoption Counts RAAs both provide excellent examples of Centres of Excellence, covering 10 local authorities between them. This has required effective collaboration across agencies and a clear expectation on other services such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services, other health services and education.

Having originally been developed under government grants, both are now fully self-funded projects. In both cases, the model utilises a child's existing relationships, both in school and at home, ensuring that both school and family form part of the therapeutic team supporting the child on a daily basis.

This ensures access to a high quality, ongoing package of appropriate support delivered from day one and available throughout childhood and beyond. By providing targeted and effective therapy, Centres of Excellence can prevent breakdown and improve the quality of life for adoptive families.

126. We remain committed to expanding the evidence base of 'what works' in terms of support for adoptive families. An independent review of the interventions most commonly funded by the ASF, conducted in 2016 found varying levels of evidence of effectiveness but limited evidence linked specifically to adopted children<sup>23</sup>.

127. The National Institute for Health Research is funding a three-year randomised control trial for Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), one of the most frequently funded ASF interventions. This aims to determine the clinical and cost-effectiveness of DDP in improving the mental health outcomes of young children. Recruitment for the feasibility trial began in January 2021.

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<sup>23</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/534787/20160701Evidence\\_base\\_researchreport.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/534787/20160701Evidence_base_researchreport.pdf)

### **Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy**

Adoption Central England (ACE) has become the first RAA to become a DDP Certified Organisation. DDP focuses on supporting adoptive parents to manage challenging behaviour whilst staying emotionally connected throughout. This supports attachment security and builds relationships.

The two-and-a-half-year programme has been transformative where every aspect of the service has been reviewed and developed to ensure that the DDP principles are embedded and modelled throughout. Social work staff in ACE are trained and can gain further qualifications in DDP.

128. The Department for Education will work with the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England to build on the progress made under the NHS Long Term Plan and ensure that mainstream NHS services support all families, particularly through improving access to Child and Adolescent Health Services (CAMHS). We will also identify areas of research that could jointly support to improve our understanding of the particular needs of adopted children and families and ‘what works’.

129. The Department for Education is commissioning a robust, large-scale, longitudinal piece of research to investigate the needs, experiences and outcomes of children who left care on an adoption or Special Guardianship Order.

### **Education**

130. Our vision for the future is to support RAA leaders to:

- develop strong partnership working with Virtual School Heads (VSHs) and professional education organisations at national level to improve the support offered for children so that they can obtain similar education outcomes to their peers.
- understand and keep under review what support and use of pupil premium plus has the biggest impact on adoptive children’s outcomes and share findings with others.
- have strong education policies working with local Virtual School Heads and Designated Teachers to use the best practice to drive high quality support in schools across the country.
- have a focus on supporting adopted children attend and enjoy school and have a smooth transition between primary and secondary school.

- join up support with local authorities for adopted children to ensure timely access and implementation of Education Health and Care Plan.

131. Adoptive children should receive support to obtain good educational attainment. However, many do not do so, with poorer GCSE results than the overall population in 2020 and higher exclusion rates. For adopted children, schools need to be aware of any emerging special educational needs and put in place appropriate provision that helps the child in their learning or participation.

132. Some RAAs have developed strong partnership working with their local Virtual School Heads to improve the support they give to adopted children.

#### **RAA working with Virtual School Heads**

One Adoption West Yorkshire and other RAAs have reached an agreement with their five Virtual School Heads to deliver their new statutory duty to provide advice and guidance to adopted children. Amongst other responsibilities, the role will:

- Support the 'triage' of queries from adopters during their journey to adoption and post-adoption, including signposting to other services.
- Develop a direct working relationship with each individual Virtual School, including time spent working in each Virtual School location to build a 'knowledge base' to support advice and guidance.
- Co-ordinate an expert, consistent CPD offer to adoption social workers and adoption support services in One Adoption West Yorkshire that is supported by each Virtual School.
- Support the development of resources on child development, learning and education for adopters and special guardians.
- Deliver an annual CPD workshop to Designated Teachers in each individual Virtual School to promote attachment awareness.

133. During the first covid lockdown RAAs leaders worked with the National Association of Virtual School Heads and other stakeholders, including Adoption UK and the National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists, to share best practice and identify how best to support adoptive children return to school.

134. As part of the recovery from Covid 19 the government has committed to:

- Raise standards for all children in all areas of the country.
- Narrow the gap between disadvantaged and peers.

- Improve the social and emotional health of every young person.

135. To do this the government is providing additional funding. On 2 June 2021 government announced an additional £1.4bn to support education recovery for children aged 2 to 19 in schools, colleges and early years settings. This comes on top of the £1.7bn already announced to support recovery to date, bringing total investment announced for education recovery over the past year to over £3bn.

136. This funding includes £1 billion for a national tutoring revolution which will see up to 100 million tutoring hours for children and young people across England by 2024.

137. We will ensure that the needs of adopted children and other previously looked-after children are recognised and considered in all work and programmes aimed at supporting children. For example, we will ensure that adopted children and previously looked-after children are included in the definition of vulnerable children and young people in government guidance.

#### How we will measure progress

- Number of adopted children who do not have to wait a long time for an assessment of their support needs (ASF evaluation surveys).
- Number of families using the ASF and impact of ASF funded therapeutic support
- Adopted children's education progress at key stage tests and assessments
- Independent reports such as the annual AUK Barometer survey of adopter's report.
- National standards on adoption support are developed and used by all RAAs to deliver support services.
- Ofsted Inspection Reports.

## Chapter 7: Supporting the RAA Leaders Group to drive progress

138. This chapter gives details of how we will support the RAA Leaders Group to deliver the vision we have set out in previous chapters.
139. RAAs are accountable to their local authorities. Lead members for children's services hold political responsibility for local authority adoption services and Directors of Children's Services are professionally accountable for children's outcomes across a local area, including adoption services. Most RAA Boards include Directors of Children's Services, who share legal accountability for the performance of their RAA, and some include lead members.
140. The RAA Leaders Group is a collaborative group bringing together experienced, dynamic and engaged professionals who work collegiately together. Over the past two years, leaders from the RAAs have come together to share good practice, influence national policy and to solve common problems.
141. To build on achievements so far, the Leaders Group will be supported by creating a platform for sharing, learning and collaboration as well as collective engagement with other key stakeholders, such as VAAs, the judiciary, education and health.
142. Support for RAA leaders will help them to collaborate pan-regionally and nationally and give them more leverage to develop services and drive performance – to build a framework of national standards in all areas of adoption services
143. Therefore, the government will fund the RAA Leaders Group in 2021-22 with £500k to employ a full-time National RAA strategic leader and a support team to progress collaborative working on agreed priority areas. The strategic leader will:
- drive and support the RAA Leaders Group in delivering the best possible adoption services on behalf of the local authorities and in line with government policies and guidance.
  - be responsible for the delivery of an agreed RAA strategic plan aimed at driving continuous improvement across the sector with key partners and stakeholders.
  - empower, enable and motivate the RAA Leaders Group to have high ambitions for the sector embedding a culture of shared accountability and continuous improvement.

- work with the What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care to identify gaps in the evidence and create new evidence through trials and evaluations around adoption practice, leading to a framework of national standards.
144. The support team will manage the development and implementation of the annual plan, provide data analysis, and where appropriate commission and manage services on behalf of the RAA leaders.
145. RAA leaders will develop an Annual Plan for 2021-22 setting out priority areas and strategic objectives for the year - agreed by their local Boards and local authorities - and report on progress in meeting previous priorities. For each priority area the plan will set out the goals or milestones that are expected to be achieved. They will review progress on improving adoption on an ongoing basis using data, including that collected by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB).
146. The new National RAA strategic leader will become a member of the ASGLB and report on progress against the annual plan. The strategic leader will also have quarterly meetings with the Minister for Children. They will also work closely with the Association of Directors Children’s Services through their Health, Care & Additional Needs Policy Committee and attend meetings at the request of the Chair. They will also liaise with the Local Government Association Children and Young People Board
147. The RAA Leaders Group will also work closely with ASGLB task groups set up to look at specific issues. For example, the ASGLB has set up a group to look at issues affecting children and adopters from ethnic minorities and what changes can be made to bring waiting times down for these children and support them in placements with adopters from a different ethnic group.
148. Over time we will support the RAA strategic leader and the Leaders’ Group to work increasingly closer together to deliver services at a national level.
149. At present, Ofsted looks at adoption practice through inspections of local authorities, VAAs and adoption support agencies. It does not have the powers to inspect RAAs. This means that it is difficult to understand fully the impact of RAAs. We will explore with Ofsted the opportunities to improve the current inspection and regulation arrangements so that there is the right level of scrutiny and reassurance across all key elements of adoption practice, and more accurately reflect the way that services are now delivered.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

150. In conclusion, this strategy sets out our long-term vision for adoption and the changes we expect to make over the next year. This is supported by additional funding this year, as set out below, to begin delivering this vision immediately. Also set out are our longer-term proposals for adoption which we will consider developing with sector leaders and others.

### Additional funding in 2021-22

151. To start to deliver our vision, we are committed to providing additional funding of £48.1m in 2021-22. This funding will be used in the following ways.

#### Boosting adopter recruitment

- Providing £1m to RAA leaders to improve the recruitment of adopters and drive a consistent approach to the approval process.

#### Matching children with families

- Providing £500k to improve Early Permanence arrangements in RAAs to increase the number of children put forward for Early Permanence placements.

#### Post adoption placement support

- Continuing to support families through a £46m investment in the Adoption Support Fund

#### Research

- Funding to commission a feasibility stage for a large-scale, longitudinal piece of research to investigate the needs, experiences and outcomes of children who left care on an adoption or Special Guardianship Order.

#### Regional Adoption Agencies

- Funding the RAA Leaders Group with £500k to employ a full-time National RAA strategic leader and a support team of two project workers to progress collaborative working on agreed priority areas.

### Longer-term proposals for adoption post 2021-22

152. We will explore how to support the RAA strategic leader and the Leaders' Group to trial and set a framework of national standards and the sector commissioning some services at a national level.

153. This will include exploring the following areas in collaboration with sector leaders:

- Considering developing new processes and procedures on family finding and matching services, including exploring the value of a national matching service with the aim of speeding up the sharing of adopters across regions.
- Exploring alternatives to fees changing hands between RAAs for adopters to assist with quicker matching processes and reduce the time children wait to find families.
- Look to continue a national approach to recruiting adopters following the success of the first national recruitment campaign. Focusing on ensuring that we recruit the adopters we most need for children waiting the longest.
- Investigate the value of a national or pan-regional approach to delivering and commissioning some elements of support.
- Consider how to build on the success of the Adoption Support Centres of Excellence in two RAAs, to improve support to children in all parts of the country.



Department  
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