



Department  
for Education

# **Evaluation of regional adoption agencies: final report**

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**Ecorys UK and the Rees Centre,  
Department of Education University of  
Oxford**



Government  
Social Research

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# Executive Summary

## RAA programme

The regionalisation reforms<sup>1</sup> were intended to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services and create c.25-30 regional adoption agencies (RAAs). The RAAs were expected to pool resources resulting in targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters; speedier matching with a larger, more diverse pool of adopters; and an improved range of adoption support services and regulatory compliance. Overall, in the longer term, RAAs were expected to provide better outcomes for children and adopters; reduced practice and performance inconsistencies; more effective strategic management of the service to deliver efficiency savings; and a culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with the Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) sector.<sup>2</sup>

As of March 2021, 31 RAAs were in operation (eight more than at the point of the Second Report and 21 more than at the point of the First Report) and three RAA 'projects' were continuing to work towards launching as operational RAAs. The policy objective of all local authorities (LAs) joining a RAA by the end of 2020 had therefore been broadly achieved. The amount of time RAAs had been live varied from more than three years (for eight RAAs) to less than a year (seven RAAs).

## RAA evaluation

The evaluation of RAAs ran from January 2018 to December 2021. Ecorys led the evaluation working with Professor Julie Selwyn and her team at the Rees Centre, Oxford University. This is the Final Report (2020-21), which reviews the progress of RAAs over time focusing on the four main objectives of the programme (adopter recruitment, reducing unnecessary delay, adoption support and cost efficiencies), alongside any other impacts achieved<sup>3</sup>. Building on the large-scale qualitative research and impact analysis from previous waves, the report includes findings from this final wave of research:

- A total of 226 interviewees were interviewed across seven RAA case studies. These included RAA Heads of Service (HoS), managers and practitioners from RAAs, LA children's social workers, Assistant Directors of Children's Services, staff working in business support, independent reviewing officers (IROs), adoption panel members and other local services such as clinical

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education (June 2015) Regionalising Adoption.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/437128/Regionalising\\_adoption.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16\\_Thurs\\_A.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16_Thurs_A.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Previous evaluation reports can be found at:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>



psychologists, virtual school heads, Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs), Adoption Support Agencies and local family courts.

- Interviews with a further 15 RAAs and RAA projects, one LA not yet part of an RAA project.
- An RAA survey to explore progress, model adaptations and services delivered across agencies, responses from 21 RAAs (seven case studies and 14 other RAAs).
- Interviews with 11 national stakeholders.
- The adoption support survey findings and the interviews with 31 approved adopters as part of the adopter research strand.
- The longitudinal analysis of the SSDA903<sup>4</sup> and ASGLB<sup>5</sup> data; and
- An analysis of costs: Section 251 returns for all LAs (local authority accounts collected nationally), and detailed financial accounts provided by 6 RAAs and interviews with finance leads in the case study areas.

There were several limitations that should be considered when reading the report, and this final report should be read alongside the detailed reports on adopters' views and experiences.<sup>6</sup>

- The final wave of research for the evaluation took place in early 2021, almost a year after the COVID-19 pandemic began and restrictions on face-to-face contact were introduced, forcing large-scale changes to adoption practice and bringing additional unforeseen pressures. The pandemic resulted in court closures and long delays that led to a decrease in the number of placement and adoption orders and an increase in the number of adoptive families waiting to be matched. Therefore, the conclusions may not be as might have been expected at this stage of the evaluation and policy development, over three years since the first LAs joined together as RAAs.
- The pandemic added another layer of complexity to the evaluation that involved a rolling programme of RAA implementation which meant that RAAs were at different stages of development.
- The evaluation drew on data from different time periods; quantitative data available up until March 2020 (with ASGLB data on adopter registrations covering the period from 1 April 2020 to March 2021), and the more recent qualitative data collected in 2021. It was therefore difficult to undertake thorough mixed-methods analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> Provides information about looked after children in England. The figures are based on data from the SSDA903 return collected from all English LAs.

<sup>5</sup> The ASGLB data return on adoption is completed by every local authority, voluntary adoption agency, and regional adoption agency in England on a quarterly basis.

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

## The RAA models

Analysis of RAA models over the course of the evaluation period (2018-2021) has shown that they typically fall on a continuum ranging from fully centralised and integrated RAA teams (generally the first RAAs to go live) through to more locality or decentralised/partnership models (the more recent RAAs) where LAs retained more responsibilities. On average an RAA was made up of five LAs. Only one RAA was led by a VAA. Another RAA project had developed a strategic partnership with a VAA to help recruit and support adopters. VAAs were sometimes part of RAA strategic board arrangements and delivered core services or provided commissioned services. Interviewees across RAAs, LAs, VAAs and national stakeholder interviewees raised the concern that VAAs were less involved overall than the original policy intention, particularly given that the original policy intention and guidance<sup>7</sup> was to work together to develop a culture of excellence.

The DfE defined an RAA as requiring six core elements<sup>8</sup> but, (according to RAA HoS' responses to the evaluation model survey (n=21/ 31)), the six core elements were not always present. The presence or absence of the six core elements was not associated with model type. Stakeholders thought that the most important core elements were having: a single line of accountability for functions that sit within the RAA reporting into robust governance arrangements; core functions of recruitment, matching, adoption support; and a single, pooled budget. They felt these elements helped to support strong leadership, better strategic management and planning, and more shared practice across partners.

The model survey findings showed that of all the RAA core elements, the two that HoS considered to be least present, as of early 2021, were: 1) a system-wide approach to meeting the needs of children, young people, and families, and 2) working with other RAAs and adoption agencies in their region to identify and implement best practice. The interviews indicated that as they have become more established, RAAs continued to refine how they worked with external services, but the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the remote working implications hampered their progress. The main exception to this was that there was more joint working with LAs to make applications to the ASF COVID-19 Scheme. Where there were links with health and education, the courts and Family Justice Boards, these tended to focus on responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there were examples of several RAAs coming together as a group to work on wider

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<sup>7</sup> Regionalising Adoption (2015) Department for Education.

<sup>8</sup> RAA core elements: a single line of accountability for functions that sit within the RAA, reporting into robust governance arrangements; a HoS with responsibility for line management, recruitment, budgets, contract management and strategic relationships, and who is accountable to the governance board for delivery of functions delegated to the RAA from LAs; pooled funding into a single RAA budget; core adoption functions of recruitment, matching, and support are transferred to the RAA; pan-regional approach: embedding best practice across the RAA; and a system-wide approach to meeting the needs of adopted children and families.

systems topics such as the development of a collective approach to tackling placement disruptions; an approach which broadly reflects the proposal set out in Regionalising Adoption<sup>9</sup> for the creation of regional permanence hubs. One of the facilitating factors for HoS working together was the RAA Leaders' Group, which had grown over time and was frequently said to be fundamental to the implementation of the programme and its future direction.

Largely, the model survey findings indicated that services for children (e.g., care planning and reviews, permanency plans, life story work), and decisions about their care planning, remained the responsibility of LAs, although RAAs often provided advice and support. Services for adoptive parents and post placement were mainly the responsibility of RAAs, which were set up to deliver LA statutory adoption duties. RAAs often worked in partnership with LAs and VAAs to provide certain functions which included preparation groups and activity days. The co-ordination and management of adoption support was generally the RAAs' responsibility. Most arrangements for Special Guardian (SG) support remained the LAs' responsibility. Step-parent adoption assessments were generally within the remit of RAAs. Inter-country adoption services were commissioned out by all RAAs.

## The sufficiency of adoptive families

The ASGLB data<sup>10</sup> shows that the number of Adoption Orders (AOs) has continued to decline, and the number of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) has continued to increase. In 2019/20 there were 3410 Adoption Orders (AOs) granted, a decrease of 4% (160n) from 2018/19 and the number of Special Guardianship 4210 SGOs granted, an increase of 10% (380n) from 2018/19<sup>11</sup>.

Despite ongoing efforts to improve adopter sufficiency by RAAs, analysis of ASGLB adoption data showed that nationally the percentage of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with an adoptive family decreased from 62% in 2015 to 47% in March 2020 (i.e., pre-COVID). Analysis showed a similar pattern for children defined in the report as children who wait the longest (older children, disabled children, sibling groups, ethnic minorities, and males).

There was a small negative effect associated with RAAs on the sufficiency of adoptive families over the period when RAAs started to go live (April 2017 to March 2020). Relative to LA-led adoption services (i.e., LAs that were not yet part of a live

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<sup>9</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/437128/Regionalising\\_adoption.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf)  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/437128/Regionalising\\_adoption.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

<sup>11</sup> More recent ASGLB data is available which shows a similar picture. This data was not available at the time our analysis was completed: <https://coram-i.org.uk/resource/asglb-q4-2020-21-headline-measures/>

RAA), analysis indicated there was a small (3%) but statistically significant decrease in the percentage of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with an adoptive family. RAA stakeholders thought this was likely due to the negative effect of a “hiatus” in recruitment activity during the transition period.

As RAAs became more established, they worked on targeted marketing and recruitment through community and faith groups and national initiatives (You Can Adopt campaign<sup>12</sup>). In addition, changing lifestyle choices in the public throughout the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increase in adopter enquiries and registrations (4760 registrations, an increase of 21% in 2020/21 compared to the ASGLB 2019/20 published figure)<sup>13</sup>. However, RAAs reported that there had so far been limited impact on the *profile* of adopters able to meet the needs of waiting children. There was widespread acknowledgement that RAAs still needed to recruit and train more adopters who were willing and able to take on children who wait the longest. RAA interviews found this was difficult as RAAs faced increasing demands responding to the large number of enquiries, assessing prospective adopters, and meeting rising demand for adoption support even though fewer children were needing placements. The research with adopters suggests that there could be more support for adopters who would like to adopt children who wait the longest; often, these adopters did not receive the support and guidance they needed to adopt children who wait the longest and when adopters were interested in adopting siblings, they were frequently matching with a single infant child.<sup>14</sup>

## Reducing unnecessary delay

Analysis of 2020/21 data by Coram-i<sup>15</sup> shows an ongoing trend that children with a placement order were waiting longer to be placed with an adoptive family. Across the qualitative research, delays in court proceedings were primarily because of COVID-19 restrictions and changes to care plans. LA delays were said to be contributing to slowing matching and placement processes.

Whilst there was a national trend of children waiting longer to be placed between April 2017 and March 2020 (before the first COVID-19 lockdown), analysis of data revealed that, relative to LA-led adoption services, RAAs had reduced the time taken to match and place children with adoptive families (all results were statistically significant):

- The average time from placement order to being matched with an adoptive family was quicker in RAAs (11 days less) compared with LAs not part of a RAA: 210 days in LAs and 199 days in live RAAs. RAAs were also on

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youcanadopt.co.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

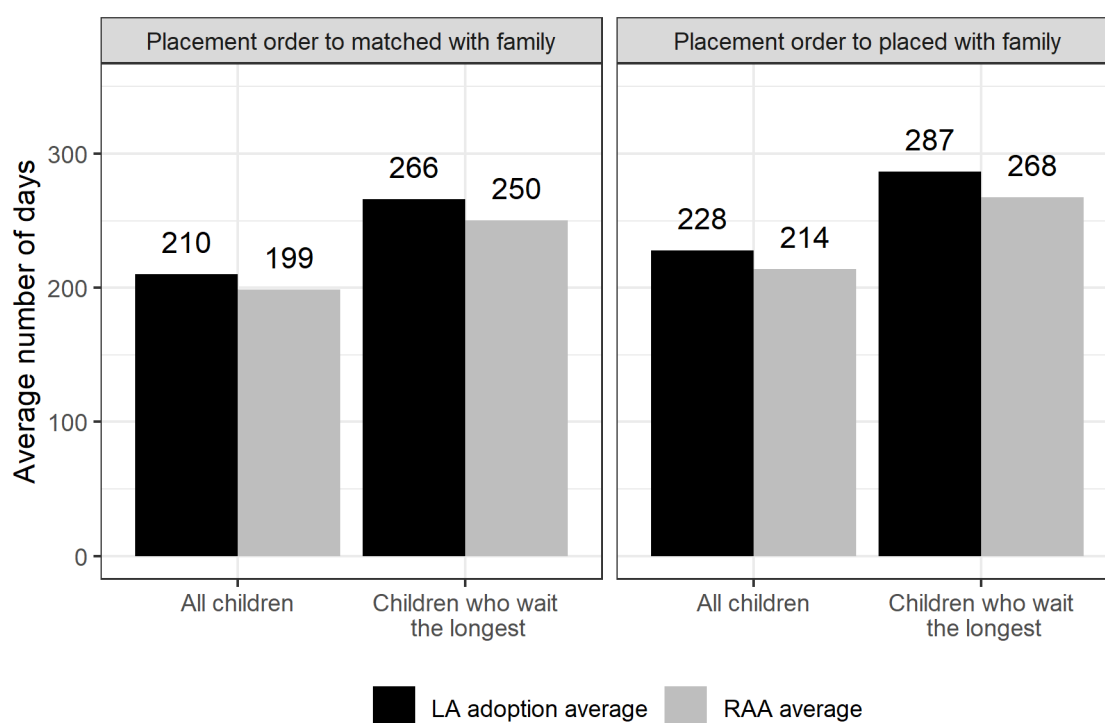
<sup>14</sup> [The views and experiences of approved adopters in 5 regional adoption agencies.pdf](#)

<sup>15</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

average quicker (16 days less) to match children defined as those who wait the longest (266 days in LAs and 250 in RAAs).

Similarly, the average time from placement order to placement with an adoptive family was quicker in RAAs for all placed children (14 days less - 228 days LAs, 214 RAAs), and for children defined as those who wait the longest (19 days less - 287 days LAs, 268 days RAAs) (see Figure 1). This is similar to the impact estimates in the Second Report.

**Figure 1: Average time from placement order to match and placement order to placed between April 2017 and March 2020**



Commonly, stakeholder interviewees attributed improvements in timeliness to ongoing efforts by RAAs to strengthen their matching processes by introducing earlier tracking, strategic matching meetings and sharing best practice with LAs; although there was also scope for some RAAs to work even more closely with LAs in these ways. Several LAs and RAAs believed that these changes, alongside more training and reflection time, resulted in better quality Child Permanence Reports, which helped to speed up the process. However, interviews with LAs and RAAs indicated that RAAs prioritised placements within their areas and the inter-agency fee (IAF) seemed to create incentives to arrange placements in-house, which might sometimes delay the process when a good match could be found earlier elsewhere.

At the same time, timeliness improvements were sometimes thought to be helped by a growing focus on Early Permanence in certain RAAs (particularly Fostering for Adoption). Where planning for Early Permanence worked well, the RAA, LA staff and partners were clear about their respective responsibilities, systems and processes

and senior staff took an active role in ensuring that all staff were knowledgeable and considered all routes to Early Permanency from the very start. There was, however, a consensus around the need to build better links between RAAs, LAs and VAAs around Early Permanence, further improve training for staff and adopters and better manage 'risk' in planning.

## **Adoption support**

The interviews provided qualitative evidence that RAAs were enabling a more strategic, coordinated approach to embedding adoption support, improving the range, accessibility and consistency of their support offers over time. Although there was still a heavy reliance on external funding for therapeutic support – particularly ASF and, this year, the ASF COVID-19 Scheme – RAAs believed there was a stronger foundation in place for RAAs to build on to deliver more support in-house. Indeed, the interviews showed that RAAs' in-house early intervention support offer was growing. Resourcing adoption support continued to be challenging, as was managing heavy caseloads. Large caseloads meant that stakeholders from RAAs acknowledged families still experienced delays in receiving targeted and specialist support, and this support was often delivered through commissioned (rather than in-house) services. RAAs often had staff with the skills to deliver these interventions but did not deliver the support because they did not have the capacity to do so. Working with LAs to agree funding for support was still proving challenging in some cases. There was limited evidence that RAAs collected information on the quality or impact of their support offers on families, and feedback from the research with adopters indicated that the quality of support was not much different to pre RAAs being established, with lengthy delays in assessments and the provision of services. Gaps remained, especially support services for SGOs and birth parents.

## **Analysis of costs**

Analysis of Section 251 data indicates that, up to March 2020, RAAs did not appear to be increasing (or decreasing) local authority expenditure on adoption and therefore were cost neutral. The majority of RAA spend was associated with staff costs. There was a view amongst RAA HoS and staff that, as RAAs, they were able to recruit strong candidates who benefitted from enhanced training offers and opportunities to work alongside adoption specialists, which led to practice improvements.

Stakeholders felt that the shift to RAAs had led to efficiencies, such as economies of scale in commissioning support (but also due to the shift to remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic); this had enabled them to increase their adoption support offer (via remote delivery). Views on any savings made through a reduction in the use of the IAF varied; in one case study area, staff found interagency placements

were cost neutral, whereas in another example, a surplus was reported. The impact analysis showed an improvement in timeliness, which can be translated to savings for LAs in foster care costs – national cost savings from when RAAs started to go live (April 2017) to March 2020 were estimated to be £3,909,080. Qualitative insights revealed that it continued to be difficult to accommodate the needs/expectations of all LAs, particularly where RAAs, like LAs, were being asked to make cost savings.

## **The impact of COVID-19 and the effectiveness of the RAA response**

There was a widespread perception amongst interviewees that RAAs had adapted well to the challenges presented by the pandemic. Across the RAAs, adoption services were digitalised to enable families and children to continue to move through the service with as little disruption as possible. Adaptations were made in the immediate response to quickly move provision online, with RAAs thinking creatively to adapt their service in the longer term to meet the needs of children and families remotely. Despite the challenges, the pandemic presented opportunities for the RAAs to recognise the benefits of digital delivery for some strands of their service that they intended to continue after restrictions were lifted. Proposed areas of the service to remain remote included panels, early phases of introductions and online Adoption Information Sessions (AIS). However, stakeholders recognised the importance of delivering some elements of the adoption process in-person; there was consensus across the RAAs that some visits, assessments, training, and support sessions must return to face-to-face delivery. Similarly, interviewees felt that the delivery of specialist adoption support, work with birth parents, childcare experience and family finding events were difficult to deliver remotely and worked better in person.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this evaluation paint a complicated picture. The evaluation data consists of three broad sets – quantitative administrative data, qualitative data from stakeholder interviews, and survey data from adopters. Generally, these different sets of data do not fully align. The qualitative research commonly provided positive perceptions of certain changes brought about due to the introduction of RAAs (amidst challenges resulting from systems change and the COVID-19 pandemic), and a main theme was that RAAs have led to improved collaboration and practice. However, this was only partially reflected in outcome data – with some positive impact around timeliness but negative impact in relation to adopter sufficiency. Furthermore, whilst the amount of adoption support appeared to have increased, adopters reported long delays in accessing it. Trying to interpret and understand this complicated picture is challenging. The complexity is likely due to several factors:

- Due to lags in the data, the time periods over which the data was collected differ (with the quantitative data covering 2018-2020 and the qualitative data covering 2018-2021); it is possible things are gradually improving over time, and so the qualitative perceptions paint a more positive picture than is reflected in the quantitative data
- The shift to RAAs had caused short-term disruption which was still showing in the administrative data (even though the evaluation found this disruption to be minimising in the later years)
- It was too soon to see improvements in practice of coming together as an RAA being consistently reflected in the ultimate outcomes of timeliness and efficiency
- The ultimate outcomes were affected by other elements (COVID-19 and decisions in other parts of the adoption ecosystem) that were outside of the RAAs' control.

The remainder of this conclusion builds on these points.

Largely, the RAA programme had transformed the adoption system by regionalising LA adoption services, with just 4 LAs not yet part of an operational RAA or RAA project in March 2021. By the time of the final wave of interviews (early 2021) more established RAAs had worked through the early teething problems, and they reported greater collaboration and stronger leadership, which had encouraged reflection and a more coordinated effort to improve practice and outcomes.

Despite the views on improved practice, individual RAAs' achievements in relation to the four main outcome areas were mixed:

- In terms of **timeliness**, positively (pre-COVID-19), RAAs appeared to have sped up the time it took to place a child relative to LAs not in RAAs. However, there was limited partnership working outside of RAAs and a tendency to prioritise placements in-house, which may not always help in terms of timeliness and finding the most appropriate match.
- In terms of **sufficiency**, relative to LA led adoption services, analysis indicated there was a small (3%) but statistically significant decrease in the percentage of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with an adoptive family. The shift to RAAs had caused initial disruption which had slowed down adopter recruitment. In later years this appeared to have been overcome, and adopter enquiries had increased. However, recruitment had not substantially changed the profile of adopters to meet the needs of children waiting. Even when families were interested in supporting harder-to-place children, our research with adoptive families showed they did not always receive adequate support to achieve this.



- In terms of **adoption support**, overall RAAs appeared to have increased their support offer. However, adopters interviewed held mixed views on this support, often waiting a long time to receive it. RAAs recognised the need to improve how they measured the impact of their support offers.
- In terms of **generating efficiencies**, the programme up to 2020/21 had been cost neutral and so whilst savings predominantly came in the form of cost avoidance, efficiencies meant more could be done within budget through, for example, smarter commissioning of adoption support on a larger scale.

Positively, RAAs were shown to be resilient structures, adept at working at scale in partnership with LAs and other partners (e.g., VAAs, courts) to address many of the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought whilst strengthening some links between RAAs and LAs. The qualitative findings suggest that regionalisation had facilitated a more effective response than would have been possible if adoption services had remained within LAs. This was because they coordinated adaptations together rather than each individual LA establishing and implementing changes separately and HoS had the support of each other at a national scale. However, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived when several RAA projects were going live or in the early stages of life and the declining trend in the number of children given placement orders was exacerbated by court closures. This unique situation challenged the progress RAAs were making.

Strong leadership was central to the success of the RAA programme at regional and national level. This will be even more critical to the success of RAAs in the future and continuing uncertainty with the COVID-19 pandemic. RAAs will need to work closely with local leaders (including Directors and Assistant Directors of Children's Services, Lead Members for Children and Young People and other local services) to manage changes in the adoption numbers (and all routes to permanency). Continued and improved partnership working will help to overcome challenges external to RAAs (e.g., local government restructuring, funding pressures) which, as the case study research in particular showed, presented risks to the impact and effectiveness of RAAs.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

The evaluation of regional adoption agencies (RAAs) ran from January 2018 to December 2021. Ecorys led the evaluation working with Professor Julie Selwyn and her team at the Rees Centre, Oxford University. This is the Final Report (2020-21), which reviews the progress of RAAs over time focusing on the four main objectives of the programme (adopter recruitment, reducing unnecessary delay, adoption support and cost efficiencies), alongside any other impacts achieved<sup>16</sup>. The report includes new information, such as findings from the adopter research strand, the longitudinal analysis of the SSDA903<sup>17</sup> and ASGLB<sup>18</sup> data and an analysis of costs. It should be read alongside the detailed reports on adopters' views and experiences<sup>19</sup>.

## Content and scope of the report

- Chapter 1 provides a brief **outline of the RAA programme** and the Theory of Change (see Annex one). It sets out the evaluation aims and objectives and provides an overview of the evaluation method. More details on the evaluation methodology are provided in Annex three. It also provides important **context** on the changing nature of the adoption landscape over the course of the evaluation and introduces the key issues arising from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020.
- Chapter 2 traces the development of the **RAA models over time** and provides an up-to-date picture of their structures and core elements, plus a detailed breakdown of how services were delivered.
- Chapter 3 focuses on whether the RAAs had an impact on **adopter sufficiency and the number of adoptions**. Key facilitating factors and barriers/challenges/risks are highlighted alongside the views of prospective and approved adopters.
- Chapter 4 examines **whether average timeliness in matching and placing children with adopters** had increased or decreased and how and why any changes occurred.
- Chapter 5 assesses the impact of RAAs on the **range and quality of adoption support that was available**. This section also considers the effect

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<sup>16</sup> Previous evaluation reports can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

<sup>17</sup> Provides information about looked after children in England. The figures are based on data from the SSDA903 return collected from all 150 English LAs.

<sup>18</sup> The ASGLB data return on adoption is completed by every local authority, voluntary adoption agency, and regional adoption agency in England on a quarterly basis.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

of using the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) and the Covid-19 ASF emergency funding designed to help vulnerable families during the pandemic.

- Chapter 6 provides an analysis of **costs**, examining the costs of running RAAs and any changes to income, expenditure, and net expenditure because of regionalising adoption services.
- Chapter 7 explores factors affecting the **progress of RAAs** and perceptions on how effectively RAAs have managed the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and what these changes mean for current and future adoption practice. This chapter offers a more practical guide to share learning around what has worked, for whom and in what circumstances.
- Lastly, in chapter 8, there is a **summary of the main findings**. The **conclusion** highlights the implications for RAAs, LAs, the wider adoption system and the DfE policy team to consider, to inform the future development of the programme.

Throughout, it is important to recognise the fluid and evolving nature of the RAA programme development and to interpret the qualitative findings as reflections in winter 2020/spring 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic and note that the SSDA903 data analysis reflects the period pre-pandemic, up to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. RAAs continue to evolve.

In the report we refer to the RAAs in the following ways:

- **Case study RAAs:** The seven live RAAs that were longitudinal case studies (see Evaluation scope and method)<sup>20</sup>.
- **RAAs:** All RAAs involved in the research, including live RAAs and RAA projects (see below).
- **Live RAAs:** RAAs which had launched at the time of the research (i.e., up to Spring 2021) and were operational.
- **RAA projects:** RAAs which had not launched at the time of this wave of research which finished in March 2021.

We acknowledge that all children should be prioritised in family finding, however, for ease of reading, we refer to children who are harder to place as ‘children who wait the longest’. The children who wait the longest to be placed for adoption include older children (over the age of 4), sibling groups, ethnic minority children and children with additional and complex needs.

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<sup>20</sup> A seventh case study was paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## RAA programme

The regionalisation reforms<sup>21</sup> were intended to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services and create 25-30 RAAs. The RAAs were expected to pool resources resulting in targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters; speedier matching with a larger, more diverse pool of adopters; and an improved range of adoption support services and regulatory compliance. Overall, in the longer term, RAAs were expected to provide: better outcomes for children and adopters; reduced practice and performance inconsistencies; more effective strategic management of the service, delivering efficiency savings; and a culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with the Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) sector.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the course of the evaluation the Theory of Change (ToC), developed by the evaluation team, was tested (see Annex one), including the assumptions and identified risks.

As of March 2021, 31 RAAs were in operation (8 more than at the point of the Second Report and 21 more than at the point of the First Report). Eight had been live for more than three years, six for two or more years, nine had been live between one to two years, and seven had been live for less than one year. Three other RAA projects were continuing to work towards becoming operational RAAs.

## Context

To provide important context for interpreting the evaluation findings Table 1 details the number of children entering and progressing through the adoption process each year. It is important to note that Table 1 is a snapshot of numbers for each year. For example, the number matched/placed with an adoptive family include children where a placement order was granted in previous years. After a peak (4,395) in 2017, the number of children receiving a placement order has declined. The number of children matched, placed, and adopted has been in decline since 2015.

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<sup>21</sup> Department for Education (June 2015) Regionalising Adoption.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/437128/Regionalising\\_adoption.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> [http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16\\_Thurs\\_A.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16_Thurs_A.pdf)

**Table 1: Adoption process over time**

**Number of children within each year (up to 31<sup>st</sup> March)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Placement order granted</b>	<b>Matched with an adoptive family</b>	<b>Placed with an adoptive family</b>	<b>Adopted (has an adoption order)</b>
2015	3,981	4,637	4,785	5,211
2016	4,138	4,031	4,072	4,452
2017	4,395	3,746	3,846	4,280
2018	4,100	3,409	3,528	3,753
2019	3,880	3,391	3,372	3,481
2020	3,307	3,063	3,136	3,324

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data 2015-2020

In March 2020, a nationwide lockdown was put in place to stem the transmission of COVID-19; with all but essential services forced to close their doors. Restrictions remained in place through Winter 2020 and early Spring 2021 when the final wave of qualitative research took place. The pandemic caused delays particularly in court proceedings and medical assessments. Across the interviews, there were reports of an increase in the demand for adoption support, as the daily lives of children and families were disrupted due to government restrictions such as school closures. The ASF Covid-19 Scheme was launched by the DfE and provided up to £8m in emergency funding to RAAs and LAs to support adopted children or those with a Special Guardianship Order (SGO), specifically to meet the needs arising from the pandemic. The role of the ASF Covid-19 Scheme<sup>23</sup> (and other external funding) is discussed in Chapter 5.

## **Evaluation aim and objectives**

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the impact of RAAs on improving the delivery of adoption services. There were three main aims:

- To understand the structure of RAAs, including what models of service delivery RAAs were adopting.

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<sup>23</sup> A report reviewing the ASF COVID-19 Scheme is available here.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-the-adoption-support-fund-covid-19-scheme>

- To understand what impact the new models of delivery were having on four main areas of practice:
  1. Timeliness of **matching** and placing children with adopters
  2. **Recruitment** of sufficient adoptive parents to meet the needs of children
  3. The provision of **adoption support** as defined in regulation
  4. Costs and benefits of the regionalisation of adoption services.
- To explore how each RAA had implemented its local plan and the extent of progress towards improved service delivery.

## Method overview

The research questions are provided in Annex two and a detailed methodology in Annex three. This report draws upon:

- The longitudinal analysis of ASGLB and SSDA903 data, which cover all children with a placement order. Analysis included descriptive analysis of the numbers and characteristics of children over time, and at different stages of the adoption journey, and econometric analysis to understand the factors/characteristics associated with, and the impact of RAAs on, adoption timeliness.
- In-depth longitudinal case study research in seven RAAs to capture quantitative and qualitative information to measure the outcomes achieved, assess the factors affecting progress and understand the local context. During Wave 1 (2018/19), 186 interviewees took part in the case study research, at Wave 2, (2019/20) there were 210 interviewees across 6 RAAs. In the final year, due to the impact of Covid-19, all interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams or telephone. A total of 226 interviewees were interviewed in this wave, comprising RAA Heads of Service (HoS), managers and practitioners from recruitment and assessment, family finding and adoption support teams in RAAs and LA children's social workers and Assistant Directors of Children's Services. Interviews also involved staff working in business support, independent reviewing officers (IROs), adoption panel members and other local services such as clinical psychologists, virtual school heads, and local family courts.
- Interviews with 15 RAAs and RAA projects not involved in the seven case study areas. These interviews built on visits to 23 RAAs and projects at the evaluation scoping stage, and interviews with 22 RAAs and projects at Wave 2.
- Interviews with one LA that was not yet involved in an RAA or RAA project building on early interviews with 4 LAs in this position at Waves 1 and 2.
- Interviews with eight VAAs (across four case study RAAs), double the number engaged in previous rounds of case study research.

- Interviews with 11 national stakeholders (including one VAA representative), where possible with the same people involved at each wave.
- An RAA survey<sup>24</sup> to explore progress, model adaptations and services delivered across agencies, responses from 21 RAAs (seven case studies and 14 other RAAs).
- Preparation group surveys of adopters in five case study RAAs and interviews with prospective adopters. This report is published [here](#).
- Follow up interviews with prospective adopters who progressed through assessment. This report is published [here](#).
- Adoption support surveys of approved adopters in four case study RAAs. This report is published [here](#).
- Research into RAA costs (Section 251 returns for all LAs, detailed financial accounts provided by 6 RAAs and interviews with finance leads in the case study areas).

## Strengths and limitations of the evaluation

### Limitations

- The final wave of research for the evaluation took place in early 2021, almost a year after the COVID-19 pandemic began and restrictions on face-to-face contact were introduced, forcing large-scale changes to adoption practice. The pandemic resulted in court closures and long delays that led to a decrease in the number of placement and adoption orders and an increase in the number of adoptive families waiting to be matched. Therefore, the conclusions might not be as might have been expected at this stage, over three years since the first LAs joined together as RAAs.
- Virtual interviews generally worked well and negated some logistical issues, but also presented connectivity issues, fatigue from being on Teams meetings all day, as well as the loss of interpersonal cues that are noticed when in person.
- The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of complexity to the evaluation that involved a rolling programme of RAA implementation which meant that RAAs were at different stages of development and operating within different contexts, making it hard to generalise the findings.
- The evaluation drew on data from different time periods; quantitative data available up until March 2020 (with ASGLB data on adopter registrations covering the period from 1 April 2020 to March 2021), and the more recent qualitative data collected in 2021. It was therefore difficult to undertake thorough mixed-methods analysis. The SSDA903 analysis covers data that

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<sup>24</sup> Referred to in the report as the model survey.

was available up until 31st March 2020 and covers the period before the first lockdown in response to COVID-19. Whilst some analysis of the number of adopter enquiries/approvals is provided over time, recognising the limitations of the data (specifically, the availability and quality of data pre-RAAs), the analysis should not be interpreted causally.

- For the economic analysis, Section 251 data (providing adoption service costs) for all local authorities was accessed, and detailed RAA accounts were analysed for 6 case study areas. Limitations associated with the Section 251 data, such as differences in how LAs attribute cost, were, as far as possible, accounted for in the analysis. Further detail is provided in Chapter 6.
- The interviews with adopters followed the progress of 41 prospective adopters from 41 different households. Adoptive parents were selected for interview because, at the end of their training, they had indicated that they were willing to adopt a child/ren who wait the longest to be placed (e.g., a sibling group, a child over 4 years of age or of minority ethnicity or with additional needs). However, the parents who were interviewed may not be representative of those willing to adopt children who are described as 'hard to place.' Although asked about recent events, interviewees' recall may also have been affected by the passing of time or by wanting to give socially desirable answers.
- The adoption support survey was only open for 10 weeks (due to a DfE pause on research because of COVID-19 restrictions) in four RAAs and may have been completed by those with the strongest feelings about the gaps and deficiencies in services. Their recollections may have been affected by the passing of time and are subjective views. We also do not know whether the responses are representative of those receiving support from other RAAs. However, the responses and comments provided by parents reflect the long-standing concerns with adoption support services.

## Strengths

- Despite the impact of COVID-19 ending in-person data collection, conducting the research interviews through Microsoft Teams enabled good, if not better, engagement with RAAs and staff at all levels. The findings are based on large-scale qualitative research with a broad range of stakeholders.
- Due to the final phase of research taking place between January and March 2021, most RAAs were by this time accustomed to virtual meetings, allowing for a relatively smooth process both in arranging and recording/transcribing interviews.
- The flexibility generally offered sufficient time for the interviews to achieve broad coverage of the topic guide.



The quantitative research sought to build on the Second Report (2019-2020), including addressing some of the limitations. Of note is that the econometric analysis of timeliness now covers a larger sample of RAA (not just those that were live in 2018/19) and, as such, can be considered more representative.

## **Longitudinal analysis**

During the final wave of analysis there was a concerted effort to draw upon the previous waves of research to present a longitudinal perspective on the progress and growth of the RAAs over time. NVivo software was used to support qualitative data analysis across the data collection waves taking a structured codebook approach to the qualitative analysis drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2020)<sup>25</sup> approach to thematic analysis, which has six broad stages starting with data familiarisation and coding, through generating, reviewing, and developing themes, and further refinement to reporting. Having a structured approach in which some themes were determined in advance linked to the Theory of Change also provided space for organic coding when comparing data sources during the process of triangulation. Through strategic labelling and coding, the research team were able to draw upon qualitative insights from interviews across the waves and some interviewees have remained consistent across the whole period. This report therefore reflects on three waves of research, showing the progress made by developing RAA projects, through to go-live and as fully operational RAAs. As a mixed-method evaluation, the team have integrated the different data sources at each wave analysis and reporting point to compare, contrast, and validate the findings from the model survey, cost, monitoring and adopter research across the waves.

Regarding the quantitative research, the final wave of analysis (as far as possible) was aligned to the methods/approach undertaken in previous waves (for consistency and comparability). To account for the now expanded roll-out of RAAs, some adaptations to the approach were required and are highlighted where appropriate.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/thematic-analysis.html>

## Chapter 2: The RAA models

### Summary

- The first RAAs tended to choose more centralised models, and RAAs that went live later chose locality or decentralised/partnership models.
- Generally, RAAs had not made major changes to their initial models or structure, although they had made some refinements over time, in terms of moving other services into their remit and there were some changes to Heads of Service (e.g., letterbox services).
- Just one of the live RAAs was led by a VAA and in this RAA the VAA had responsibility for recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. Another RAA project had developed a strategic partnership with a VAA to help recruit and support adopters.
- Early in the RAA programme, just one RAA had taken on Special Guardianship (SG) assessments and support. By the time of the final wave of interviews in Winter 2021, there remained few RAAs that had incorporated SG support into their offer, and where they had, they tended to work jointly with LAs to deliver services.
- The DfE defined an RAA as requiring six core elements, but according to Heads of Service (HoS) responses to the model survey, these were not present in all RAAs. Stakeholders thought that the most important core elements were having a single line of accountability, core functions (recruitment, matching, support) and a single, pooled budget. They felt these elements helped to support strong leadership, better strategic management and planning, and more shared practice across partners.
- Analysis of the presence/absence of core elements in RAA models suggests there is no clear pattern, indicating that analysing effectiveness by RAA model is likely to be too simplistic and miss the complexity of individual RAAs.
- Services for children (e.g., care planning and reviews, permanency plans, life story work) still generally remained within the remit of LAs, whereas services for adopters (or prospective adopters, except for finance) were usually the RAAs' responsibility. General support (except financial support) for families was usually provided by RAAs. There were variations across RAAs in terms of the extent to which they could provide specialist support (e.g., therapeutic support) in-house, or if they commissioned out. Again, there was no clear link between RAA model used and the services offered.
- This year there were also examples of RAAs coming together at a broader level to work on wider systems topics that helped to further links between individual RAAs and the wider system. One of the facilitating factors for HoS

working to progress the longstanding issues in adoption policy and practice was the RAA Leaders' Group, which had grown over time and was frequently said to be fundamental to the effective implementation of RAAs and the future direction of adoption services. However, stakeholders raised concerns that sometimes there was a tension between national and local government priorities; Directors of Children's Services, corporate parenting bodies and local government needed to be more aware of the work of RAAs.

This chapter provides an overview of the RAA models, providing a picture of their size, structures, core elements and a description of service delivery for children, adopters, special guardians, adopted adults, and birth relatives. The chapter also considers views on the relative importance of the core RAA elements, any model-related changes over time, and plans for future development. More information on the RAA models is available in the Annex five.

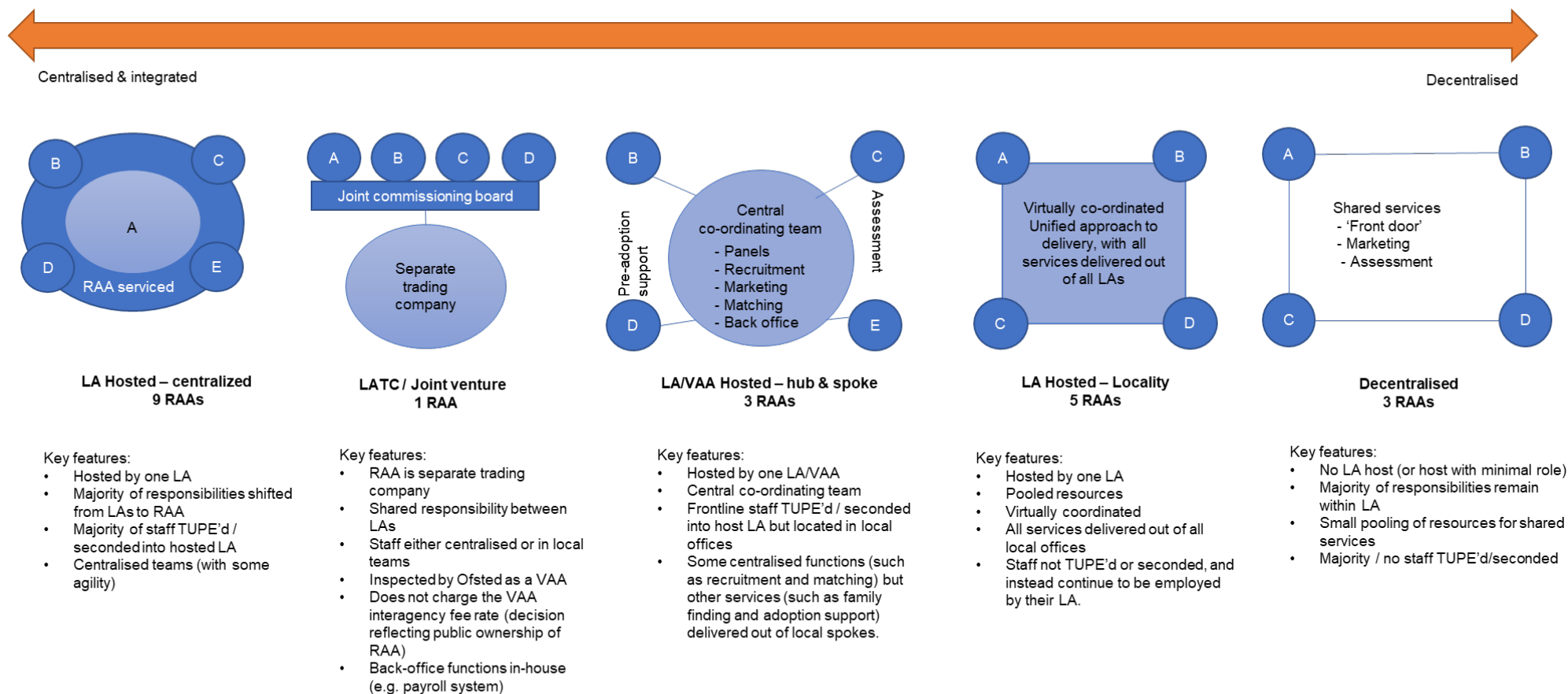
## **RAA size and structures**

As of March 2021, 31 RAAs had gone 'live'. The average number of LAs in a RAA was five but ranged in size from two to 10 LAs. Since the 2019/20 evaluation report, the average number of LAs involved in each RAA increased from four to five. The role of VAAs varied across RAAs; they were sometimes part of RAA strategic board arrangements or delivered core services or provided commissioned services. Only one RAA was led by a VAA, and in this RAA, the VAA was responsible for recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters.

## **Different RAA models**

During the evaluation, a typology of RAA models was developed, updating it where needed as new RAAs went 'live'. The Second Report described how RAA models typically fell on a continuum, ranging from fully centralised and integrated RAA teams, through to more decentralised models with teams largely operating from their original LAs. The third and final evaluation wave confirmed the typology, but also highlighted that RAAs did not always fit neatly into the models, as they made refinements over time (especially during COVID-19, as we go on to discuss in Chapter 7). Figure 2 provides an overview of the typologies and their characteristics, with further detail provided on the preceding pages (more detail on the models can be found in the Annex five). The descriptions also detail the number of RAAs which roughly fall into each 'type', based on HoS responses to the model survey from the evaluation, in which they were asked to select the model that best reflected their RAA (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: RAA model typology and characteristics**



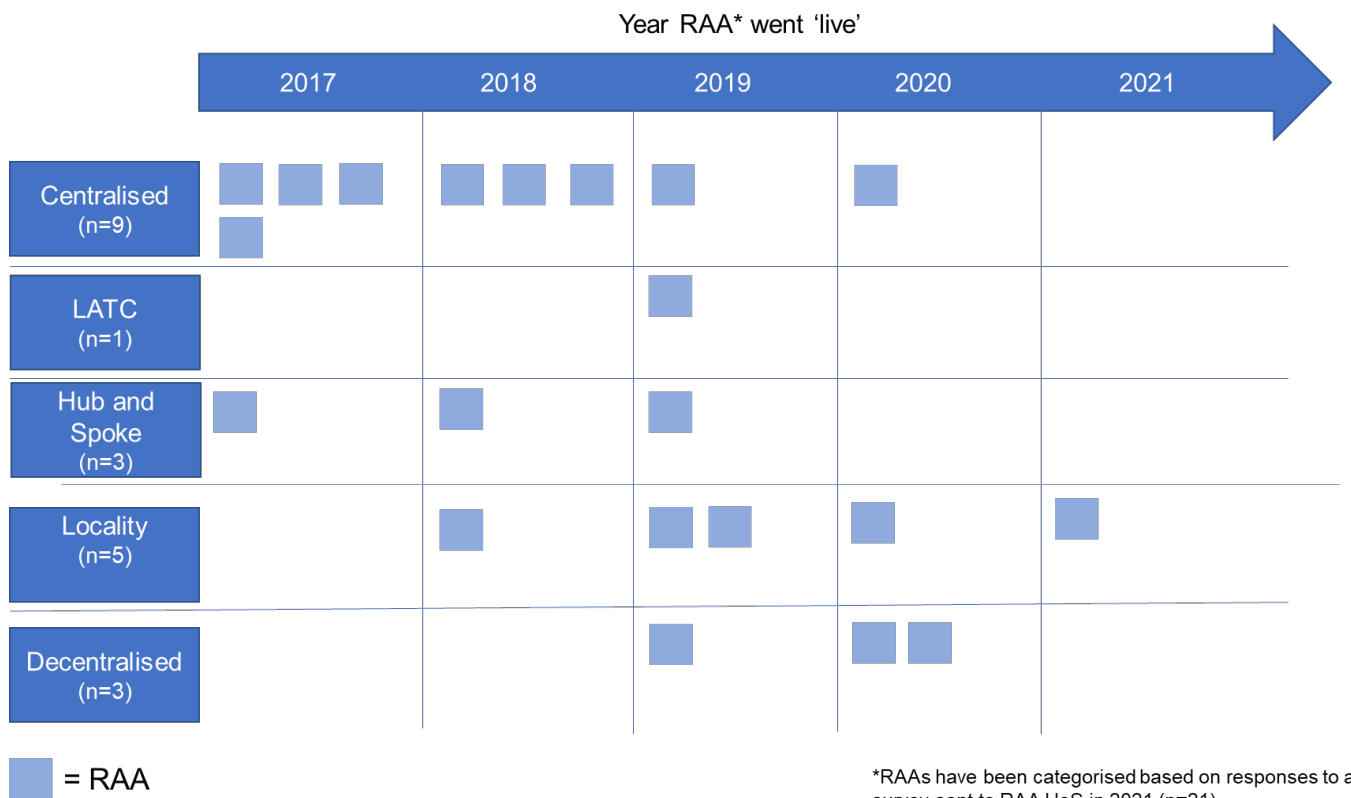
A/B/C/D refer to LAs/VAAAs  
N=21 (Source: RAA Survey)

At the time of reporting, other RAA projects were still being developed and exploring different model types. In one example, an LA was developing a strategic partnership with a VAA, drawing on the strengths of the VAA in recruiting and supporting adopters to help meet the needs of the LA's children. The RAA will be managed by the LA, but the LA will commission the VAA to support service delivery. It was hard to categorise the model as operational arrangements were still being developed as the evaluation interviews were concluding, but it is an important approach to explore in the future.

### Variations in model selection over time

In Figure 3, we show the types of RAA model and the year that they went live. The earlier models, launched in 2017-18, were mainly LA Hosted Centralised or Hub and Spoke models. From 2019, the models used by RAAs going live were increasingly diverse, with more locality and decentralised models being used.

**Figure 3: RAA Models by year they went live**



National stakeholders also commented on this gradual shift over time to what they sometimes described as 'looser' models, which were said to be more attractive to some LAs. Stakeholders thought that looser models were chosen because the earlier RAA projects comprised LAs that were already working together closely and found the transition to live RAAs easier. RAAs that went live more recently comprised LAs that were more cautious and resistant to creating any substantial disruption to their day-to-day delivery.

## How RAA models evolved over time

Between spring 2020 and spring 2021, stakeholders said there had been no major changes to their RAA model or structure (aside from Covid-19 restrictions causing changes to staff working practices). Interestingly, three of the case study RAAs were considering changing or reviewing their model structure linked to the end of three-year funding agreements. The impact of Covid-19 has also shaped stakeholders' perception of models, with some thinking that working remotely has resulted in more of a centralised model, rather than staff being based in different office 'spokes'. One 'hub and spoke' case study RAA was considering whether, post-pandemic, they should no longer have 'spoke' offices and instead have one centralised hub. However, no decisions about the future model had been made at the time of the interviews.

## RAA core elements

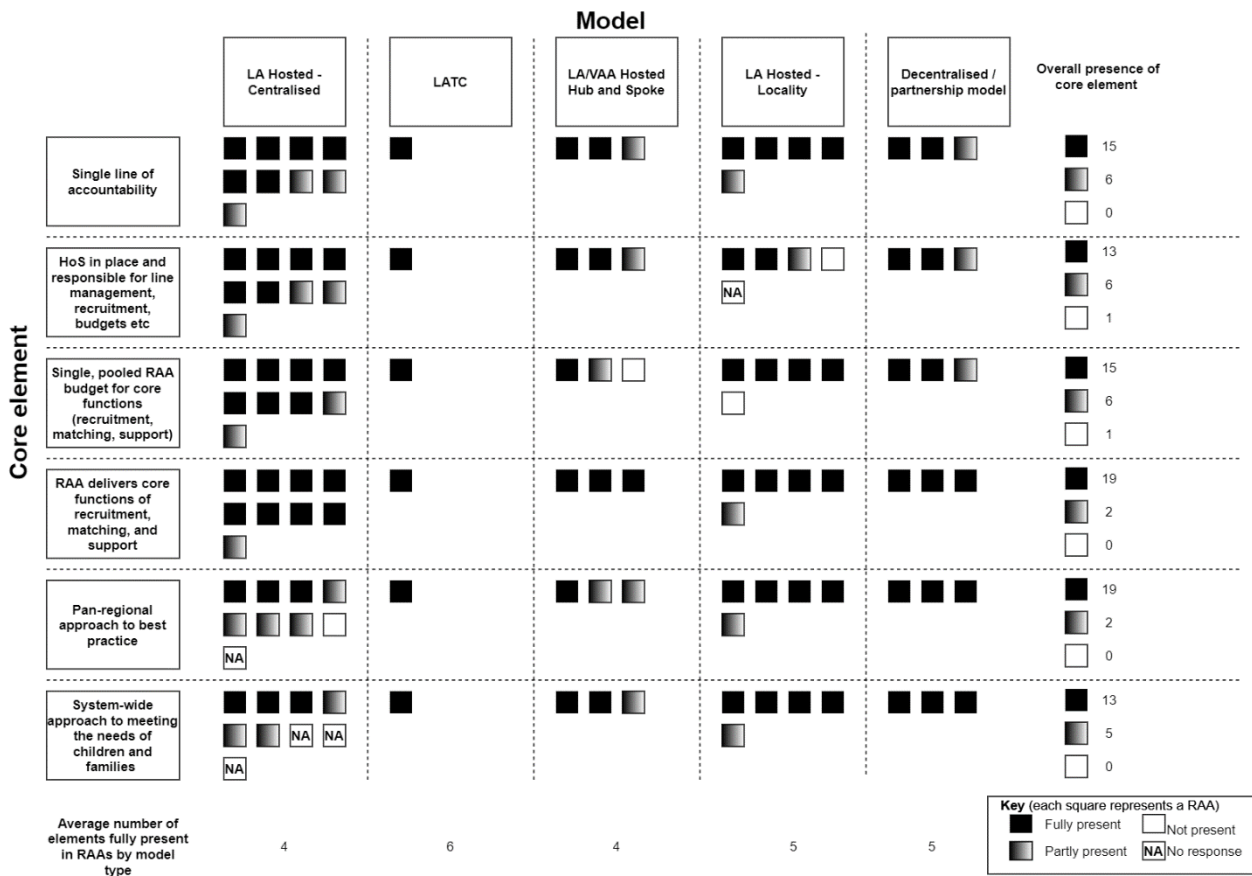
In the 2019/20 report, we noted that, according to stakeholders, RAA models were less important for delivering effective services than the presence of certain core elements. The Department of Education considers a RAA application to meet the definition of a RAA if it has the following functions:

- a single line of accountability for functions that sit within the RAA, reporting into robust governance arrangements.
- a Head of Service (HoS) with responsibility for line management, recruitment, budgets, contract management and strategic relationships, and who is accountable to the governance board for delivery of functions delegated to the RAA from LAs.
- pooled funding into a single RAA budget.
- core adoption functions of recruitment, matching, and support are transferred to the RAA.

- pan-regional approach (different RAAs working together to take a collective approach): embedding best practice across the RAA; and
- a system-wide approach to meeting the needs of adopted children and families.

Analysis of the 21 responses from the 2021 model survey sent to all RAAs found that eight of the HoS thought that all six core elements were ‘fully’ present in their RAA and in seven RAAs ‘partly’ present. In six RAAs, one or more core elements were thought not to be present, or the field had been left blank. Figure 4 provides an overview of the presence – and the extent of the presence – of the core elements by each RAA model type. Overall, it shows that there was no association between type of model and presence of core elements. The LATC RAA had all six elements but, as there is only one LATC in the country, it is not possible to assert that the model type ensures that all core elements are present. Figure 4 also shows that core elements are all or partly present in all decentralised/partnership models (e.g., single line of accountability at board level and pooled budget). This suggests that, despite the perceptions of some RAA and national stakeholders of models ‘loosening’ over time, these RAAs align with DfE’s conceptualisation of an RAA in terms of the necessary core elements. They align more than other models due to DfE’s greater scrutiny of models that differ from the initial tightly defined models.

**Figure 4: RAA core elements**



Source: RAA 2021 Model Survey (n=21) completed in early 2021

## Services offered

This section provides a brief overview of how services were typically split between RAAs, LAs and other organisations. It draws on the findings from the survey that the RAA HoS completed. Further information on how services were typically split can be found in Annex five. Overall, though, there was no clear relationship between the RAA model and the agency (e.g., RAA, LA, VAA or other commissioned service) responsible for the management and delivery of the function. This provides evidence that examining effectiveness by model type is unhelpful as it misses the complexity and nuances of different RAA configurations. Furthermore, in some RAAs, there were variations in terms of services offered across different LAs, further highlighting the complexity of drawing conclusions about specific model types.



## Services for children

- Services for children (e.g., care planning and reviews, permanency plans, life story work) were usually the responsibility of LAs but RAAs did provide varying levels of support depending on where the child was in their adoption journey.
- Children’s care planning and reviews fell within the remit of the LAs, although RAAs generally provided support.
- Permanency plans were the responsibility of LAs, although most RAAs had processes or systems in place to work with LAs to identify children who might need an Early Permanence placement.
- Typically, LAs retained the responsibility for child preparation, including life story work, although like other services for children, RAAs inputted and had a role in advising LAs.
- Across RAAs, there were some variations in responsibilities for delivering specific Early Permanence services such as Concurrent Planning<sup>26</sup>; often, Early Permanence options such as Fostering-for-Adoption were within the remit of the RAA while concurrent placements were often commissioned from a VAA.
- Family finding was largely the responsibility of RAAs, although survey respondents noted that family finders generally worked closely with LA children’s social workers who held children’s cases.
- Agency decisions about placement for adoption and matching were made by the LA agency decision maker (ADM), although RAAs gave advice to ADMs to help inform their decision.

## Services for prospective adopters

- Across most RAAs, services for adopters were delivered by the RAA or in partnership with a VAA. Usually, the RAA took responsibility for recruiting prospective adopters, drawing on in-house marketing and recruitment campaigns alongside using assets provided by the National Adoption Week campaigns.

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<sup>26</sup> As defined by First4Adoption, Concurrent Planning is “for babies and young children under two in care who are likely to need adoption, but who still have a chance of being reunited with their birth family.” See: <https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/who-can-adopt-a-child/early-permanence/concurrent-planning>

- Responsibility for providing linking (such as through exchange days) and matching advice to adopters typically lay with prospective adopters' own RAA social worker.
- RAA staff typically led on writing the matching reports, but often had input from LA teams to complete them.

## **Services to support adoptive families**

- The co-ordination and management of adoption support generally fell within the RAAs' remit, although there were RAA variations dependant on how and which types of services were commissioned. More details are provided in Chapter 5.
- Most of the RAAs undertook assessments of adoption support needs, several shared this responsibility with LAs.
- RAAs were usually responsible for co-ordinating the applications to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), but in one of the LAs, staff reported being able to apply to the ASF directly.
- General support to adoptive families, such as support groups or newsletters, were usually provided directly by the RAA, although in some cases RAAs also commissioned services from VAAs and adoption support agencies (ASAs).
- Letterbox services<sup>27</sup> for contact were often the responsibility of RAAs, although in several cases the service was still under the remit of the LA.
- In most cases, LAs were responsible for managing the Virtual School Head (VSH) service and support in education. However, some RAAs provided training to schools and worked directly with schools in relation to individual children.

## **Services for adopted adults and birth families**

- There were differences across RAAs in terms of how they managed support for contact with birth families. Some RAAs commissioned the service from VAAs, whereas in others the in-house adoption support team managed the arrangement.

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<sup>27</sup> Letterbox services facilitate indirect contact between children (and their adoptive families) and their birth families.

- Provision of services for adopted adults and birth families included a mix of direct support from RAAs, and specific commissioned services.
- Searching was generally managed by RAAs, although usually the counselling and advice was commissioned out to VAAs/ASAs
- Most RAAs did not provide intermediary services (i.e., a service that can help establish contact between birth relatives and adults who have been adopted if they both want it).
- Mostly, RAAs did not provide birth parent counselling. A few commissioned VAAs to deliver birth parent support or referred to an ASA.

### **Service delivery for Special Guardian support**

- At the time of the final fieldwork, most arrangements for Special Guardian (SG) support remained within the remit of LAs. Very few RAAs had incorporated SG support into their offer, and where they had, they tended to work jointly with LAs to deliver services.
- Generally, assessments of SG support needs were provided by LAs, although some RAAs were considering including the assessments in their scope.
- Most LAs managed SG applications to the ASF.
- Support was delivered to SG families mainly by LAs who provided general support, financial support and contact support for families with an SGO. Several RAAs provided some general support.
- Therapeutic support was mainly managed by LAs drawing on ASF funds to commission specific provision for families.

### **Other adoption services**

- Children's adoption medicals remained the responsibility of LAs, as LAs commissioned health partners/relevant clinical commissioning groups to provide medical assessments for children with adoption recommendations. RAAs supported this activity.
- In most RAAs, panels for adopter approvals and matching were managed by the RAA, although ADMs approving matching decisions were often senior LA staff.
- In most cases, RAAs had responsibility for stepparent adoption assessments.

## RAAs working together

The previous sub-section set out the services that RAAs provided and described how they worked with other services (e.g., clinical commissioning groups) within their local region. The final wave of fieldwork (Winter 2021) found examples of RAAs coming together at a broader level to work on wider systems topics that helped to further links between individual RAAs and the wider system. These included the development of a pan-regional approach to tackling placement disruptions; an approach which broadly reflects the proposal set out in Regionalising Adoption for the creation of regional permanence hubs.

It's about [X number of] RAAs and we'll meet now to look at what we can do across that whole footprint... I mean, one of the work streams are across the whole of [the region] is working with the VAAs across there. So, for us that's beneficial because we've only got one [VAA] in our area now, so we're looking at our sufficiency and whether we should have any sort of alliance with the VAAs and more formal arrangement, mainly with the aim of placing our children, more within the [area]. – Head of Service

One of the facilitating factors for HoS working to progress the longstanding issues in adoption policy and practice has been the RAA Leaders' Group. This has grown over time and throughout the evaluation and has frequently been described by RAA, LA, VAA and national stakeholders to be fundamental to the effective roll out of the programme. HoS have both a strategic and operational role, which the interviewees found to be “demanding” and held up to “scrutiny” by their peers. RAA Leaders reported that they have found the group meetings and joint working extremely helpful in supporting individual leaders to develop their skills, confidence, resilience, and resources to maintain accountability.

It's a really good space to meet other people. Being only 30 of us doing this job in the country. So that's been really important to do that and to kind of think about how it's opened up the possibility to think about adoption work in a broader context. It's been really important having a broader context that isn't defined by LAs... you are freed from broader local authority plans to actually kind of come up with some different solutions... we're currently in discussion about commissioning some specific anti-

discriminatory practice training for adoption social workers because that's never been done. – Head of Service

Similarly, the COVID-19 working groups set up to help tackle arising issues at a national level were valued by RAAs (see Chapter 7). There was a suggestion that a national board would be required to help coordinate work in relation to COVID-19 and other key issues like Early Permanence in recognition of the ongoing need for more guidance and coordination. Creating and maintaining that joint working nationally, regionally, and locally is a priority for RAAs in the future, particularly given concerns raised by some RAA and LA staff, and national stakeholders about several HoS retiring or moving on and the resulting loss of experience.

We're losing a lot of scale, the drive, and the leadership [from]when our RAAs were setup. ... there have been several heads of service who have retired in the last 12 to 18 months across the country. And that's a whole raft of experience that's going be lost from the RAAs. - VAA

There was also a concern raised by national stakeholders, RAAs and LAs that sometimes there was a tension between national and local government priorities and that Directors of Children's Services, corporate parenting bodies and local government needed to be more aware of the work of RAAs.

Where there were not strong links at senior strategic level (e.g., linked to staff turnover/structural change), it was more difficult to improve connections between RAAs and the wider system, even where previously links were well-established. This was especially so when there were changes such as local authority restructuring that were outside of the RAA's immediate control. In one example, staff told of their experiences of silo working, a risk that was first evident at the evaluation scoping stage.

When I would go along to senior management team meetings, I would hear everything that was going on across the piece of business, so I'd be much more readily kept up to date on things that were happening in safeguarding children in need...but because we've been siloed off into the RAA, that disconnect is actually a really problematic and damaging action on behalf of the government. I think that we should be seen as core business within children's social care services. - Case study manager

## Conclusion

Overall, analysis of survey responses from HoS and findings from the qualitative data confirms that the typology of RAA models developed at the beginning of the evaluation still largely stood, but there had been slight changes in models over time. Over time, more RAAs had moved to what stakeholders described as 'looser' models, such as locality or decentralised models.

The consensus amongst stakeholders was that the specific model was less important than the presence of the six core elements. However, when examining the extent of the presence of the six core elements of RAAs, there was no clear link between the model type and the extent to which elements were present, except for in the LATC RAA, where all six core elements were present. Stakeholders often reflected on the importance of a single line of accountability especially, alongside responsibility of core functions such as recruitment, matching and adoption support, and pooled funding, for helping to facilitate staff working consistently and sharing best practice with the aim of providing a higher quality service for children and adopters.

The model survey findings showed that of all the RAA core elements, the two that HoS considered to be least present were a system-wide approach to meeting the needs of children, young people, and families, and a multi-regional approach to identifying and implementing best practice. Although HoS reported that multi-regional approaches were less developed, there were examples of several RAAs coming together as a group to work on wider systems topics such as tackling placement disruptions. One of the facilitating factors for HoS working together was the RAA Leaders' Group, which had grown over time and was frequently said to be fundamental to the effective implementation of RAAs and the future direction of adoption services. The National Adoption Strategy (July 2021) sets out an ambition for RAAs to work more closely together and there is a new RAA strategic leader to support this<sup>28</sup>.

The extent to which the RAA core elements have supported the intended results as articulated in the ToC is explored throughout the report. Analysis of data found no clear link between model type and which agency had responsibility for a service, again underlining how exploring RAAs' effectiveness by model type misses the complexity and configurations of individual RAAs. The services provided were not fixed, but constantly evolving as RAAs became more established.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-strategy-achieving-excellence-everywhere>

## Chapter 3: The sufficiency of adoptive families

### Summary

- Nationally, the percentage of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with an adoptive family decreased from 62% in 2015 to 47% in 2020. Analysis showed a similar pattern for those children defined as those who wait the longest.
- There was a small negative effect associated with RAAs on the sufficiency of adoptive families over the period when RAAs started to go live (April 2017 to March 2020). Relative to LA-led adoption services, analysis indicated there was a small (3%) but statistically significant decrease in the percentage of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with an adoptive family.
- Qualitative research findings indicated that RAAs increased their targeted marketing and recruitment over the course of their development. RAAs thought they were working more closely with organisations representing ethnic minority and LBGTQ+ communities.
- ASGLB data for 2020-21 shows that, nationally, RAAs experienced an increase of 21% in registrations from prospective adopters, compared to 2019-20. In interviews, RAAs reported this was primarily down to the national recruitment campaign and the impact of COVID-19 rather than RAA-specific changes.
- Despite increases in the overall numbers of approved adopters, RAAs reported that the profile of adopters had not changed. RAAs appear to have had limited impact on diversifying the pool of adopters.
- RAAs felt that resourcing and capacity had affected their ability to meet increases in demand across the service (e.g., converting enquiries into assessments).
- RAAs acknowledged that more needed to be done to recruit and train adopters who could meet the needs of children who wait the longest.

This chapter explores the impact of RAAs on adopter sufficiency since the first RAAs went live in 2017 up to spring 2021. It covers the efforts to increase the diversity of adopters, the extent to which recruitment activities (including the 2020 national adopter recruitment campaign) affected the number and characteristics of adopters

who met the needs of children waiting to be matched, and the number of adoptions. Key facilitating factors and barriers/challenges/risks are highlighted throughout.

In the First Report, (2018-19) RAA and national stakeholders believed that the more established RAAs had created a larger pool of approved adopters. Smaller unitary authorities experienced greater benefits from moving to a regionalised structure and being able to access the larger pool. There were concerns about the negative effect of a lull in recruitment activity while RAAs were going live. At that point, there were early signs that recruitment activities in longer-established RAAs led to an improved conversion rate, as pooled budgets provided more matches within the RAA area. RAAs were beginning to expand their recruitment activities and application of targeted marketing.

At Wave 2 (Winter 2020), more established RAAs refined and implemented tailored marketing and recruitment strategies. They allocated dedicated marketing resources for adoption from pooled budgets and linked in with planning for national recruitment campaigns. Longer-established RAAs enhanced their websites, used social media, and advertised on community infrastructure and local transport. RAAs built on existing activities and extended their marketing, using partnerships with businesses to broaden engagement opportunities. Through diversifying their marketing and taking a more considered approach to recruitment, RAAs believed that they could potentially reach more prospective adopters who could meet the needs of children waiting. RAAs were developing targeted marketing to seek more diversity within the adopter pool, such as with ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ communities. At Wave 2, it was either too early or efforts were not advanced enough to comment on their success.

The research at Wave 3 (Winter 2021) explored how RAAs were seeking further improvements in these areas. First, the findings from the analysis of adoption data are presented.

## **Adopter sufficiency**

For this Wave 3 report, quantitative analysis of adoption data was undertaken before and after the implementation of RAAs between 2015 and 2020. The analysis comprised two approaches:

1. Analysis of the number of children with a placement order and the number subsequently placed with an adoptive family. This gives us an indication of



adopter sufficiency, as it tells us if children were able to be placed with adopters. However, this only gives us an indication, as there are other factors that also affect the number of children being placed with families.

2. Analysis of the number and characteristics of adopters recruited i.e., Stage 1 registering an interest to adopt.

### **1. Analysis of the number of children with a placement order and the number subsequently placed with an adoptive family.**

Table 2 shows that between 2015 and 2020 in England, the number of children with a placement order had decreased by 15%. Within a given year, the number of children with a placement order includes those who received a placement order in previous years but were yet to be placed with an adoptive family and those receiving a placement order in that year – the number reflects the overall demand for placements each year.

The percentage of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with an adoptive family (indicating sufficiency) decreased from 62% in 2015 to 47% in 2020. During this period, the number of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) continued to increase; in 2019/20, there were 4,210 SGOs granted, an increase of 10% from 2018/19<sup>29</sup>. In 2018/19 and 2019/20 there were more SGOs granted than AOs made. SGOs accounted for 55% of permanence orders in 2019/20, an increase from 52% in 2018/19<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

<sup>30</sup> More recent ASGLB data is available which shows a similar picture. This data was not available at the time our analysis was completed: <https://coram-i.org.uk/resource/asglb-q4-2020-21-headline-measures/>

**Table 2: Number of children with placement orders and number/percentage of children placed with an adoptive family<sup>31</sup>**

Year	Number with a placement order	Number placed with an adoptive family	Percentage placed with an adoptive family
2014/15	7,700	4,791	62%
2015/16	6,855	4,078	59%
2016/17	6,868	3,866	56%
2017/18	6,830	3,561	52%
2018/19	6,975	3,410	49%
2019/20	6,820	3,196	47%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

To determine whether live RAAs differed to LA-led adoption services (i.e., not-yet-live RAAs) in the proportion of children placed for adoption who were placed with an adoptive family (i.e., indicating adopter sufficiency), regression analyses were undertaken. The analysis was set up as a fixed-effects regression which allowed us to **isolate the impact of “live” RAA status** from the impacts of time (in the case of RAAs, the national downward trend of the numbers of children placed with an adoptive family from 2014/15 to 2019/20) and consider the changes “within” each RAA. The outcome variable was the proportion of children with a placement order that were placed with an adoptive family. The explanatory variable of interest was RAA live status.

The regression analysis (Table 3) found there was a **statistically significant decrease of 3%** in sufficiency associated with RAA live status. In other words, the proportion of children with a placement order that were placed with an adoptive family was worse in RAAs compared to LA-led adoption services. This finding may reflect the negative effect of a “hiatus” in recruitment activity during the transition period, reported by some RAAs (as part of the qualitative research).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Numbers differ slightly to published statistics owing to analysis being based on the raw data provided by Coram-I (and data cleaning). Published statistics (pre-2019/20) included estimates where LA returns were incomplete. Coram-I have subsequently sought to improve the completeness/quality of LA returns and the raw data.

<sup>32</sup> Evaluation of regional adoption agencies: second report (2019 – 2020)

**Table 3: Proportion of children with a placement order who were placed with an adoptive family - fixed-effects regression output.<sup>33</sup>**

Factor	Estimate	Standard Error	p value
(Intercept)	0.486	0.066	0.000
RAA live status (1 = live for at least 6-months, 0 = not yet live)	-0.032	0.016	0.039

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

### Effects on the placement of children defined as those who wait the longest

Table 4 shows, at a national level, that between 2015 and 2020 the number of children with a placement order who are defined as those that wait the longest decreased by 18% compared to a decrease of 15% for the wider cohort. However, this decrease can be partly attributed to the decline in the number of placement orders being made rather than fewer children being placed with an adoptive family. The percentage of children defined as those who wait the longest placed with an adoptive family decreased from 57% in 2015 to 39% in 2020 (Table 4), which was slightly more than the wider cohort, which fell from 62% to 47% (see Table 2). Regression analysis revealed a similar decrease in sufficiency to the wider cohort associated with RAA live status (see Table 3) for children defined as those who wait the longest, but this was not statistically significant.

**Table 4: Number of children defined as those who wait the longest with placement orders and number/proportion of these children placed with an adoptive family**

Year	Number with a placement order	Number placed with an adoptive family	Percentage placed with an adoptive family
2014/15	4,356	2,504	57%
2015/16	3,903	2,204	56%
2016/17	3,863	1,999	52%
2017/18	3,770	1,768	47%
2018/19	3,794	1,674	44%
2019/20	3,643	1,407	39%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

<sup>33</sup> Output truncated. RAA and year were included as indexing variables in the fixed-effects models.

## The characteristics of children where a match was found

Table 5 provides detail on the characteristics of children matched with an adoptive family. Whilst most characteristics remained unchanged over time, the average age of children matched fell from 1.5 to 1.2 and relatively fewer were part of a sibling group (declining from a high of 43% in 2015/16 to 37% in 2019/20). On average, males accounted for just over half of the matches, and ethnic minorities ranged between 17% in 2014/15 to 15% in 2019/20.

**Table 5: Characteristics of children matched by year**

Year	Average age	% Male	% Ethnic minority	% Disabled	% Sibling group
2014/15	1.5	53%	17%	4%	41%
2015/16	1.6	53%	16%	5%	43%
2016/17	1.5	52%	15%	3%	42%
2017/18	1.4	53%	16%	3%	40%
2018/19	1.3	52%	17%	3%	39%
2019/20	1.2	52%	15%	2%	37%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

## Characteristics of children where a match could not be found

The proportion of children defined as those who wait the longest where a match could not be found increased between 2015 and 2020. Following a high of 257 children in 2015 that were no longer placed for adoption because a match could not be found, the numbers reduced in 2016 and 2017 but then increased. Table 6 details the numbers of children where a match could not be found and the percentage that were defined as children who wait the longest, by year.

**Table 6: Number of children where a match could not be found and proportion of children defined as those who wait the longest, by year**

Year	Number of children not matched	% Children defined as those who wait the longest
2014/15	257	56%
2015/16	124	59%
2016/17	74	64%
2017/18	111	66%
2018/19	201	75%
2019/20	187	70%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

Table 7 provides detail on the characteristics of children where a match could not be found. On average and relative to the characteristics of children who were matched (see Table 5), children where a match could not be found were older (over 3), more likely to be disabled (3-4 times higher) or part of a sibling group, and, to a lesser extent, male, or ethnic minority. Over time, it is important to note that by 2020, the percentage of ethnic minorities where a match could not be found was *less* than those where a match was found.

**Table 7: Characteristics of children who were not matched by year**

Year	Average age	% Male	% Ethnic minority	% Disabled	% Sibling group
2014/15	4.1	57%	24%	14%	59%
2015/16	3.9	63%	22%	22%	53%
2016/17	3.8	65%	19%	23%	59%
2017/18	4.7	55%	23%	10%	73%
2018/19	4.1	59%	19%	12%	75%
2019/20	3.8	61%	13%	13%	65%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

Regarding the characteristics of children where the placement was disrupted (prior to the adoption order), these were similar to the wider cohort (i.e., those that were matched) with the exception of being, on average, older (3.4 years old) at the time of

placement order, and more commonly part of a sibling group (68%). Owing to the small number of these cases, analysis is not provided by year.

## **2. Assessment of the number and characteristics of adopters recruited i.e., registering an interest in becoming an adoptive parent.**

The number of registrations of prospective adopters and numbers progressing to subsequent stages of the approval process for RAAs in 2019/20 is presented in Table 8. For comparison, the same data are provided for LAs that were not part of a functioning RAA in 2019/20 (referred to as 'Not an RAA' in the table). The analysis covers all enquiries from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. Key points to note from Table 8:

- In all cases, a large proportion of registrations progressed to completing Stage 1. All RAAs reported over 70%, compared to 83% for LA-led services.
- A smaller proportion of registrations completed Stage 2, ranging from 52% to 76% across RAAs. The proportion of registrations that were matched with a child ranged from 36% to 54%. This compared to 61% of registrations completing Stage 2 in LAs not in an RAA, and the proportion that were matched with a child was 41%.
- Whilst the proportions of prospective adopters leaving the process at any stage were generally low, three RAAs were above 20%. The proportions may depend on the way these data are recorded by RAAs. Furthermore, three-quarters of RAAs had a smaller proportion of adopters leaving the adoption process than the average in LAs (14%) who were not part of an RAA in 2019/20.

**Table 8: Adopter stage progress (1st April 2017 – 31st March 2020)**

	<b>Total number of registrations over a 3-year period</b>	<b>Progress to Stage 1 %</b>	<b>Progress to Stage 2 %</b>	<b>Completed Stage 2 %</b>	<b>Matched %</b>	<b>Leave process at any stage %</b>
RAA1	747	83%	67%	53%	39%	14%
RAA2	259	75%	83%	63%	42%	10%
RAA3	517	84%	79%	62%	45%	12%
RAA4	238	77%	82%	69%	50%	6%
RAA5	385	75%	74%	61%	54%	3%
RAA6	346	80%	76%	64%	44%	25%
RAA7	452	79%	88%	76%	50%	8%
RAA8	542	76%	83%	63%	39%	17%
RAA9	215	86%	79%	71%	54%	9%
RAA10	227	70%	81%	66%	49%	6%
RAA11	476	79%	72%	52%	39%	13%
RAA12	433	86%	82%	63%	47%	12%
RAA13	539	80%	76%	58%	39%	12%
RAA14	729	84%	74%	59%	40%	29%
RAA15	316	77%	79%	70%	45%	17%
RAA16	178	70%	79%	56%	42%	13%
RAA17	486	81%	73%	56%	41%	8%
RAA19	225	78%	90%	76%	44%	5%
RAA20	130	88%	82%	69%	43%	6%
RAA21	101	77%	75%	70%	36%	6%
RAA22	138	70%	78%	64%	48%	20%
Not an RAA	5464	82%	76%	61%	41%	14%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

Table 9 shows the number of adoption registrations by year for LAs that were part of 22 RAAs that had gone live between 2017 and 2020. The number of registrations had increased since RAAs started to go live, reaching a high of 3,151 in 2018/19. Between 2017/18 and 2019/20, there was a 38% increase.

**Table 9: Adoption registrations over time, by year for LAs that were part of a RAA that went live at any time between 2017/18 and 2019/20.**

Registrations 2017/18	Registrations 2018/19	Registrations 2019/20	% Change 2017/18 to 2019/20
1,903	3,151	2,625	38%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

ASGLB data for 2020/21 shows that, nationally, there were 4760 registrations, an increase of 21% in 2020/21 compared to the ASGLB 2019/20 published figure<sup>34</sup>.

At Wave 3 in early 2021, all RAAs interviewed thought that they were getting **greater numbers of prospective adopters making enquiries**. Stakeholders (HoS, managers, social workers, VAAs, national stakeholders) felt there were multiple contributing factors for this increase, not all of which could be attributed to the work of RAAs.

They described the contribution made by the national recruitment campaign (You Can Adopt, see example). The campaign had sparked enquiries, mainly because it contributed to dispelling myths around adoption. Another logic for increased enquiries from a range of interviewees was that the COVID-19 pandemic had caused people to reflect on 'what was important in life' and had made people question 'what was missing' from it. A HoS thought that there had been some 'natural' marketing i.e., word of mouth that came with being a more mature organisation and building a reputation across the region.

Enquiries have gone up nearly 400% more than they were in the first year. Part of that has been a bit of natural marketing - marketing takes a while to really hit off. Plus, everyone's sitting at home and due to Covid really. We've had about 57 applications so far which is a significant improvement on the first year when it was around 25-30, so it's you know it has massively gone up. But

<sup>34</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>



again, those conversions won't be seen until year three. – Head of Service

### **Example: You Can Adopt campaign**

The You Can Adopt campaign was created as a response to three distinct challenges across the adoption system nationally:

1. Lack of understanding about the adoption process and who is eligible to adopt
2. Myths about sibling groups and ethnic minority children
3. Significant issues in how adoption had been delivered in the previous years

The campaign involved case studies from a range of families, support from celebrities who had adopted, a PR film highlighting the key message that 'anyone can adopt', an attitudinal survey to test public perceptions of adoption, press releases, a toolkit for RAAs and VAAs, and a 'radio day' amplifying messages across regional media.

Through this work the campaign generated 158K visits to the YouCanAdopt website, where over 5,000 people visited the 'Find An Agency' page thereafter.

Source: You Can Adopt campaign evaluation

In addition, RAAs continued with their in-house marketing activity and used public relations and communications specialists to help to spread messaging more widely. These activities continued during the Covid-19 restrictions and care was taken to ensure that websites were up to date and functioning.

### **Increase in approved adopters**

In 2020/21, Coram-i analysis showed there were **more approved adopters than children waiting** for the first time in a decade, although this can be attributed to the number of placement orders declining and fewer matches and placements being recorded<sup>35</sup>. Coram-i analysis indicated that there were 2,220 approved adoptive families waiting to be matched at the end of Q4 2020/21 in March 2021, an increase of 22% (400n) compared to the end of March 2020 and 2,100 children with a PO

<sup>35</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

waiting to be matched at the end of March 2021, a decrease of 14% (340n) compared to the end of March 2020 published figure<sup>36</sup>.

Stakeholders in the qualitative interviews thought that “everybody’s got a surplus of adopters” and held the perception that there were, “too many families waiting for too few children.” The surplus meant that social workers had lots of families to choose between when looking to place a child and approved adopters could choose younger children with fewer difficulties. There was an opinion that social workers and RAA managers were better able to find a speedier match as more adopters were available (covered further in Chapter 4). Some RAA workers felt they were placing more children in-house and providing adopter placements for other agencies thus generating income (Chapter 6).

However, the link between increased enquiries and increased approvals was quite complicated for several reasons:

**Hasty or impulsive enquires:** Stakeholders reflected that, due to both the ‘You Can Adopt’ campaign and Covid-19, people were making enquiries more quickly, before thinking through all the implications of adopting:

The national recruitment campaign has given permission to some people to think, ‘Oh yeah maybe I can adopt’, who perhaps would have ruled themselves out before. Especially around things like accommodation. On the other hand, there’s been a lot of insecurity and uncertainty because of COVID - so we’ve had people jumping in quite quickly to make an enquiry. Perhaps they would have spent longer thinking about it and mulling it over. Now they come in quite quickly and perhaps it’s been a little bit too soon for them. Where they might have some job insecurity or be in the middle of building work. Or, they haven’t quite concluded fertility treatment - because it’s been a little bit more accessible than it might have been when we were in the physical world. - Recruitment and assessment social worker

**More complex cases, which were taking longer to assess:** Stakeholders noted that the message that anyone can adopt had led to more prospective adoptive applying with a family history of multiple, complex needs and past trauma, and that

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<sup>36</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

this complexity has been growing over time as social workers previously reported at Wave 1 and Wave 2.

We definitely see more complex families coming forward, and that I think is a result of the message 'Anyone can adopt'. The implications are that it doesn't necessarily mean that if they have complex histories that they're not going to be good adopters, but the more complex an assessment is. Probably you need to have more face-to-face contact, which we haven't been able to have [because of COVID]. - Recruitment and assessment social worker

Social workers said they were doing more second opinions within the team because of the complexity of applicants' family lives. Second opinions were necessary to further explore areas that raised a potential concern. One manager reported that her team had done 10 second opinions within a few months and "far more than in a whole lifetime of working in adoption" during the pandemic. Having these conversations was harder remotely and some assessments took longer:

People have traumas in their past and difficulties, people that experienced adversities as children. They've got strengths in those assessments because they've often got love, empathy, a lot of insight. As long as they work through that and got to quite a strong place emotionally it wouldn't preclude them. But you just need to have those quite sensitive discussions. They're difficult discussions to have on a screen, but also you just need to really make sure emotionally they're in the right place, in the right frame of mind. - Recruitment and assessment team manager

**Limited capacity at RAA level and delays preventing enquiries being processed:** One case study RAA had not approved as many adopters as intended this year because of increased family finding activity:

"We haven't approved as many as we wanted to approve this year and that has been just because of activity - everything else has gone up and we have placed more children this year than we did do in our first year. That in itself is increased activity. And when you've got increased activity in family finding it gives you less resource to assess and approve people really." - Head of Service

Some delays were caused by waiting for decisions from other agencies, such as housing authorities.

## Remaining challenges in adopter sufficiency and matching

Although almost all stakeholders recognised an “unprecedented rise” in the number of adopters available nationally, there was a common perception amongst RAA, LA and VAA stakeholders that the wider pool was not necessarily meeting the needs of all children waiting:

There has been an unprecedented growth in the number of people coming forward inquiring about adoption, but what the quality of that is remains to be seen... so there are a lot of adopters but whether they are pears, or whether they are apples, and we need grapefruits, time still remains for that to be seen because they are not necessarily hitting the spot where it will make a difference for the children who are waiting. - VAA

A lack of adopters who meet the needs of children waiting may partly explain why adopter numbers have increased but the percentage of children being placed (and particularly children who wait the longest) has declined over the same period. However, the qualitative research with adopters found that often, even when adopters had expressed an interest in adopting siblings for example, they commonly had single infants placed. Adopters described how they had changed their mind during the assessment process when the challenges of adopting siblings were highlighted, were discouraged from adopting siblings by social workers or by the adoption panel or were linked with one child by the RAA when they had been approved for siblings<sup>37</sup>. These findings suggest that there could be more support for adopters who would like to adopt children who wait the longest.

The qualitative research with RAAs highlighted two main challenges related to their approved adopters, which led to difficulties recruiting adopters who meet the needs of waiting children:

- Living in the same areas as birth families

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1025935/The\\_views\\_and\\_experiences\\_of\\_approved\\_adopters\\_in\\_5\\_regional\\_adoption\\_agencies.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1025935/The_views_and_experiences_of_approved_adopters_in_5_regional_adoption_agencies.pdf)

- Lack of diversity of the adopter pool.

We cover each of these below.

### **Adopters living in the same areas as birth families**

A theme across the interviews was that prospective adopters often lived within areas that children's birth families were from. This posed difficulties in matching, as there were risk and safety concerns about making local placements:

What we've done is we've had a targeted recruitment campaign with local community groups in [a certain RAA area to recruit more minority ethnic adopters] and church groups, and we've made links with them. ... That has had an impact. What we hadn't anticipated is all those prospective adopters live in a certain area that is also the same place that our children who were looking for adoptive families have been removed from ... it was a good plan, but the adopters don't necessarily live in the areas we can make safe placements in. – Head of Service

### **The lack of diversity of the adopter pool who meet the needs of children waiting**

Table 10 presents a breakdown of the characteristics of those applying to adopt between 2017/18 and 2019/20, by RAA. The average age was 39 with limited variation between the RAAs. The average percentage of ethnic minority applicants was 17% and ranged from 4% to 22% across RAAs. The majority (76% on average) were married/in a civil partnership.

**Table 10: Prospective adopter' characteristics by RAA between 2017/18 and 2019/20**

	<b>Number of applications</b>	<b>Average age</b>	<b>Ethnic minority</b>	<b>Married/civil partnership</b>	<b>Single %</b>
		<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	
RAA1	747	38.8	17%	76%	5%
RAA2	259	39.6	11%	83%	7%
RAA3	517	39.4	19%	76%	7%
RAA4	238	38.8	4%	77%	3%
RAA5	385	39.0	18%	76%	3%
RAA6	346	41.4	21%	83%	6%
RAA7	452	38.0	7%	80%	7%
RAA8	542	40.0	17%	77%	6%
RAA9	215	40.1	6%	77%	5%
RAA10	227	38.1	7%	70%	7%
RAA11	476	38.4	7%	81%	4%
RAA12	433	38.7	21%	61%	5%
RAA13	539	39.1	6%	77%	5%
RAA14	729	39.0	10%	83%	5%
RAA15	316	38.9	22%	78%	6%
RAA16	178	39.1	14%	87%	6%
RAA17	486	39.8	14%	58%	8%
RAA19	225	42.3	52%	78%	8%
RAA20	130	42.3	55%	78%	10%
RAA21	101	42.1	57%	61%	13%
RAA22	138	44.0	54%	68%	11%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

Challenges in broadening the diversity of the adopter pool are national, pervasive, and have been of concern for more than twenty years<sup>38</sup>. There was strong consensus across interviewees that while there were some marginal improvements in practice, there was a “national problem” of low diversity within the adopter cohort. Despite these challenges, many RAAs perceived that they were making incremental improvements. One RAA had changed their front door policy, so that less

<sup>38</sup> Frazer, L. and Selwyn, J. (2005) Why are we waiting? The demography of adoption for children of black, Asian and black mixed parentage in England. *Child and Family Social Work* 10, pp 135–147

demographic information was taken at enquiry stages, to be more accessible and for the questions to be less invasive.

Stakeholders described how most prospective adopters still had very strong preferences for babies “as young as possible” and that this had not changed much over time.

RAAs reported that they were placing more children with same sex couples, although the increase in LGBTQ+ couples adopting had begun before the development of RAAs. Across the board, stakeholders said, “we’ve always done well with LGBT adopters”. Targeted recruitment at LGBTQ+ events were continuing digitally, but this was not felt to be as effective as face-to-face meetings and having informal conversations and engagement with people, for example at Pride events.

The extent to which RAAs had seen an increase in single adopters, particularly single men, was mixed across the programme. There was a perception amongst several RAA interviewees that the age range of prospective adopters was widening with both younger and older people expressing interest. Interviews with RAAs found that environmental concerns about population size was a growing motivation to adopt amongst younger adopters (also found at Wave 2). Another observation was that more people from low-income households were coming forwards to adopt, “dispelling the myth that adoption is only if you can afford it.” (Social worker).

There was no evidence of a large increase in the number of approved ethnic minority adopters in the ASGLB data (annual proportions c.17% from 2017 to 2020). Where an RAA had increased the number of prospective British South Asian adopters, recruitment staff said it was not directly because of the RAAs efforts but because a local mosque had recently had adoption as a talking point at meetings. Some interviewees observed more interracial couples coming forward. Commonly RAAs also thought that there was growing interest in adoption from adults who had been born in Eastern European countries, or from other European nationalities settled in England.

Targeted recruitment campaigns through local community or faith groups, and on social media, were frequently cited, as the main ways that RAAs were or were planning to address the challenge of recruiting more ethnic minority adopters. However, it was still acknowledged that more needed to be done in terms of strategy and integrating and connecting with ethnic minority groups and organisations, an area of work that was ongoing, particularly in the context of responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic hampered efforts to

increase diversity through engagement and targeted recruitment activities. An RAA had created a 'BAME' project, seeking to recruit more Black families through outreach work. Because of the social distancing restrictions and lockdowns, the face-to-face outreach did not run as intended. Other outreach activity was taken online, as aforementioned, such as at Pride events. Stakeholders were unconvinced that attending these virtually had the same impact as working in-person.

In one RAA, a decision was taken to allow prospective adopters to apply whilst they were trying to secure larger accommodation with a spare bedroom to support ethnic minority adopters currently without space to progress. Another RAA had 'diversity champions' who were ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+, or single Dads. They were involved in social media and front facing work, to dispel myths about who could adopt.

Although analysis of the ASGLB data indicated that RAAs were not having a notable effect on the recruitment of a more diverse pool of adopters, qualitative evidence suggested that RAAs (alongside others) were having an influence on the national conversations around diversity and helping to spotlight the challenge. Influence was happening through the RAA Leaders group, the national recruitment campaign steering group and a national recruitment strategy was being developed by system leaders (Chapter 7).

### **Recruiting adopters who could meet the needs of children waiting**

Across the sector, stakeholders external to RAAs (interviews with LAs, national stakeholders and VAAs) were uncertain about whether RAAs were meeting the challenge of recruiting adopters willing to parent children who had complex needs or needed to be placed with a sibling, although the qualitative research with adopters found there were adopters willing to take children who wait the longest but were not matched with these children. Interviewees said:

It's still very hard to find people who are willing to adopt those children and that isn't changed by working together more. -  
National stakeholder

The numbers might add up, but we need the profile of adopters' needs to match the emerging needs of children... some authorities were recruiting in a general sense and then wondering why we are still purchasing placements. ... Which then begs the question, why are you recruiting those adopters when they are



not really serving the children you have identified? - Chair of Board

There were strong feelings, especially from the VAA sector, that more targeted marketing and recruitment could ensure that prospective adopters coming through were able to match and meet the needs of children waiting.

### **Learning from practice: finding adopters to meet the needs of children waiting**

Interviewees shared their learning about how to recruit adopters to meet the needs of children including those who wait the longest. These strategies consisted of:

- Making the support offer core to the recruitment and advertising, especially for children who wait the longest, as adopters wanted to know how they would be supported
- Focusing on people's motivation to adopt and exploring their openness to adopting children with different characteristics or needs
- Targeted recruitment in relevant communities and organisations
- Using adopter case studies who have adopted children who wait the longest
- Thematic information sessions (e.g., adopting a sibling group)
- Addressing adopters' preferences against children waiting early in the recruitment stage

It was felt that adopters with the necessary skills, experience, and willingness to accept help were needed to meet the needs of children who wait the longest including sibling groups, and that it was unlikely that many people were going to come through the front door ready for this. Social workers felt an enhanced early support offer and specialised training would support already strong prospective adopters be better able to meet these children's needs.

Newer RAAs were unconvinced that regionalisation 'in and of itself' would solve sufficiency. As explained in Chapter 4, RAAs were looking to a multi-regional model of working to overcome regional challenges in finding adopters who could meet the needs of waiting children. In this instance, one HoS was working with other neighbouring RAAs and VAAs to build partnerships that would help them to find families for their waiting children, on the basis that searching across an even wider

pool of prospective adopters would make it more likely to find families who meet their requirements (see Chapter 4):

I'm not going to meet sufficiency myself. It's not just about jazzy adverts and social media posts. There comes a point at which sufficiency will only be met or close, and that's with strong partnerships... I am scoping partnerships with other RAAs and VAAs... we purchase ad hoc at the moment and we need to move to a smarter model. – Head of Service

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted that the number of children with a permanency order reduced from 2015 to 2020, and that children were waiting longer for an adoptive placement despite the number of approved adopters increasing.

Regardless of ongoing and increasing efforts to improve adopter sufficiency at RAA and national level, with a resulting increase in the number of enquiries and approved adopters, analysis shows that there remains a lack of prospective adopters who can meet the needs of all children waiting, especially children who wait the longest. Nationally, the sector needs to better equip prospective adopters through initial enquiry, information sessions, preparation/training and offer clear support packages.

The findings from the research with adopters showed that even when they were wanting to adopt children who wait the longest (e.g., sibling group), they were rarely matched with these children. As we go on to discuss in Chapter 4, the qualitative data indicates an ongoing tension between using the wider pool of adopters (matching and placing in-house) and reducing inter-agency spend and meeting the needs of children who wait the longest so that RAAs can become self-sustaining.

## Chapter 4 – Reducing unnecessary delay in matching and placing children with adopters

### Summary

- Analysis of 2020/21 data by Coram-i shows that children are waiting longer to be placed with a placement order<sup>39</sup>. Across the qualitative research, delays in court proceedings, changes to care plans and LA delays were said to be contributing to slowing matching and placement processes.
- Whilst there was a national trend of children waiting longer for to be placed between April 2017 and March 2020 (before the first COVID-19 lockdown),<sup>40</sup> analysis of data revealed that, relative to LA-led adoption services, RAAs had reduced the time taken to match and place children with adoptive families (all results statistically significant):
  - The average time from placement order to being matched with an adoptive family was quicker in RAAs (11 days less) compared with LAs not part of a RAA: 210 days in LAs and 199 days in live RAAs. RAAs were also on average quicker to match children (16 days less) defined as those who wait the longest (266 days in LAs and 250 in RAAs).
  - Similarly, the average time from placement order to placement with an adoptive family was quicker in RAAs for all placed children (14 days less), and for children defined as those who wait the longest (19 days less).
- RAAs reported that they were continuing to improve their matching processes by strengthening strategic matching meetings and sharing best practice with LAs.
- External stakeholders noted that RAAs had improved the quality of assessments and were influencing improvements in Child Permanence Reports.
- Since 2019/20, RAAs have reported a gradual increase in the use of Fostering for Adoption, which they believed had helped to improve timeliness.
- The dominant view was that RAAs can and should support Early Permanence. Some RAAs were doing so through; earlier tracking, stronger and more

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<sup>39</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

effective links between RAAs, LAs, VAAs and local partners, awareness raising activities, and an improved training and support offer. However, a common theme amongst RAA, LA and national stakeholder interviewees was the need to improve training for staff and adopters to improve understanding and better manage 'risk' in Early Permanence placements.

- Where interviewees thought planning for Early Permanence had worked well, RAA, LA staff and partners were clear about their respective responsibilities, systems and processes, plus senior staff took an active role in ensuring that all staff were knowledgeable and considered all routes to adoption including Early Permanence from the very start.

## **Adoption timeliness counterfactual impact analysis**

To understand whether RAAs have had an impact on the timeliness of adoptive placements, counterfactual impact analysis was undertaken. Analysis focussed on the period where the RAA has most influence (affecting timeliness), which is from the date of the placement order to the date of the match and then to the date the child was placed with an adoptive family.

The Second Evaluation Report (2019/20) included counterfactual impact analysis on the timeliness of adoptions in 2017/18 and 2018/19. The comparator group was formed (through propensity score matching) from adopted children in other LAs/RAA projects that had not yet gone live or had been live for less than six-months. Findings at that stage provided early indications of the impact of the RAA programme, as there was a reduction of 14 days on the average time from placement order to being placed with an adoptive family. Analysis focusing just on children defined as those who wait the longest, estimated a reduction of 35 days over the same period and measures.

Building on the previous evaluation report, the final counterfactual impact analysis sought to exploit the expanded/gradual rollout of RAAs to provide more representative/summative impact estimates. The methodological approach was fixed-effects regression, which estimates causal effects through comparison of differences over time (before and after the formation of each RAA) and between areas (LAs in live / not yet live RAAs). This estimation strategy is often referred to as difference-in-differences. The data covered average timeliness for all children matched/placed between 2014/15 to 2019/20 (pre-Covid-19). The explanatory variable of interest was RAA live status (RAAs started to go live in 2017/18).

## Results

Relative to LA-led adoption services, RAAs had, on average, between April 2017 (when RAAs started to go live) and March 2020, reduced the time it took to match and place children with adoptive families. Over this period:

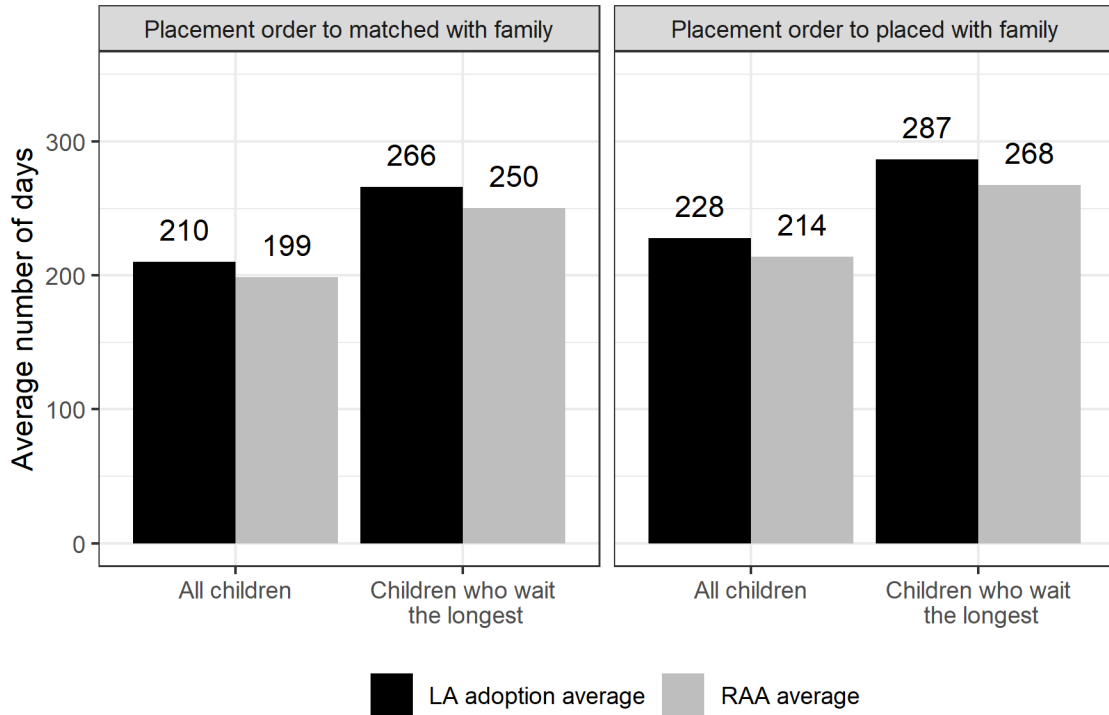
- The average time from placement order to being matched with an adoptive family in live RAAs was 11 days less for all placed children, and 16 days less when just focusing on children who wait the longest.
- The average time from placement order to placement with an adoptive family was 14 days less for all placed children, and 19 days less for children who wait the longest, which is similar to the impact estimates in the Second Report.

These results were statistically significant. Figure 5 illustrates these results as average times from placement order to matched/placed with an adoptive family.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The averages are calculated using the “within” intercept, which is a weighted average across time and RAAs/LAs. As this is a somewhat artificial intercept, Figure 5 should just be considered as illustrative (i.e., it is not reflective of a specific RAA/point in time and not comparable to national statistics)

**Figure 5: Average times from placement order to match (left hand panel), and placement order to placement with an adoptive family (right hand panel) between April 2017 and March 2020**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

It is important to note the similarity in impact estimates from the Second Report (2019/20) and the present one. The estimated impact from placement order to placement with an adoptive family was a reduction of 14 days in both sets of analysis. This is an encouraging finding as a) it demonstrates the early indications of impact estimated in 2019/20 were realised with a larger group of RAAs and over a longer period (2017/18 to 2019/20), and b) the different counterfactual impact analysis methods (see previous section) serve as validation to one another.

There was no statistically significant impact on the average time from entering care to adoption order. Impacts here were not anticipated as the legal processes pre-placement order, and post placement are not in the direct control of the RAA.

To understand the factors/characteristics associated with adoption timeliness, multi-level modelling was undertaken.<sup>42</sup> The outcome variable was time from placement order to placement with an adoptive family and multiple characteristics were included as explanatory variables (see Table 11). Analysis was focused on all children who had been placed with an adoptive family between 2017/18 and 2019/20 financial years.

All factors tested had a statistically significant increase on timeliness. The multi-level regression results are presented in Table 11. As an example, to aid interpretation, considering the number of days from placement order to placement with an adoptive family for a two-year old male, the model would estimate that the number of days would be 192.4, which comprises:

- The intercept (or “baseline” average number of days when all other factors are held constant) which is 137.2 days, plus
- Age at placement, 2 (years) multiplied 21.5 days, which is 43 days, plus
- Being male, which is 12.2 days.

On average, children with a disability took an additional 223 days to place. Being part of a sibling group also added a substantial number of days (64). Whilst the analysis focused on children who had been placed, it also provides insights on the characteristics associated with children who are not yet matched/placed.

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<sup>42</sup> The precise multilevel model was random intercepts (at the LA-level)

**Table 11: Multi-level model results: The effects of child characteristics on placement order to placement timeliness – all children placed between April 2017 and March 2020**

<b>Child characteristics</b>	<b>Estimate in days</b>	<b>Standard error</b>
Intercept (baseline average)	137.16	4.99
Age at placement order (estimate for 1 additional year)	21.55	1.09
Male (yes/no)	12.15	3.72
Ethnic minority (yes/no)	38.05	5.34
Disability (yes/no)	223.17	12.11
Part of a sibling group (yes/no)	64.16	4.17

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2020

## How RAAs reduced delays

### Family finding teams

Across the three waves, the research has consistently found that staff who were interviewed in RAAs and external stakeholders believed there had been improvements in the strategic tracking of children and adopters. A common theme from the interviews was that dedicated family finding teams and regular matching meetings had contributed to improvements in timeliness.

RAAs had continued working to strengthen the links with children’s social workers in LAs since becoming live RAAs. Family finding teams liaised with Children Looked After (CLA) teams to identify children needing placement, understand their needs, and discuss children who might need an adoptive placement in the future. A focus group of family finding social workers spoke of how these improvements were levelling up practice across the region:

We’ve tried to level it out through strategic matching meetings every month. Before, we used to sit in the office and have those



little conversations with assessing social workers to see who they've got coming up ... we now look at all the children and consider them... you are more aware of children in all of the authorities. - Family finding social worker

One RAA organised family finding using one key person per region who had responsibility for tracking children within the LA. The RAA felt the key person provided a good overview of the children and was effective because of a stable staff group but there were risks associated with staff turnover.

### **Sharing of best practice**

Some interviewees from RAAs and LAs felt that RAAs had helped improve family finding by sharing best practice approaches. For example, in some RAAs, adoption workers were supporting LA children's social workers to understand the adoption process through close working. Close working was particularly important as turnover of social workers could be high and newly qualified social workers lacked knowledge and experience in adoption. Working together was believed to improve consistency:

The emergence of the RAA caused [a] pulling everything [permanency planning] together. There is a more nuanced approach towards family finding and recruitment, the matches, the profiling, and anticipated needs of the children and a greater degree of consistency of practice both within the RAA and by implication, for permanence planning in the [X] participating authorities. - Case study other local service

The example below outlines practice examples from family finding teams within RAAs.

### **Developments to support quality of practice in matching children and families**

Alongside monthly strategic matching meetings, RAAs created tools to support matching children and adopters:

- Children who wait the longest booklet for prospective adopters
- Collection of profiles of children who wait the longest sent out to adopters.
- Diversity working groups, and diversity tools
- Integrating ethnicity needs into preparation training
- Generating more in-depth understandings of cultural heritage amongst social workers through training
- House of Honourability tool: identify adopters' strengths and weaknesses promoting heritage and making a plan on how to address weaknesses.

External stakeholders (IROs, VAAs, LAs) strongly believed that close working between LAs within RAAs had raised the quality and consistency of adopter and child assessments. Reflecting on RAA-led improvements, interviewees added:

[Matching practice] has significantly improved because of two things. Firstly, it is the coming together of organisations and you get the benefit of that. Secondly, it is about the sharing of expertise across authorities... the RAA is made up of a few authorities coming together and two of those had outstanding adoption services, and two others weren't. We've all benefited from that sharing of expertise. – Independent Reviewing Officer

What we've seen is the quality of care planning and preparation for children to move into placements is much stronger than before [the RAA]. The care planning is strong, the tracking for children potentially coming into adoption is strong, and we've had a very consistent operational approach... and we are getting much richer Child Permanence Reports. - VAA

However, not all interviewees felt that the RAA's efforts had improved timeliness or practice. Some LA staff thought that RAAs were over-emphasising their contribution in the partnership effort. They thought that improvements to matching had not been made by the RAA alone and that the reality was not as positive as their promotion might suggest. For example, a team manager said:

They're very good at saying they're very good at the sell "Oh, X many of our families will take this. So many of our families will take that". But when you get under the figures [they] are not as healthy as they portray them to be when you are actually trying to place children. - LA team manager

Adoption picnics, stay-and-plays (activity days based on Coram model) and profile sharing meetings were felt by internal and external stakeholders to have improved the speed and choice of matches, especially for children who wait the longest.

[The RAA has] improved on things like activity days. They have been positives for my children... we have managed to place a few children from those and, outside of Covid, if that can continue to be promoted and to be improved, that would make a difference. - Looked After Children's Team

Technological challenges were still hampering efforts to develop a common approach. For example, partner LAs in some RAAs were using different case management systems, so RAA adoption workers remained unable to access LA children's case files or other key documents. In the example below, we show how one RAA's family finding team used data to better inform linking and matching children and adopters.

### **Using data to better inform the matching process**

An RAA's family finding team were concerned that children's records were inaccessible. To solve this, they designed new spreadsheets, one of which was a 'matching matrix'. This enabled social workers to use records to plot qualities of adopters against the needs of children. The results of the matrix showed the best matches for that child that were then passed onto the children's social worker. By forming an internal database, the HoS believed they 'took the data to a new level'. The HoS thought that the matrix brought efficiencies to their work and enabled the

family finding team to work better together as they knew the cases they were all working on and could see the progress made.

## Early Permanence

Interviews with RAAs found a perception that an increased focus on Early Permanence could also help explain the improved timeliness amongst RAAs. Early Permanence is an effective way to ensure infants are placed with carers who may go onto adopt them, so removing the risk of multiple foster placements and creating stability<sup>43</sup>. However, the child may be reunified, as either the court has not yet made a judgment or work is still ongoing with the birth family. Over the course of the evaluation, RAA interviewees repeatedly shared their motivation to deliver a more consistent and cohesive focus on Early Permanence. Many RAAs reported close working with LAs to track children early on and many provided Fostering for Adoption placements. Concurrent placements were mainly commissioned services from the VAAs because of the skills needed to work towards reunification and support adoptive parents at the same time.

In one RAA, the HoS was the ADM for approvals and directly challenged cases where Early Permanence had not been considered. The challenge was believed by interviewees to be behind an increase in the number of Early Permanence placements in that locality. At the point of interview, the RAA was hoping to triple the number of children placed through Early Permanence in 2021, which staff said reflected a shift in their focus from adopters' to children's best interests. Senior oversight appeared to be a key factor in the increasing number of Early Permanence placements made, which mirrored broader reflections about the importance of the single line of accountability core element in supporting the effective functioning of RAAs.

Collaborative and consistent messaging within RAAs and between RAA and LA staff was very important. Following staff training, an interviewee explained how the RAA sought to embed the idea of considering Early Permanence for children needing an adoptive placement.

... authorities are really on it now and it feels like more proactive in terms of search, seeking out Early Permanency placements

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.coram.org.uk/sites/default/files/EP%20policy%20and%20practice%20v2c.pdf>

or...at least discussions about it and tracking children much more effectively. – Case study manager

One RAA had established an Early Permanence team in which dedicated permanency planning leads had responsibility for linking with children's social workers and attending permanency planning meetings. They provided information and guidance at a very early stage, and in one example provided guidance pre-birth to an LA who wanted to begin care proceedings and where siblings had previously been adopted. The expertise of the Early Permanence lead in that RAA had enabled staff to consider all options more thoroughly.

The focus really is on strengthening Early Permanence, and we've placed quite a number of children. ... Two of the three LAs were [already] quite strong on that, but ... is an area where we have strengthened. Having a dedicated team and dedicated social workers in planning meetings, that's been really beneficial, and they have since increased resources in that area. - Head of Service

To support staff engagement and knowledge development, a case study RAA was considering creating Early Permanency championing roles. A similar approach had been taken by another case study RAA in the form of adoption champions who worked within LAs to raise awareness, share information to support early tracking and inform decision-making. Interviewees said the early indications were positive, but it was too early to assess success.

There were examples from a few RAAs of the number of Early Permanence placements, especially Fostering for Adoption (FfA), increasing. A management information report from one of the case study RAAs indicated that there were 23 children placed in a FfA placement, an average of 7.6 per quarter during the first nine months of the RAA's second year (20/21). This compared favourably to 25 children being placed in a FfA placement during the whole of 2019/20 (an average of 6.25 per quarter) and to an average of 3.5 per quarter during 2018/19. In another case study RAA, 11 Early Permanence placements were provided for children in the previous six months, compared to 18 in 2019/20.

Interviewees were encouraged by examples in their RAAs of children being placed quickly into a FfA family. In one case, an RAA interviewee talked about doubling the number of FfA placements over the past year. They believed the increase was due to

prospective adopters having a better understanding that an Early Permanence placement could increase their chances of adopting a younger child.

Staff in one case study RAA said social workers were increasingly considering Early Permanence in matching meetings following the training they had delivered.

[I've] been impressed by the numbers of children placed through FfA. That has been a huge positive for children being placed and in terms of care planning it has gone very well. - VAA

The management information supported this perception and showed that the RAA had made 16 FfA placements since April 2020 compared with 15 in Q3 in 2019 and was on target to achieve 20 by end of reporting year.

Examples like these provide further evidence of a potential for increase in FfA. This theme was first reported in our Second Report when interviews indicated that interest in FfA had boosted adopter recruitment efforts. This has the potential to address some of the adopter sufficiency issues reported in the previous chapter, because it means children are adopted earlier and are therefore younger.

However, it did depend on the availability of services to support Early Permanence. An interviewee said they had seen a decline in FfA since the move to RAA, when previously, the LA adoption service had provided these placements “all the time”. They felt that although adopters would have taken FfA with the right support in place, the RAA had been unable to provide it. The example highlights the inconsistent offers and practices in relation to Early Permanence across the RAAs.

Work between RAAs and LAs to help staff share informed contributions to make Early Permanence a viable option has continued. Training staff was a theme that ran through previous reports to help RAAs place more children and limit unnecessary delays. In the third wave of interviews in 2021, there were multiple examples of enhancements to staff training to build knowledge, understanding and confidence, which was particularly important due to the complexity of cases associated with the increased take up of Early Permanence placements:

Early Permanence is something that's been a real positive this year. We've been able to recruit more adopters for Early Permanence but ... they are incredibly complex, and we need to ensure that people are trained and clear about the issues when they're setting them up, because so many things can go wrong

with those placements. The courts have different ideas about it. -  
Case study HoS

However, in one example, pressures on the LA Children's Services, a shortage of capacity and staffing changes, negatively affected social workers' confidence to make Early Permanence decisions. Interviewees reflected on the impact of working alongside social workers who did not feel equipped to assess the different options.

The changes in LAs [restructuring] mean you haven't got as many confident and experienced social workers doing it, so people are less likely to see Early Permanence as an option or even know it exists. - Case study managers

A lack of clarity around Early Permanence pathways was evident in the interviews with staff and managers across a few other RAAs too.

Where there is a lack of clarity, there has been some confusion over the process which has led to delays. - Case study practitioners

To address these issues, one RAA had improved its written policy on Early Permanence so that it clearly set out and explained the process and, in addition, the Government has invested funding to improve Early Permanence practice this year<sup>44</sup>. This RAA felt that without adequate training and experience, there was a risk of a lack of awareness around the process and responsibilities, which could then lead to delays for children in the process.

In parallel to improvements in staff training, several RAAs continued to improve their preparation group training to encourage prospective adopters to consider FfA as a route to Early Permanence. The preparation group training enhancements were partly in response to increased demand from LAs. The pandemic also provided an opportunity for RAA staff to incorporate a virtual Early Permanence course into preparation group training for adopters in response to wide recognition of a lack of understanding of the requirements. Other interviewees urged caution and wanted to avoid prospective adopters becoming too optimistic about the court's future decision. They wanted to change the narrative around Early Permanence and move away from talking about risks to speaking with prospective Early Permanence carers about uncertainty and offering a balanced perspective. In one case, they explained that

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<sup>44</sup> The Department for Education invested 500,000 into improving Early Permanence practice in 2021.

they spoke about Early Permanence rather than FfA to help manage the “continuum of risk” as set out in the Quality Mark in Early Permanence.<sup>45</sup>

A related issue was managing relationships between RAAs and the Family Justice Boards. RAA and national stakeholders reflected on what they saw as the courts holding a negative view towards adoption, Early Permanence placements, and the ability of RAAs to find adoptive families for some children, which could affect timeliness. The RAAs felt they had much more to do to help some judiciary to understand and change their perceptions about Early Permanence placements.

One of the things we are finding is the courts are getting less positive about making adoption orders for older children and children with additional needs because they perceive that we struggle to place them, which isn't entirely accurate. So, we've got to do some work with them to open up the possibility for some children rather than making the assumption that we won't be able to place them and then not making a placement order. –  
Head of Service

Work between RAAs and the Family Justice Boards was ongoing with examples of RAA HoS attending regular Family Justice Board meetings and being involved in discussions about topics such as contact with birth families and responding to the court delays associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which was helpful in developing a shared understanding and working through the challenges faced.

## **Family finding through Link Maker and VAAs**

The findings from interviews suggested that RAAs were not using Link Maker in a standardised way, which may have affected timeliness and had implications for finding the best match for a child. One RAA was improving matching by upgrading from a shared spreadsheet to a new arrangement within Link Maker. The new arrangement provided a private website enabling the RAA and the LAs to have access to information on all adopters and children within their region. It was also a solution for LAs whose internal systems used different software, preventing sharing of information. Other RAAs had an ‘unwritten rule’ to family find within the RAA before looking outside. Another RAA had made a policy change to use Link Maker at

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<sup>45</sup> The Early Permanence Quality Mark is the standard of excellence awarded to adoption agencies who demonstrate quality of service <https://quality-mark.earlypermanence.org.uk/>



an earlier stage, as they had previously had an informal rule to wait for three months to use the service. They hoped that this would further reduce any delay and that it would ultimately help them to find a speedier match.

We are going to Link Maker and more quickly now. We used to have an informal rule to wait for three months after approval before looking outside or using Link Maker. We've made the recent decision to abandon that and to use it straight away when people want to. - Adoption worker, RAA

The inconsistent use of Link Maker by RAAs also affected the timing and frequency with which RAAs approached VAAs. Many RAAs reported having withdrawn from formal contractual arrangements with VAAs, as they expected to place more children within the region. However, as one VAA said, the RAA still asked the VAA first if they were unable to find a match. VAA adoptive families were still key to finding a match if there was not an appropriate match within the RAA.

We still go through all the normal channels when it comes to matching and linking in-house. But if there are individual circumstances ... we'll do what we can to work together in the best interest of those children with a VAA. – Head of Service

Matching was affected by the pressure for RAAs to make 'in-house' matches and not create an interagency spend. A common theme across the interviews with RAAs, VAAs, and LAs was an inherent tension between speedier matches to match the child's needs (which might be a VAA placement) and making cost savings from becoming a bigger structure. In one example, an LA with higher numbers of ethnic minority waiting children felt that there were delays in the process (because of a keenness to make an in-house match rather than look further afield, even if this was thought to be better for the child's needs). Other external stakeholders felt that some RAAs prioritised their own adopters and that this could sometimes feel pushed or forced, and that this was influenced by the concerns around the costs of the interagency fee.

The RAA pushes us towards their adopters, that's very common. Sometimes we have to challenge each other ... to say, "No ... we need to look for another adopter". But sometimes they get annoyed when you are antagonistic ... but it has to be the best placement for the child. - Looked After Children's Team

As in Wave 1 and Wave 2, there was a prevailing sense that RAAs could do more to join up services as part of a system wide approach to matching, for example, and that VAAs and other children's services could do more to integrate with RAAs too. There remained a perception across the interviewees that despite the original policy intention for RAAs to work closely with VAAs, this was not happening across the board. Some collaborations, rather than being proactive, were reactive to situations that the RAA could not address in-house which did not necessarily support effective partnership working and, as certain interviewees argued, may not put the needs of the child first.

I think [a] VAA is still involved, but it's much more on finding organisations to contract with rather than seeing them as strategic partners involved in the strategic direction of how adoption should be working in that area. – National stakeholder

Interviewees felt that close working with VAAs required a shared commitment to break down any barriers. One VAA talked about how hard they have worked at forging a relationship with the RAA. They have arrangements in place for placements and the RAA and VAA meet regularly to exchange adopters for children the RAA has waiting, which were usually older children, sibling groups and those with additional needs.

VAAs provide 25% of the market for placements, so they need us. ... If only, we would just sort of settle on that understanding, I think it would just help. [...] You know we work well together. We collaborate. ... RAAs need VAAs and vice versa. And if only there was no shame in that. If only that was just understood as it's about doing our best for children. - Case study VAA

One RAA was being formed with a VAA in a strategic partnership role (Chapter 2) and there were examples where VAAs played a more active role and sat on the RAA boards.

Arguably I would say that it's probably more in keeping with the spirit of the region. ... I know that way back when the idea was to try and use some of that commercial acumen that existed in the VAA, there was a perception that VAA were doing recruitment and support very well. And what could LAs learn from that? – Local Authority lead

A common belief across RAAs was that there were certain cases where a longer match was justified if it enabled a better match to be made. It was felt that these were the more complex cases of both children and adopters, and required more time and resource to carefully consider options and to make appropriate plans:

In terms of placement order to placement, we've seen variation between LAs. Some areas are well within timescales, others are longer. But then you've got to understand the story of the children. For example, one authority had a sibling group of four who were placed but which took longer, which meant the average timescale had increased. – Head of Service

## Conclusion

At Wave 3, our analysis found that between 2017 and 2020 RAAs had achieved a statistically significant (albeit modest) decrease in the average time for children, from placement order to match, and placement order to placed with an adoptive family. The findings were similar to the impact estimates from the Second Report (2019/20) and suggest that, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, RAAs were improving timeliness. However, data from Coram-i<sup>46</sup> from April 2020 until March 21 shows that children were waiting longer, there had been a decline in the number of children matched and placed, and an increase in the number of approved adopters not matched.

Factors affecting timeliness of matching were varied but included the relative strength of RAA, LA and VAA links, the complexity of children's needs and how well prospective adopters were able to meet those needs, differential court preferences and practices and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not all were within RAAs' control. Interviewees pointed out that having smaller cohorts of children who wait longer because of complex cases or a lack of adopters to meet their needs (Chapter 3) could have a disproportionately negative effect on their timeliness data.

In the Second Report (2020), the evaluation found that RAAs started to introduce new tracking systems and supporting protocols. At that point, it was unclear whether the changes arose because of regionalisation or would have been an increasing trend regardless, and in 2021, many of the same questions remained. There was, however, more evidence from this Third Report (2021) of an increased momentum as RAAs had been able to recover from the initial and unexpected service response that

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<sup>46</sup> <https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

the Covid-19 pandemic required and sought to further build on the links with LAs and services across the wider system to help improve timeliness.

However, whilst the broad range of qualitative interviews provided some evidence to indicate that the timeliness and quality of practice in matching across RAAs was becoming more consistent and improving, the numbers showed ongoing delays and the quality of placements would only be realised over time.

## Chapter 5: The provision of adoption support

### Summary

- All three waves of the evaluation found that stakeholders believed that adoption support was one of the core areas where RAAs were making the most changes. Improvements were driven by embedding support in the adoption journey in a way not done previously and by placing a greater emphasis on accessible support.
- There had been a shift in practice in many RAAs to proactively provide an early intervention service for families who were beginning to struggle rather than reactively manage crisis situations. For the most part, these new early intervention services were funded and led in-house by RAAs.
- Most targeted and specialist adoption support interventions were provided through commissioned services rather than in-house, despite some RAAs having skilled staff with the capability to provide these interventions.
- RAAs continued to rely on the ASF to provide the funding for therapeutic support to families who were assessed as being in need. The ASF Covid-19 Scheme was welcomed and had enabled RAAs to respond flexibly to family needs.
- The RAAs continued to report that adequately resourcing adoption support was challenging, and adoption support teams continued to carry heavy caseloads. Demand for services had increased during COVID-19. Heavy caseloads meant that families still experienced delays in receiving targeted and specialist support.
- There was limited evidence that RAAs collected information on the impact of their support offers on families. A common theme across the interviews and the research with adopters was the need for improved measurement of the quality and effectiveness of adoption support to inform service development, and ultimately improve long-term outcomes for children and families.
- Gaps in adoption support services for children, adoptive parents and birth parents remained, especially in relation to the provision and quality of life story work, birth parent counselling, support for contact, access to case records and intermediary services

This chapter of the report explores the provision of post-adoption support by RAAs, considering the impact regionalisation has had on the range and quality of support provided to adoptive families. This chapter draws predominantly on interviews with RAAs – both those involved in case studies and those who were not – as well as interviews with national stakeholders, the findings of the adoption support survey with adopters, the models survey conducted with RAAs, and reports from the evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) and the related ASF COVID-19 Scheme.

## **The national context for adoption support**

The provision of adoption support is a statutory requirement for RAAs and other adoption agencies. Adoption support within RAAs is typically funded from core RAA budgets provided by member LAs. RAAs also have access to external funds to provide support to families. The most significant of these is the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), which had an overall budget of £45m in 2020/21. The Fund provides up to £5,000 for therapeutic interventions per child per year, with an additional £2,500 available for specialist assessment. Agencies can also provide match-funding, should more costly or longer-term support be required. A separate evaluation of the ASF is being undertaken<sup>47</sup>.

A small number of other external funding sources have been available to RAAs on a short-term basis. The ASF COVID-19 Scheme provided up to £8m in emergency funding for RAAs and LAs to meet the needs of those adopted or with a Special Guardianship Order (SGO), specifically needs that had arisen during the pandemic. The ASF COVID-19 Scheme operated between April and June 2020 and services had to be delivered by the end of December 2020. In 2017, a small number of RAAs also received grants to develop adoption support via Centres of Excellence grants and the Practice and Improvement Fund.

The additional funds for adoption support, such as ASF, have considerably added to the resource available within RAAs. A common theme across the RAA interviews was that the ASF COVID-19 Scheme was beneficial during the pandemic, because RAAs were able to use the Fund to pay for activities such as virtual peer to peer support, access to helplines, couples therapy and online counselling to try and address gaps left by social distancing measures. As noted in our year two report, Centre of Excellence and Performance Improvement Funds contributed to the

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluations-of-the-adoption-support-fund-asf>

development of strong adoption support services in several RAAs, particularly in helping RAAs to recruit specialist staff.

## **Demand for support services**

It was clear throughout the research that demand for adoption support increased (from an already-high baseline) during the pandemic. The increase had significant implications on being able to respond quickly to requests for support as well as on providing the support required. There was also increased demand for letterbox services, provoked by concern for the welfare of absent birth family members.

I will say our activities have gone through the roof just looking in the last quarter. We have had an 88% increase on calls to our advice and support line. - Head of Service, case study RAA

The pandemic and associated social distancing restrictions meant that adoption support teams, much like teams across other parts of the adoption journey, had to adapt how they worked with families. Interviewees said much less work with families was face to face, though social workers were meeting with parents where necessary and taking appropriate precautions; for example, sometimes workers met with parents outside. The ASF COVID-19 Scheme was instrumental in providing support during the early part of the pandemic, and other ASF services were maintained, albeit delivered remotely where necessary.

Interviewees reported that families' presenting needs were becoming more severe and that was particularly the case during the pandemic. Multiple interviewees referred to children and families that they felt were on the 'edge of care' due to the severity of the challenges they faced and the proximity to breakdown. Others described children who needed interventions as they were involved in county lines, sexual exploitation, or had significant mental health needs.

Despite adoption support teams facing significant challenges during the pandemic, Wave 3 of the evaluation found that RAAs reported that they were continuing to add to the "menu" of available support. RAAs were developing early intervention services and reviewing approaches to commissioning from external organisations, as the rest of this chapter explores.

## What adoption support services were RAAs providing?

This evaluation of RAAs explored what types of adoption support RAAs were providing. Adoption support offers within the RAAs were typically structured as follows:

- Early intervention / universal services: available to all adoptive families without specific assessment. These included peer services, support groups and activities such as Xmas parties, webinars, training, information resources and support for contact. These activities were provided by the RAA (or commissioned by the RAA) using their own funds, although the ASF Covid-19 Scheme contributed to some of this work in 2020.
- Targeted interventions: provided by specialist RAA staff such as psychologists, education support or occupational therapists for families with higher levels of need. While these posts were usually supported by RAA budgets, in some cases funding came from other sources such as Centre of Excellence grants. As a result, not all RAAs had these posts in their adoption support teams. This category also included therapeutic parenting courses, which were often commissioned out (and paid for using the ASF).
- Specialist support: requiring an assessment of need, these interventions typically included parenting courses focused on specific issues (e.g., non-violent resistance) or therapeutic support (e.g., DDP) for individual families and work with children (e.g., life story work). These services were primarily funded by the ASF, although some were offered by RAAs in-house.

## Development of early intervention services

Our previous evaluation reports highlighted that RAAs had begun developing early intervention services, and this trend continued during year three. National stakeholders pointed out that they were increasingly seeing RAAs introducing early help approaches, with prevention viewed as preferable to crisis management. RAAs reported that they were now more commonly introducing adopters to a broader range of support at an earlier stage in the adoption journey – often during the matching stage pre-placement. For example, RAA staff highlighted that therapeutic parenting work was introduced during preparation training.



In practice, the RAAs involved in this research demonstrated a range of initiatives and approaches to universal and early intervention-focused support. For example, RAAs were providing:

- Access to Adopter Hub<sup>48</sup>, an online resource which is generally the first place adopters are signposted to by adoption support teams.
- Dedicated and centralised advice and support lines, the creation of a database of resources, and a range of new workshops and webinars including topics such as screen time, social media, life stories, dealing with contact and letter box, and parenting teens.
- Peer services. The box below explores this in more detail.

### **The value of peer mentoring**

The use of peer support or peer mentoring was held up as particularly useful practice by several RAAs. While some explored the use of peer support for the first time by purchasing places on external peer offers through the ASF COVID-19 Scheme, more commonly RAAs had developed programmes as a core part of their in-house adoption support offer. In one such example, peer mentoring was offered to all adopters during Stage One ensuring adopters were paired with a mentor who had similar circumstances and could offer genuine lived experience of their issues. The mentor was expected to stay with the adopters right through the adoption process. This offer had proved so successful that the RAA was expanding their existing pool of 20 mentors by recruiting five more. Staff in the adoption support team saw the programme as a wrap-around package of support which was realistic – adopters could share the light at the end of the tunnel but also the journey to get to it. Support was provided flexibly, and during the pandemic that included by phone, email, or text.

“The families that are getting that support are just really grateful just to be able to talk to somebody that just ‘gets it’. That’s the phrase that they use to mean it’s really nice to be able to talk to someone who gets what being an adopter is like.” Adoption Support Worker, case study RAA

Another RAA which was not involved in the case studies had recruited three Adopter Development Coordinators, all of whom had previously adopted children themselves. They were responsible for running the RAA’s peer mentoring scheme which offered

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.theadopterhub.org/adopter-hub>

support throughout the adoption process. They also coordinated closed groups on social media, which had proliferated during the pandemic. Some of the volunteer mentors had progressed to paid sessional work with the RAA, offering specific support on thematic areas such as parenting adopted teenagers.

Interviewees across the RAAs highlighted several advantages from using peer-focused interventions. The offers could usually be accessed quickly and flexibly to meet the family's needs. Interviewees also believed that parents could find it empowering to be able to develop solutions and approaches without involving their social worker or other formal support mechanisms. They suggested that adoptive parents felt less alone knowing others had been through similar situations.

Peer support was not eligible for funding from the ASF other than through the Covid-19 fund. As such, it needed to be resourced through the RAA's own budgets. There was broad consensus from those providing peer services that peer support services provided value for money and prevented problems escalating, potentially creating savings in the long run and better outcomes for children.

## Targeted support

Providing targeted support mainly relied on external funding sources. For example, some RAAs used the ASF COVID-19 Scheme to pay for a psychologist post. A Head of Service noted that the skills of the psychologist were very highly valued and as an RAA, they wanted to explore ways to keep the post in the longer-term. There was a desire to create specialist roles within adoption support teams to enable targeted support to be provided by skilled staff in the RAA rather than having to commission out.

However, it was clear that RAAs had found value in having adoption competent staff with knowledge of the adoption life cycle and skills in specific developmental areas. These staff focused on addressing common challenges faced by adoptive families. For example, one RAA had a dedicated school advisor in their adoption support team focused on reducing permanent exclusions for previously looked after children and ensuring stability in education settings. This staff member worked closely with families and education staff and liaised with other specialists such as the team's adoption psychologist.

## Specialist support

As with targeted support, there was variation in the specialist support interventions that were offered in-house (delivered by RAA staff) or commissioned from other agencies using either RAA funds or the ASF. Some RAAs offered more specialist interventions than others. The ASF was instrumental in funding therapeutic support, and for most RAAs the ASF was the primary mechanism for the delivery of these services. Demand for and use of the ASF remained high, and for some RAAs the amount of funding drawn down from the ASF was larger in 2020 than ever before.

Because of the level of demand, processing ASF applications was resource intensive for adoption support teams, and workers often found their working time consumed by this task alone. While the ASF had provided the funding for families to access specialist and targeted provision, one interviewee thought that it had also created a “double-edged sword.” The workload created by the high level of demand for assessments of need and processing the related ASF applications meant that staff did not have the capacity to provide the specialist support themselves, even where they were equipped to do so.

During the pandemic, the ASF COVID-19 Scheme proved particularly helpful for providing responsive specialist support to families in need. RAAs were able to use the fund to provide online therapy and courses addressing specific issues such as home-schooling and child to parent violence.

[The courses] were incredibly popular. Almost every group was full. - Adoption Support Worker

Some RAAs did provide specialist courses in-house. Where these courses existed, they commonly included Non-Violent Resistance and DDP (as highlighted in our Second Evaluation Report). Some RAAs provided DDP training to all adoption support staff, and that approach underpinned all work done with parents. However, providing a full DDP intervention with a family was time-consuming; and as a result, this work was often commissioned out.

One case study RAA flagged that their adoption support team provided therapeutic support to families routinely by implementing good social work practice; as such, this support was not specifically badged as a therapeutic intervention. Similarly, interviewees in other RAAs talked about the work they did to “hold” families and support them informally until assessments and applications were completed and commissioned interventions could begin (see example below).

### **Providing tailored support to families**

One RAA adoption support social worker described how they were supporting a teenager with suspected Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. While the young person was awaiting diagnosis and subsequent referrals to specialist services, the social worker was providing therapeutic support to help the young person recognise their own emotions as well as those of others, and better understand their anxiety, respond to social cues and so on. The social worker described this as focusing on life skills and coping strategies. The approach would not “tick a box” as providing a specific therapy but was addressing some of the young person’s difficulties.

## **Enablers and barriers to improving adoption support**

### **Improving consistency in support offers**

Improved quality and consistency of support was identified as a key outcome of the RAA programme in the Theory of Change. Interviewees with strategic roles (such as national stakeholders or LA senior managers) agreed that improved support was an intended outcome and a main theme in the qualitative research was a perception that improvements in adoption support were one of the greatest benefits of regionalisation, although recognising that they needed to do more research into the quality and impact of their support offer (see later in this chapter).

I think that the RAA has been particularly beneficial for adoption support and for reasons... around pooled expertise and creating much more robust, less sort of Cinderella service, as it was within the LAs. We’ve now got a dedicated team with dedicated expertise developing and increasing expertise in delivering in this incredibly complex area. - LA Strategic Manager

There was good evidence from the interviews that regionalising adoption support had led to more consistent practice. At a larger RAA, interviewees expressed that there was now a clear route into adoption support across all the partner LAs, with a standardised approach to assessing support. Interviewees believed this consistency had brought down waiting times and had positively impacted the service adopters received.

The impact of sharing good practice was identified as an assumption in the Theory of Change for RAAs, and there were examples of improved collaboration and knowledge-sharing taking place in practice:

The model of adoption support is significantly more responsive than it was when we were smaller authorities. I mean it's consistent across all five now, whereas before some did more in their adoption support model than others did. - Family Finding Team

Commonly interviewees believed that the benefits of regionalisation might be most felt by those adopters and practitioners who were previously in smaller LAs. Indeed, in some of the smaller RAAs involved in the case study research, there was evidence that the RAA was able to provide more adoption support in-house, with newly trained staff, than they had been able to as single LAs. Interviewees thought that smaller authorities benefitted from pooling finances and knowledge – particularly in the delivery of group activities and workshops.

A few RAAs were considering increasing economies of scale by partnering with neighbouring RAAs to provide adoption support. A positive impact of the pandemic had been the removal of geographic barriers to participation when support was delivered remotely. Pooled resources were a core element of the RAAs; this move takes that concept a step further.

### **Reflecting on practice and learning from other adoption support teams**

For one RAA, collaborating with neighbouring RAAs had included the introduction of practice reflection sessions with adoption support teams. The sessions had allowed adoption support staff to come together in workshops to share knowledge and learning.

“We've been doing practice observation sessions reflecting on our own practice or delivering workshops with workers from the other regions. I know just learning from them [and] the colleagues from my own team as well it is so beneficial. Some work in quite different ways or have different ideas, perspectives, tools... sharing tools has been invaluable really, especially when you're trying to navigate this virtual world and don't have a clue where to start.” - Adoption Support Worker, case study RAA

Improvements in the support offer was not mirrored across all RAAs. In one RAA, staff were said to have become frustrated at being unable to provide support in-house due to lack of resources. Some staff had left the RAA to provide therapeutic work independently – often in interventions funded through the ASF and processed by the RAA that had employed them.

## **Smarter commissioning**

As in previous reports, the Wave 3 evaluation highlighted how RAAs were streamlining commissioning processes to improve their adoption support offers. In this third year (2021) of the evaluation, further examples were cited of RAAs developing procurement frameworks and purchasing systems, which have made the process of sourcing and contracting with suppliers easier. Where such systems had been implemented, a main theme amongst interviewees was that they brought greater consistency, better quality and gave adopters more choice of who supported them. However, the task of setting up the frameworks had been substantial and the success of new arrangements longer-term remained to be seen.

There was evidence that joined up commissioning was more challenging in RAAs covering large and diverse geographic areas (such as those with coastal and in-land city areas within their remit), or in RAAs with hub and spoke models. In such cases, centralised provider lists made less sense, as it was less likely a provider would cover the whole region.

### **Using procurement processes to speed up access to support**

One RAA had developed a procurement framework for providers with the aim of streamlining the commissioning process to make procurement and provision of support as fast as possible. Work was underway to improve this further by addressing the timeliness of access to support. An internal review highlighted that even with the new procurement framework in place, the time lag between a family receiving a support assessment and interventions starting was around 4.5 months. RAA staff were now working closely with procurement teams to explore how the process could be made as short as possible to provide timely support.

However, the Head of Service has found the process of working with procurement challenging, with the two parties (the RAA and the LA procurement team) coming at the issue from different perspectives. This example not only illustrates the complexities of improving commissioning, but also highlights the range of responsibilities – and the associated challenges – which fall within the remit of an RAA HoS.

## **Resourcing adoption support**

The Modernising Permanence Programme (MPP), commissioned by the ASGLB, has led to the development of a Blueprint for Adoption Support Services, which sets out 17 key elements for teams to benchmark their support services against, using a newly developed audit tool. The Blueprint for adoption support highlighted that high quality adoption support required adequate resource<sup>49</sup>. RAA interviewees reported that having sufficient resource remained a challenge for RAAs. For example, one RAA noted that their partner LAs varied in their contribution to the adoption support budget. The interviewee called for increased statutory guidance on the provision of adoption support. The variety of approaches to resourcing adoption support had an impact on how much support could be provided in-house, particularly when therapeutic and specialist support was needed.

In an ideal world, I would have an in-house clinical psychologist. I would have some dedicated trainers. I would have some family support workers, but I haven't got the budget at the moment. So

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<sup>49</sup> An example budget for an RAA's Centre of Excellence adoption support service is included in the Blueprint. This states the total cost of adoption support for the 450 open cases at £1.276m, excluding the £850,000 the RAA had also drawn down from the ASF. Further detail and context can be found here: <https://corambaaf.org.uk/practice-areas/adoption/blueprint-adoption-support-service>

that would be ambition through growth, which is a really difficult conversation with LAs, so I'm not there yet... I don't see an internal way of funding that. - Head of Service

One case study RAA received funding from health partners to pay for an experienced adoption psychologist. However, during the pandemic, this funding was withdrawn as resources were redirected to deal with the impact of COVID-19. The RAA's board agreed to cover the cost for the short-term, but this had implications for the RAA's own budget.

## Understanding the quality and impact of support

The Blueprint<sup>50</sup> for adoption support sets out parameters for high-quality adoption support. The Blueprint includes a toolkit for adoption agencies to benchmark their services. In our interviews for this evaluation, only one (larger, more newly established) RAA referenced the Blueprint and noted that they had begun to review their practice against its parameters. The process of reviewing practice had prompted thinking about the strategic direction needed for adoption support in the agency.

There was a commonly held view amongst the interviewees at both case study and non-case study RAAs, that RAAs generally needed to be better at measuring the impact of their adoption support activity and evidencing the quality of their services; this is a key tenet of the adoption support Blueprint. One adoption support worker felt that the lack of statutory measurement in the adoption scorecard measures, for example, made the support service feel undervalued, or not as important as other areas of adoption.

It's difficult to measure outcomes for us. It's like we live in a grey area. Not as much emphasis or value is put on our work. As in you can measure the amount of matches you make or placements you make of children. You can measure how many adoption assessments or SG assessments you do. Nobody really takes enough care over what we do, possibly because it's slightly more difficult to measure. You could measure the amount of assessments we do, but it's not quite the same. - Adoption Support Worker

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<sup>50</sup> <https://corambaaf.org.uk/practice-areas/adoption/blueprint-adoption-support-service>



## Seeking adopter's views on adoption support

While formal indicators on the quality of support are lacking, RAAs are increasingly engaging with adopters to understand the impact of adoption support. Active engagement with the adopter voice has become more prevalent over the course of the evaluation. Interviewees flagged various approaches that had been developed in the previous year to engage adopters with service development, particularly around adoption support. As noted, one RAA had recruited Adopter Development Coordinators with lived experience of being an adoptive parent. As well as offering peer services, the coordinators had worked with the RAA to develop their support offer. In another RAA, working with adopted adults has been vital for gaining insight into how to shape their services.

Adopted adult support and the adopter voice generated from that is at the core of everything we do, so I want to keep that in-house as well. They are our best feedback. Adoptees will tell us everything we need to know about how to run an adoption service. - Head of Service

## Areas for improvement in adoption support provision

Interviewees identified several areas of adoption support practice where they felt RAAs still had work to do. These included: (i) support for birth parents; (ii) support for families in other types of care, and (iii) multi-agency support.

### **(i) Support for birth parents and relatives**

Analysis of the 2021 model survey results found there was little consistency in which agency was responsible for birth parent support services where a mixture of RAA and LAs held the service. Adoption support teams reported an increasing need to offer support for direct contact, and our second report showed that there was growing demand for birth parent support, interviewees at one RAA thought that progress was being made in providing support to birth parents, but not as fast as they might have wanted. At this RAA, interviewees believed that considering the needs of birth parents should be built into the whole adoption process and was not just for adoption support teams. For example, they wanted to see family finding teams working on adopter perceptions and fears about birth family contact, as well as ensuring children's social workers in the LA had the same ethos or approach to birth parent support as the RAA staff.

Where birth parent support had been brought into the RAA, interviewees felt that it was the right decision because it helped ensure they could meet the needs of adopted adults who want to know whether their birth families were well supported through the adoption process, and that it was important that the RAA has oversight of that task.

I like it [birth parent support] being in-house because it gives it the clout it needs. What we know from our adopted adults is one of the big questions I'm always asked is, 'Did anybody help my [birth] mom?', and we have a duty and responsibility to keep very focused on that. I worry that if we commission it out, we lose that focus. - Head of Service

Commonly, interviewees reported that the management and provision of letterbox services has historically been variable in quality<sup>51</sup>, but it has been particularly challenging for RAA adoption support teams during COVID-19. This was particularly the case as staff were unable to access offices (and thus, any non-electronic letters) for some time during lockdowns. Having a backlog of letters had been a challenge for one RAA and staff emphasised the importance of resourcing letterbox services sufficiently – not just in terms of dealing with high volumes but ensuring that data breaches did not occur (which has occurred in some LAs<sup>52</sup>). Examples of data breaches highlight the importance of attention to detail and having a good understanding of adoption processes. However, an IRO at another case study RAA felt that although letterbox had been under-resourced in the LA, they had seen little improvement in the service families received since the move to the RAA. Staff in another letterbox team found their situation disheartening and felt that the significance of letterbox services for adopted children and birth families was not always recognised by the RAAs.

I personally feel like I've had two years of failing in my job... you get all those incoming calls and you get the queries and ... listening to the siblings of adopted children who may be looked after children themselves and an annual letter is the only contact that they have with that person. They have to deal with all the stuff that comes with being separated from the family... but [they

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<sup>51</sup> Iyer, P., Boddy, J., Hammelsbeck, R., and Lynch-Huggins, S. (2020). Contact following placement in care, adoption, or special guardianship: implications for children and young people's well-being. Evidence review. London: Nuffield Family Observatory.

<sup>52</sup> See for example: <https://www.theboltonnews.co.uk/news/19259967.adoption-data-breaches-revealed-bolton-council/>

have] this one connection, and we can't get that right... Every item that comes in is really precious to that family member. - Letterbox team

Interviews with managers and HoS thought that they had seen some progress in letterbox services but equally they often recognised that there was some way to go.

Despite the challenges, there were examples of work to support birth parents that could usefully be reintroduced post-pandemic. For example, one RAA had supported birth parents to meet prospective adopters, but this work was halted because it needed to be carefully managed and delivered face to face, rather than remotely. Another RAA provided support on letter-writing to birth parents; the same workers staffed the letterbox service so there was consistency and oversight throughout the contact journey.

#### **(ii) Providing support to families in other types of care arrangements**

A common theme in this final research wave was that the RAA programme has continued the debate around different routes to permanence, the relative value of different routes (e.g., long-term fostering, special guardianship), and roles and responsibilities. Interviewees indicated that RAAs were increasingly thinking about their role in relation to other routes to permanency. The provision of support to families in other types of permanent care arrangements, such as those with SGOs, was a perceived gap after specialist support staff have moved from being based in LAs to RAAs. For the vast majority of RAAs, support for families in special guardianship arrangements remained with the LAs. Only two RAAs that responded to the model survey had any involvement in providing support for SGOs, and for one of these RAAs, the responsibility was shared with the LAs (Chapter 2).

The ASF supports children and young people with an SGO who have previously been in care and therefore not all children are eligible. Some interviewees expressed concern that children who had not been looked after and their families might not receive adequate support for their needs. Staff at one case study RAA flagged that the courts had fed back that there was not enough support available for special guardians, but the RAA was not currently resourced to provide SGO support so there were concerns about where this support would come from.

#### **(iii) Providing multi-agency support**

As interviews highlighted, a main theme was that it was important for children that RAAs formed links with other agencies such as health and education to provide

rounded and holistic support to adoptive families to help prevent instability in education and adoption breakdown. However, interviews highlighted that there were long standing difficulties for LAs and RAAs in working collaboratively with other agencies such as CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service), and it was challenging to work with virtual school heads who are now responsible for adopted children due to a lack of additional resources to support them.

There were few examples in the case studies where RAA staff had employed health and education staff to provide specialist support. However, where this was in place RAAs said it was important for addressing the support needs of adopted children and particularly around key transition points e.g., from primary to secondary school.

We've got our multidisciplinary team that supports with education.  
We've got the occupational therapist which supports with sensory integration. – Head of Service

The HoS in another RAA described how they had begun working on a trauma informed education project linked with VAAs and virtual schools, which they believed to be an example of good practice that would help to improve school readiness. The RAA had commissioned an evaluation to explore the benefits. When staff had been able to be in a room together, they felt the in-person presence helped to break down any barriers that may have existed around roles and responsibilities.

Some RAAs reported that they were continuing to work on developing health links, for example with CAMHS. The Covid-19 pandemic had made this very challenging (Chapter 8), because of rising demand for mental health services during this period. Ongoing challenges for RAA staff included finding the right people to speak to, particularly when children had multiple needs and the health authorities covered different geographical areas to RAAs.

Staff in one RAA reported that health funding for adoption psychology services had been cut and there had been “an ongoing difficulty in terms of pinning people in the health sector down”, which made it difficult to address needs due to the complexity of working with different health authorities. Similarly, one strategic representative from an RAA noted that they would like to see greater linkage with SEN services but had found this problematic due to different legal thresholds, criteria, and operating processes between RAAs, LAs and the education system.

There was a suggestion that closer working between RAAs, education, and NHS staff was required to help raise awareness and professionals' understanding of the

resources and support needs of adopted children and to make these more of a priority. This could be done by bringing in specialist staff, formalised meetings/workshops and devoting time to develop more informal links.

In some cases, there were also challenges for RAA staff in linking with social workers in LAs.

I think there are real issues for us in the adoption system which are very closely linked to our colleagues in other parts of children's social care which we all have to grapple with together.  
- Head of Service

Capacity challenges between RAAs and different social work teams and the ability to work together on this have impacted on life story work, a responsibility held by the LA. Interviewees across a variety of roles flagged life story work as significantly lacking in some LAs. One national stakeholder believed that where LAs were already good at this, services remained good; however, their perception was that there was no improvement in LAs which were not doing well. Adopters involved in the evaluation survey on adoption support also expressed concern over poor quality life story books provided by the child's social worker; indeed, one in five respondents to the survey had not received a book at all.<sup>53</sup> Putting together a life story book requires significant input from the child's social worker, which few are given the time or the resources to complete. While life story books are important to an adopted child throughout their life span, they are also an important facet of putting together an adoption support plan and need to be thorough and accurate to support planning. One adoption support worker noted that they were keen to do life story training but there was no funding available for them to do so. However, a more established, larger case study RAA noted that they were doing extensive work on life story books, because of their importance to children.

We have to do lots of life story work and supporting children. What we found is the life story books that children come with don't necessarily serve them for life. So, we're having to redo a lot of books for children and just going through those with them as they age and develop. It takes up a lot of our resource, but it's

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<sup>53</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1025974/Supporting\\_adoptive\\_families\\_the\\_views\\_of\\_adoptive\\_parents\\_in\\_4\\_regional\\_adoption\\_agencies\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1025974/Supporting_adoptive_families_the_views_of_adoptive_parents_in_4_regional_adoption_agencies_.pdf)

really important for our children because they struggle to understand their identities as they age. - Team Manager

An emerging issue which was raised by a national stakeholder was the increased demand for intermediary services to support adopted young people who wanted to find out more or reconnect with their birth families as they reached adulthood.<sup>54</sup> The demand for these services had increased during COVID-19, as people reflected on their lives. From the interviewees' perspective, there was a service gap in this area, which would require specialist skills in tracing families, counselling, and support to address. They believed that there was variation between RAAs in how (or indeed, whether they did) offer the statutory requirement to provide intermediary services, and with which organisations.

This [intermediary services] has become even more crucial during lockdown, because a significantly higher number of adults have suddenly realized if I don't go and look for my mom now, she might die. ... I think there's been an awful lot more people who maybe might have put it off to next year, and put off to next year, who suddenly, in the middle of a pandemic, when thousands and thousands of older people are dying, have suddenly thought this could be my only moment and I might miss it if I wait any longer. This has become a really, really crucial issue and we still haven't really managed to work through it. And there's nobody allocated within the RAA to actually do the job. So, you know, the information is held by the LA, which is why the RAA says it's not their responsibility. Yet, the LAs say but now we're in an RAA... So those jobs that might have been held within the LA are vanishing and not being replicated in the RAA. - National Stakeholder

## Conclusion

Over the three waves of the evaluation, RAAs continued to report improvements in their provision of adoption support. The qualitative research provided evidence to suggest that RAAs had facilitated a more strategic, coordinated approach to

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<sup>54</sup> Intermediary services in adoption are provided by registered adoption agencies to provide support to people who were adopted before 30<sup>th</sup> December 2005 and are over the age of 18. The service brokers contact between birth relatives and adoptees. Depending on who provides the service, it may incur a charge for the service user.

resourcing and accessing adoption support for adoptive families especially through new commissioning approaches and broader early intervention offers. Although there was still a heavy reliance on external funding – particularly the ASF and, in 2020/21, the ASF COVID-19 Scheme – having specialists with therapeutic skills provided a stronger foundation for RAAs to build on delivering more support in-house. Indeed, the evidence showed that early intervention support, provided for the most part by RAAs themselves, was growing. Importantly, RAA interviewees reported that this work was also well-received by adoptive families and had potential to reduce the amount of targeted and specialist work needed in the long term.

While demand for support (and ASF) remained high, without increased resources and capacity, RAAs felt that they will likely continue to struggle to provide adequate early intervention support or be able to shift delivery in-house or reduce the delays that families experience in receiving targeted and specialist support. In their first years of operation, the RAAs had focused their attention on improving support services to adoptive families. There remained gaps in services for birth parent counselling, supporting contact and intermediary services.

While RAAs had taken steps to improve the supply and breadth of adoption support, there was less evidence about the impact of their support offers on families. With new tools such as the Blueprint for Adoption Support now available, RAAs would benefit from increasing their monitoring and review processes and building on existing work around adopter voice.

## Chapter 6: Analysis of costs

### Summary

- Analysis of Section 251 data 2015 – 2020 (local authority accounts submitted nationally) indicated that the adoption expenditure of LAs who were part of an RAA was not increasing or decreasing, within the evaluation timescales.
- Over the course of the evaluation, the majority of RAA spend was associated with staff costs.
- The impact analysis (see Chapter 4) estimated that, relative to LA-led adoption, time from placement order to placed with an adoptive family was reduced in RAAs. The reduction can be translated to savings for LAs in foster care costs. National cost savings from when RAAs started to go live (April 2017) to March 2020 were estimated to be £3,909,080.
- Insights from the case study interviews with RAAs and data they supplied on their budgets revealed there has been progress in making efficiencies (e.g., savings on adoption support contracts via new and reportedly improved commissioning frameworks and reduced travel time through more in-house placements). Although these efficiencies were not necessarily cashable (i.e., not realised in LA expenditure), or realised by all RAAs, there was evidence that savings had facilitated reinvestment/improvements in the quality of support.
- COVID-19 forced some functions of RAAs (e.g., meetings, adoption panels) online, which was seen by some RAAs as making processes more efficient.
- Some financial challenges had persisted since the inception of RAAs. It was difficult for RAAs to respond to changes in the demand for adoption services when budgets were fixed and to meet the varying expectations of LAs, both in terms of their financial contributions and the support offer they expected.

This chapter presents findings on the costs associated with adoption prior to and during the formation of RAAs, the approaches adopted to financing RAAs, and whether there have been cost efficiencies to date. Evidence informing this section draws predominately on administrative costs data (Section 251 returns), detailed financial accounts from six case study RAAs, and qualitative interviews with RAAs, including finance staff.



Financial accounts, which provide a more granular breakdown of RAA costs, were shared by the 6 case study RAAs.

The analysis utilises Section 251 data (S251),<sup>55</sup> which is publicly available information regarding LA education and children's social care funding/expenditure. The focus here is on the costs associated with adoption using data from 2015-2020 to calculate yearly changes in expenditures and incomes to understand any impact RAAs might have had on these. The analysis in this report is an update of the previous report, which covered 2015 - 2019.<sup>56</sup>

Key assumptions and limitations are:

- It is likely that LAs attribute costs of adoption and their overheads differently. Previous research on Section 251 data has found that it is of poor quality due to differences in the way each local authority completes the submission (e.g., Holmes 2021<sup>57</sup>). However, it is the only financial data that is publicly available. We have tried to account for the limitations in our study design by assessing how the costs within each LA change over time – if each LA is (broadly) consistent in their recording of costs, the analysis presented can be considered valid.
- Where there was a lead/host LA within an RAA, it is possible there was an element of double counting. There was some evidence that the lead LA reported the total cost of the RAA as their expenditure and at the same time other LAs included their financial contribution to the RAA as their expenditure. In addition, DfE funding that was made available to support the development of RAAs could have been entered as income by LAs in their accounts although S251 guidance explicitly states that grant incomes should not be included. Both could cause an upward bias in our analysis, especially in the case of expenditure, as figures might be inflated among live RAAs, and annual changes would be difficult to interpret with implications on attributing effects accurately. Steps were taken in the analysis to guard against this: **analysis which excludes lead LAs is presented** – this is useful for the longitudinal assessment of costs where changes during the transition to RAAs are clear.

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<sup>55</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/la-and-school-expenditure>

<sup>56</sup> Evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies, Second report: 2019 to 2020, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/927364/Evaluation\\_of\\_Regional\\_Adoption\\_Agencies\\_second\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/927364/Evaluation_of_Regional_Adoption_Agencies_second_report.pdf)

<sup>57</sup> Holmes L (2021) Children's Social Care and Cost pressures. DfE [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/951146/Children\\_s\\_social\\_care\\_cost\\_pressures\\_and\\_variations\\_in\\_unit\\_costs\\_Jan\\_2021.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951146/Children_s_social_care_cost_pressures_and_variations_in_unit_costs_Jan_2021.pdf)

## The impact of RAAs on adoption expenditure and income

To determine whether LA annual adoption expenditure and income (sourced from S251 data) in live RAAs differed to LA-led adoption services (i.e., LAs that were not yet part of a live RAA), regression analysis was undertaken. The analysis was set up as a fixed-effects regression which allows us to **isolate the impact of “live” RAA status** from the impacts of time and considers the changes “within” each LA. In simple terms, fixed-effects regression compares changes in expenditure and income for LAs in live RAAs against LAs not yet part of a (live) RAA.

The outcome variables in the analysis were **total expenditure, income, and net expenditure**. Net expenditure is total expenditure minus income. The emphasis was on net expenditure, as this represents the costs borne by LAs. The key binary explanatory variable in the regression model was whether the RAA had been live for at least six months or not.<sup>58</sup> To control for changes in demand for adoption services, the number of children placed for adoption (i.e., placement orders) from each financial year were included in the regression model (“Model 1” in Table 12). Recognising annual budgets are influenced by previous years’ demand, a second set of regression models included the number of placement orders from the previous financial year (lagged) were run (“Model 2” in Table 12).

Key findings from the analysis were:

- There was **no statistically significant difference between LAs in live and not yet live RAAs on net or total expenditure**.
- There was a **statistically significant difference in income** (-£89,898 in Model 1 and -£99,205 for Model 2).

The outputs from each regression model are summarised in Table 12.

The impact of RAA live status on reduced income is likely explained by interagency fees (a source of income) being taken by the lead/host LA (which are excluded from this analysis) rather than being received by individual LAs.

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<sup>58</sup> Models were also run for RAAs which had been live for at least 1 year. This did not change the statistical significance or direction of estimates so is not reported.

**Table 12: Fixed-effects regression output: RAA impacts on outcomes total expenditure, income and net expenditure, by Model**

Estimated difference in costs	Total Expenditure (Model 1)	Total Expenditure (Model 2)	Income (Model 1)	Income (Model 2)	Net Expenditure (Model 1)	Net Expenditure (Model 2)
RAA live status	+£5,432	-£10,338	-£89,898*	-£99,205*	+£95,331	+£88,867
Annual placements (1 additional placement)	-£12	NA	-£823	NA	+£812	NA
“Lagged” annual placements (1 additional placement)	NA	+£3,233	NA	-£3,143*	NA	+£6,376*

Source: Ecorys analysis of Section 251 data and SSDA903

“\*” indicates statistical significance at the 5% level or less

NB: Model 1 included annual placements (i.e., “demand” for adoption) for each year as a covariate, and Model 2 included annual placements from the previous year as a covariate.

## RAA costs of adoption

This section focuses on the types of costs of RAAs, based on **detailed financial accounts of six case study RAAs** (last year, the analysis was based on three RAAs). This is important to bear in mind when considering the findings below, as this may not be fully representative of all RAAs.<sup>59</sup> In this section, all figures are based on 2019/20 accounts, except for one RAA where accounts were available only for 2020/21.

Costs included staff, overheads, and other factors supporting the adoption process. Interagency fees represent both a cost and a source of income for RAAs. These are addressed in turn below.

Data supplied by the case study RAAs revealed that the annual costs of RAAs are heavily dependent on staff. More than **64%** of RAA yearly budgets are made up of staffing costs, with some RAAs spending more than 80%. These costs refer to all the staff employed through the LAs which make up each RAA and include the salaries of RAA directors, managers, advisors, social workers and practitioners, business and

<sup>59</sup> However, case study RAAs were selected to cover a wide range of sizes and models.

marketing managers, administrators, and others, along with recruitment costs and staff training. On average RAAs spend around **£2 million** each year on staffing costs (ranging from £1 to 3m).

RAAs must cover a range of different types of expenses to function efficiently and effectively. These costs include running costs of the premises, office, and administration-related costs such as supplies, phones, storage, and furniture, as well as transport/travelling costs. Data supplied by the case study RAAs revealed that management and premises-related costs make up approximately 13% of RAA expenditure, while supplies and services make up 3% and transport 2%. RAA budgets also consider IT costs, which usually make up 5% of total costs. RAAs also spend on marketing and advertising, although such costs were too inconsistent to draw conclusions. Some RAAs spent as much as £170k, while others did not report these costs.

RAAs engage in many types of adoption activities which translate into costs in their budgets e.g., preparation training for prospective adopters, organising adoption panels, as well as post-adoption support. Data from the case study RAAs revealed that adoption panel costs were usually between 1-3% of their total expenditure, while the costs of adoption support made up 7% of total RAA expenditure.

Another significant part of the RAAs annual budgets was reserved for **interagency fees (IAF)** and its generated income. Case study RAAs indicated that they reserved around 7%<sup>60</sup> for IAF, which usually translates to **£250,000** in costs. It is worth noting that the analysis from last year (although based on three RAAs instead of six), showed a much higher IAF allocation as RAAs reserved 10-20% of their budget which translated to £300-700k. Some interviewees from case study RAAs also reported a reduction in inter-agency fees compared to the previous year, although it was not clear if this led to any new cost-efficiencies.

## RAA approaches to financing

The qualitative research identified two main approaches that had been used to calculate the LA financial contributions to fund the newly forming RAAs:

- **Based on LA historical adoption service spend:** This approach provided a baseline budget for RAAs to deliver the adoption services within (after

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<sup>60</sup> A previous study of the Costs of Adoption (Selwyn et al) found that about 8% of the total budget was spent on IAFs (range 2%-18%) before the development of RAAs

inflation) or aimed to achieve (small) savings against what had previously been spent.

- **Based on adoption service demand within each LA:** This activity-based model took account of the number of children requiring a placement/support from each LA. This involved forecasting demand based on historic adoption numbers/trends. The exact formula varied by RAA depending on the services within their remit (e.g., those providing post-adoption support included this in their funding formula). RAAs with (or moving to) this approach reported that it might be more responsive to demand but would still lag against the current demand for services.
- **Both** models had an overarching goal for the overall cost of the RAA to not exceed the pre-RAA costs.

**Some RAAs, as planned, had moved from a historical spend model over to an activity-based model.** Those RAAs that had switched thought that starting the RAAs based on historical spend was an effective way to launch an RAA. LAs would know that financial contributions would be in line with previous years and enabled time for activity-based funding formulas to be developed and negotiated. The rationale provided for activity-based models was to support financial contributions that reflect demand from each LA, and potentially increased responsiveness to changes in demand. The shift from historical funding to activity-based was widely perceived to be a fairer reflection of varying demand, and a means of (re) negotiating budgets during the review cycle. However, interviewees highlighted that developing an activity-based formula that worked for all LAs was not without its challenges – “inevitably, there will be some winners and losers”.

Regardless of the model, a common theme in the interviews was that the move to RAAs has helped the LAs/RAAs understand the ‘true’ costs of adoption – LA adoption service costs varied before RAAs (and for adoption and wider CSC services) and were attributed differently. Part of the RAAs role has been to align the service offer and to begin to ensure financial contributions were equitable.

## **Cost efficiencies and economies of scale**

Cost-efficiencies are defined as improvements (i.e., efficiencies) in processes that lead to potential cost-savings.

The impact analysis undertaken on timeliness (see Chapter 4) demonstrated a **reduction of 14 days in the time from placement order to being placed** with an adoptive family, which was attributed to practice within RAAs. Almost all of the children placed by a live-RAA had spent some time in foster care prior to being adopted. Assuming the 14 days would have otherwise been spent in foster care, it is possible to estimate the cost savings associated with this.

Curtis et al (2020)<sup>61</sup> estimated the weekly cost of foster care to the state/LAs was £607. Applying this figure to the, on average, two-weeks (14 days) reduction in timelines and the number of children supported by an RAA (between April 2017 and March 2020), **the total national cost saving is £3,909,080** (3,220 children x 2 weeks (14 days) at £607 per week). However, this saving would be made to the local authority placement budget and not the RAA.

**Economies of scale are defined as cost savings resulting from pooling of resources.** It was anticipated that the transition to RAAs would result in an initial increase in costs but with the potential for cost savings over time. Yet even during this final round of interviews, there was a prevailing sense of uncertainty as interviewees talked of being “very dubious” around the “myth” that RAAs would make adoption services more cost efficient.

While the financial accounts showed that spending had not increased significantly, some of those interviewed described more being spent on specific aspects of adoption services e.g., psychologists appointed to the adoption support team.

There were RAA accounts of some RAAs spending more than the LAs did on adoption services previously, but this felt justified because they believed they were delivering a better-quality service. There was a view that RAAs were able to recruit strong candidates who benefitted from enhanced training offers and opportunities to work alongside adoption specialists which led to practice improvements, helping to create efficiencies.

Whilst RAAs were cautious about claiming cost savings, a number of potential savings were mentioned by some RAAs:

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<sup>61</sup> [Unit Costs of Health and Social Care | PSSRU https://www.pssru.ac.uk/pub/uc/uc2020/1-services.pdf](https://www.pssru.ac.uk/pub/uc/uc2020/1-services.pdf)

- Savings on external contracts as suppliers now only had to deal with one organisation (rather than several LAs). RAAs could contract larger volumes, which in some cases incurred a discounted rate.
- Reduced travel and associated time and travel costs for staff as more children were placed within the region, rather than out of area.
- One panel for the whole region rather than panels for each LA.

Interviews with RAAs showed **mixed views** regarding the **potential cost savings in inter-agency fees**. Some interviewees mentioned that more placements could be found within the region, leading to savings that could be re-directed into staffing or adoption services. It should be noted that **not all these economies of scale (or cost-efficiencies) were necessarily cashable**. It was more a case that savings enabled improvements elsewhere in the system (e.g., improving the adoption offer across the region), helping to manage unexpected/hidden costs, including (for LAs who were previously net exporters of adopters) reductions in income from the interagency fee.

Some RAAs reported that even if efficiencies were not necessarily visible in current budgets, they were able to provide better quality and more 'streamlined' services. Examples of this included being able to spend more on staff, flexibility due to a larger pool of people employed, and providing rather than commissioning some services. The latter was mentioned as an example of potential cost avoidance, as preventative work of therapeutic providers such as psychologists and specialists can be very beneficial in the future. Interviewees also reported having a stronger voice as an RAA, rather than separate LAs, meaning that they can hold big conversations on important topics and coordinate more efficiently.

Lastly, some **cost-efficiencies and cost savings due to the COVID-19 pandemic** were also reported. While some referred to short-term savings such as reductions in transport and meeting venue costs, or the cost of adoption panels, others referred to improving processes in the long-term as well. For example, one RAA mentioned there had been efforts to make adoption panels paperless for a long time, but Covid-19 had forced them to use digital documents resulting in many cost savings in printing and posting paper reports.

## Challenges

Whilst the analysis of quantitative data showed limited effects on RAA spending (aggregated LA expenditure), most RAAs reported challenges around budgets. Over the three waves of research the following challenges associated with costs were experienced or were being anticipated. The challenges were:

- Additional/unanticipated costs. This included costs that would have typically, under LA-led adoption services, fallen with wider CSC functions (e.g., marketing and legal services).
- Variation in LA adoption services prior to forming an RAA. This meant LAs had different expectations on the RAAs remit and costs associated with this.
- The challenges related to a combination of agreeing LA contributions and balancing this against the differing expectations of LAs in terms of the service offer - LAs wanted the best support that RAAs could provide for their children but, were not always willing or able to agree additional funding contributions.
- Changes to the adoption landscape (i.e., external factors).

Changes to the adoption landscape included changing use of the interagency fee (see previous section), increased demand for adoption support and RAAs restructuring (e.g., when a new LA joined an existing RAA) resulting in new budgets having to be agreed.

## Conclusion

At this final stage of the evaluation, analysis of local authority expenditure on adoption revealed limited impacts associated with the transition to RAAs. As in previous reports **there was no statistically significant decrease or increase in costs**. However, this likely reflects agreements LAs made when RAAs formed those financial contributions should not exceed business as usual, which could change in the future.

Analysis of more detailed financial accounts, where these were provided from the 6 case study areas, revealed that **the majority of RAA costs were spent on staff**. Drawing on results from the impact evaluation on timeliness of adoptions, it is estimated that, nationally, **£3,909,080** was saved in fostering costs.



Insights from the qualitative interviews revealed some challenges experienced by RAAs. It was difficult for RAAs to respond to changes in the demand for adoption services when budgets were fixed and to meet the varying expectations of LAs, both in terms of financial contributions and, linked to this, the support offer.

# Chapter 7: Impact of COVID-19 and the effectiveness of the RAA response

## Summary

- RAA interviewees reported that the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic was to move all services online and, where possible, maintain the level of service and provision for children and families to keep the adoption process moving. As RAAs adjusted to home working and remote delivery, they made longer-term adaptations to ensure the quality of the service provided was not negatively impacted by the restrictions.
- Interviewees recognised some of the benefits of the forced digitalisation of adoption services. There were plans to continue to deliver some virtual services for the foreseeable future. Proposed areas of the service to remain remote included adoption panels, early phases of introductions, and an online AIS (Adoption Information Session).
- There was consensus across the RAAs, though, that some visits, assessments, training, and support sessions must return to face-to-face delivery. Similarly, interviewees felt that the delivery of specialist adoption support, work with birth parents, providing adopters with childcare experience and family finding events were difficult to deliver remotely and worked better in person.
- In terms of challenges, a main theme across the RAA interviews were the delays the pandemic caused in court proceedings and medical assessments which slowed the adoption process. There was an increase in the demand for adoption support as the daily lives of children and families were disrupted by the pandemic and the government restrictions put in place to stem transmissions, such as limiting school attendance to all but vulnerable children and those of key workers. Staff members reported the strain that prolonged remote working had on their wellbeing.
- A common theme was the value of the forced digital overhaul of adoption services and noted that families adapted well to remote provision, embracing technology as a means of moving through their adoption journey despite lockdown. The structure of the RAAs provided resilience to the fast-changing government guidance. A single line of accountability enabled RAAs to make timely decisions, whilst a large organisation

allowed RAAs to adapt to staffing shortages when people were ill or shielding. The national leadership groups facilitated the sharing of learning across the RAAs throughout the pandemic.

A nationwide lockdown was put in place to stem the transmission of COVID-19 in March 2020; with all but essential services forced to close their doors. This chapter explores the impact of the pandemic on RAAs' practice, interviewees' perceptions on how effectively RAAs have managed the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and what these changes might mean for future adoption practice.

## Changes to working practices

The COVID-19 restrictions that began in March 2020 meant that workers, including those within the RAAs, were told to work from home with immediate effect. Interviewees from across the evaluation reported initial feelings of shock at moving to home working, with the added uncertainty of how long the pandemic would last, and the impact that this may have on adoption services. Despite this, a common theme amongst interviewees within and outside of RAAs was that the RAA staff teams reacted quickly to adapt their provision and keep the service moving throughout the uncertainty. Early adaptations included setting up drop boxes to deal with enquiries; creating slides for Adopter Information Sessions (AIS) to be put online, complete with voiceovers; adapting all training for virtual delivery; ensuring advice and support lines were staffed; and importantly, communicating that adoption services were open.

I just remember that last day in the office and we were all a bit like, 'Oh my gosh', it's a bit frantic and thinking about how we are going to deliver AIS and work from home. But I would say it felt like we sorted things out within a few days really. So, for the AIS, the adoption information session, we had our PowerPoint, and I did a voiceover. - Recruitment team

As it became clear that 'stay at home' guidance was likely to be in place for some time, the RAAs began to make longer-term adaptations to their delivery, including to panels, visits, and assessments.

If we were going to maintain the progression of children's plans, we needed panels and we needed a flow through of recruitment and assessment activity. So effectively, we took a view that we would continue to maintain all services but just do it in a way that

was COVID secure, and over the months I've written and rewritten operational practice guidance that has ebbed and flowed ... and sometimes had to change that twice in one week, especially in some of the early days. – Head of Service

RAAs' standpoint on conducting in-person visits to children and families during the pandemic varied somewhat. The majority of RAAs required at least one in-person visit as the families moved through the process to approval and in one example, an RAA began to share assessments with prospective adopters ahead of visits to help them prepare. However, one case study RAA did not require any face-to-face visits during the early phases of the pandemic, meaning that some families moved through the process without ever meeting an adoption worker in person, which proved very challenging for all involved.

I have placed children with families that I have never met and that makes me feel really uncomfortable. – Case study family finding team

The number of in-person visits was often situation dependent; for example, where there were complexities or safeguarding concerns that had to be addressed during a face-to-face visit. Where face-to-face visits were required, comprehensive risk assessments were completed to mitigate the risks to, and to take account of the concerns of all the parties involved, for example during transitions.

In terms of risk assessments for moving children into placement, so some of our family finding and our transitions, we've got a really robust model in place for that, and I think the introduction of vaccines and lateral flow testing has been really good at trying to reassure adoptive parents and foster carers moving forward. – Head of Service

Overall, interviewees felt confident to trust their 'gut instincts' when conducting assessments and visits virtually. However, there were concerns about the quality of assessments that had been completed online. Staff expressed hopes of returning to more in-person visits because, whatever safeguards were in place, the experience of seeing people within their own environment could not be replicated online (see later in this section - Aspects of service provision that will return to face-to-face).

The majority of it is done virtually in terms of assessing adopters, but we do ask that three face-to-face visits are done during their assessment. I think we're yet to see what impact that had on the quality of those assessments. I think having read the reports that are coming through to panel, they're still really good quality. I think what you can't ever replicate is the power of being in somebody's home, seeing them in their own environment and picking up on some of those relationship cues or that kind of body language cues that you will try your best doing that virtually.

- Head of Service

As it became apparent that home working would not end quickly, the RAAs worked creatively to enhance their virtual provision. They implemented their learning from virtual delivery and tried to tackle the gaps that arose from the lack of in-person contact. Across the interviews, a main theme was the need to emulate the connection that prospective adopters experienced during in-person delivery, both with their peers and with experienced adopters. To create peer networking opportunities, one non-case study RAA gave prospective adopters homework during their preparation groups, which included listening to podcasts. Then, during the sessions they held small breakout groups to discuss the task whilst creating an opportunity for prospective adopters to create a connection to their peers, which worked very well and sometimes had input from foster carers too. Despite efforts like these to replicate networking opportunities virtually, staff members within the RAAs recognised the ongoing barriers to facilitating and maintaining those connections.

The information evenings have all gone online and I think the preparation groups are now being done online too. I think that's had an impact on the experience of prospective adopters in terms of their engagement and being able to engage directly, not just with the workers, but with other prospective adopters who are on the same journey as them which I think has had an impact... I think something will have been lost for prospective adopters. - VAA

Another gap in virtual delivery was not hearing first-hand from experienced adopters during virtual preparation training, which one HoS said was always identified as one of the most valued elements from feedback. One RAA adapted their preparation groups by creating five videos of adopters speaking about their personal experiences of adoption. Each video was half an hour long. They had planned to shorten the

video to make the messages more succinct, but then decided that there was “something great” about hearing the adopter voice directly, which added genuine feeling to the content. The same RAA had also set in motion plans to implement a buddy system between prospective and experienced adopters. They had 10 volunteer adopters signed up at the point of the research interviews (conducted between February and March 2021) and intended to match buddies based on their characteristics. The box below provides a good practice example of creating connections between experienced adopters and prospective families from one of the case study RAAs.

### **Good practice example: Adopter chat**

Adopter chats were developed in response to concerns that prospective adopters were no longer getting face-to-face contact with experienced adopters. The service provides families with the opportunity to have one-to-one conversations with purposefully matched experienced adopters. Matching is completed based on the characteristics and circumstances of the family that are established during the initial duty call (e.g., a same-sex couple would be matched with an experienced adopter from a same-sex family). Adopter chats take a mentoring format, with the level of input from the mentor being dependent on the needs of the individual families. Conversations and interaction take place in whatever format makes the family feel most comfortable, including phone calls and video calls.

Although adopter chat was run by staff from the RAA who had adopted themselves, importantly, they were not social workers. This provided prospective adopters with a safe space to ask questions and gain advice through confidential conversations with people who have been on the same journey.

I think our Adopter Chats kind of set the foundations for a lot of families before they go onto having their assessment meetings in stage one and stage two. I think it starts off conversations that they might not necessarily be having until those points. It starts people thinking about stuff more and sets those cogs in motion. - Case study RAA, recruitment staff

My assigned Adopter Chats were primarily with adopters looking at going down the fostering for adoption route because I'm an FfA adopter myself. The kind of questions I would be asked in those chats are, 'How did you find the fostering side of that adoption?' ... 'How emotionally resilient did you need to be?' I would just use that opportunity to be really honest with them. For me it was a different kind of conversation. It was a more personal conversation rather than a clinical one like on a duty call. I saw it as a way of putting adopters at ease about going through the process and maybe giving them the forum to ask a question that they wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable asking a social worker in case they felt judged. - Recruitment staff

During 2020, when there was an ongoing uncertainty about the pandemic, initiatives were put in place to maintain connections and promote staff wellbeing. Informally staff members had used WhatsApp group chats and virtual coffee sessions to replicate the everyday connections that people missed about the office. One RAA started a 'daily walk' WhatsApp group where staff members posted a picture of their walk that day. The initiative was started to promote staff members to get out from behind their computer screen. Importantly, staff wellbeing and connectivity were facilitated from the top down, particularly in RAAs that reported strong leadership. Staff and strategic stakeholders said leaders had maintained a sense of openness, approachability, and collaboration in moving through the pandemic, with staff wellbeing as a key priority alongside the quality of the service for children and families.

[HoS] has been very committed to the welfare of staff and that's made a huge difference. - Strategic stakeholder

## **Adoptive families' response to changes in practice**

Professionals who were interviewed thought that adoptive families had also adapted well to the provision of services online. RAAs recognised that most families lived within the digital world and embraced technology within their day-to-day life, something that adoption agencies were behind with. Therefore, families valued the ability to move through the process to adoption despite online delivery. This was further facilitated by RAAs using creative ways to emulate networking through initiatives such as Adopter Chat.

I think in terms of user experience, our families going through the assessment and starting their journey... I think that we live in a technology-based world, and it wasn't difficult for families to adjust because everybody is kind of used to using technology in this way. – Recruitment team

During the various phases of lockdowns, there had been significant changes to the day-to-day lives of adoptive families nationwide. For some, home working and home schooling had been welcomed as a settled period. Others have found the change in their family dynamics challenging, compounded by the lack of routine, changing restrictions and the inability to reach out to their support network.



I think we've had some really wobbly placements as a direct result of Covid. People who are struggling to build attachments with children but are stuck in their four walls and can't do the things you would be encouraging them to do to make connections. And I think it has definitely resulted in disruptions as well. And that's definitely because they haven't had the family support, they would have relied on their networks for support and that has just disappeared. – Manager

One RAA HoS noted that they had increased placement breakdowns within introduction stages, during the pandemic. In their view, this was largely tied to having less support and the fact that networks were more diminished because of social distancing and lockdowns.

In the past year we've had three placements that have broken down in introductions, which is higher than pre covid, so we're still at the point of trying to unpick...Is that about the impact of lockdown, or would it have happened anyway? My early thoughts would be of course it's related to lockdown ...they can't have as many people around to support them. They can't attend groups...it's all of those issues. – Head of Service

As a result of the challenges faced by families during this period, RAAs from across the evaluation reported an increase in the demand for adoption support, as reported on in Chapter 6. Whilst the inquiries for support have increased, RAAs valued the ASF Covid-19 Scheme in providing adoption support for families in a timely manner during an emergency (see Chapter 5).

## Resilience of RAAs

Family Court statistics showed that the number of adoption cases started in the courts dropped by 35% in 2020 compared with the same quarter the previous year<sup>62</sup>. However, RAA interviewees reported extra strain on RAAs as court hearings were delayed due to a backlog of cases as well as papers being unable to be served to birth parents physically. Lack of technology in courts exacerbated the problems. In some regions, court delays have improved with no delays for the making of adoption

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<sup>62</sup> <https://data.justice.gov.uk/courts/family-courts/>

orders, but delays remain in care proceedings and/or placement orders which proved challenging for RAAs and presented another barrier to overcome.

In lockdown one, there were delays in adoption order hearings, but that's caught up and there are no delays now. It was like lockdown one was everybody working out how to do it, and I think when they worked out how to do virtual adoption order hearings, they prioritized them. In lockdown three they've not been impacted. Full care proceedings and placement orders are [delayed] because they want everybody to be able to be heard and represented properly, and so that sometimes still needs physical court time. –Head of Service

Delays in GPs completing adoption medicals was challenging across RAAs. Many health care personnel were redeployed during the early phases of the lockdown and, more generally, there was a reluctance amongst GP surgeries to conduct what they viewed as non-essential appointments, which sometimes meant that RAAs could not progress cases as quickly and efficiently as they would like. During the later vaccine rollout, many GP surgeries were prioritising vaccinations. There was no consensus across GPs in whether they were willing to complete adoption medicals during the pandemic, so the delays were not RAA-wide but rather localised to particular practices.

We've had delays with medicals for adopters because ... in lockdown, we had to work out how to do it, whether it could be virtual, whether medical advisers would accept that and then you get a level of understanding that it's OK. But then, in lockdown 3, some GPs have been prioritizing vaccination work. So, it is not all adopters waiting for medicals, it depends on who is your GP really. - Head of Service

It was clear across the interviews that despite the challenges, the Covid-19 pandemic offered the RAAs and LAs a valued opportunity for change. The restrictions led adoption agencies to adopt a more flexible approach to delivery, with a forced digitalisation of the service overnight. Staff members within the RAAs acknowledged that under normal operations, the idea of moving to flexible working or a digital overhaul of their service would have been unthinkable. What this period of delivery has offered was a catalyst for change, embracing the benefits and improvements made through advances in the use of technology within adoption services.

We were really very risk averse and very slow at doing things and, like Microsoft Teams, it runs now, and everybody is used to it. Now, if we'd done that normally pre-pandemic, it would have been like 2 years' worth of consultations, focus groups, it was so slow. Actually, the best thing is you get thrown in at the deep end and you do it. That's what happened with Covid, we actually got on with that. - Local authority

During the pandemic, RAAs reported that they had experienced staff shortages, difficulties in recruitment, and staff absence through sickness and shielding. Being part of a larger organisation gave the RAAs the resilience to meet the demands of the service despite staff shortages. Staff were redeployed to other areas of the service to ensure that adopters and children could continue to move through the process. For example, one RAA who had experienced severe shortages within their recruitment team was able to draw on staff members from other teams to facilitate the increasing demand for online information sessions.

In principle the regional structure gives us more resilience 'cause obviously, if people are ill, it's easier to cover their work. ... The larger organisation is more resilient. - Strategic stakeholder

The single line of accountability within the structure of the RAA models allowed the service to adapt to the immediate and changing requirements quickly. RAAs (hosted models) that had good relationships with the LAs were able to make swifter decisions than non-hosted models or RAAs in which partnership arrangements offered less direct links. Challenges occurred where relationships between LAs and RAAs were tense. Within hub and spoke model services, leaders reported they found it beneficial that, as a dedicated adoption service, they were able to quickly create policies and procedures in reaction to COVID-19. The 'spoke' element of their service provided valuable support to the LAs. In one hub and spoke RAA, the HoS was able to share learning around virtual panels with the fostering team of the local authority.

I think it's been really helpful to have [name of RAA] quite quickly and robustly create policies that reacted to Covid, because that helps support us as LAs in terms of placements and transitions. You know they had risk assessments drawn up quite quickly for social workers. I think they definitely helped because we were we were able to lean on them for that support because they had

those links and sort the tweaks that were made to any adoption  
regs. – Case study LA managers

During the period of lockdowns and changing restrictions, the RAAs had to make some difficult decisions about their services. Despite the single line of accountability, RAAs valued the ability to collaborate and share some of the decision-making with local authority partners. These discussions helped gain agreement from LAs in changes made to the service such as having virtual panels. It had also enabled RAAs to feel confident in their policy and procedure decisions through the shared accountability.

The RAAs felt that their established position as an operating regional service was a key factor in their resilience during the onset and continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Established RAAs had already had the time to sort out teething issues, build relationships and forge a regional identity. Therefore, they were in a positive space to be able to react to the crisis.

If this had happened three years ago, we would have been in a very different position. Timeliness for us was better and because we are more established. For other RAAs, that are at different stages of their development, it's probably affected them much more... in terms of adoption, recruitment and family finding, that's all been on a trajectory which has been improving year on year. So, we were in a good place to respond to the crisis that we've had this year and to a certain extent make it work for us. - Head of Service

For RAAs that were experiencing an organisational transition period during the pandemic, either due to being recently live RAA or experiencing a change in management, there were some significant challenges. Yet it was difficult for interviewees to unpick what was directly caused by COVID-19 and what was an existing issue that was highlighted by the pandemic. One non-case study RAA that had recently gone live struggled to forge their identity in a virtual world. All the physical identifiers such as branded lanyards were not needed whilst people worked from home and during the launch. The scoping and first report highlighted the importance of the transition period in forging a new RAA identity, but instead all the LA directors were prioritising firefighting the fallout of the pandemic. A case study RAA that had experienced significant changes in their leadership during the pandemic experienced various complex challenges including COVID-19-related

delays to courts and other unavoidable issues caused by the restrictions, recruitment and creating policies and procedures.

A common supporting factor was the national leadership group, which had supported RAAs. Frequently, RAA Heads of Service reported that the group enabled the RAAs to gain support from one another, as well as from the DfE throughout the pandemic. Leaders came together to share learning that has prompted agencies to "...consciously continue to progress adoption plans and assessments of adopters throughout the pandemic." (*National stakeholder*). The group had enabled RAAs to devise approaches and validate them with one another, raising the confidence of LAs in that decision-making process. LAs that were not yet part of an RAA were also invited to be involved in the discussions. The RAA leadership group has created several working groups to focus on focus on recruitment, the child's journey, and adoption support. The sub-groups were made up of different RAA and LA adoption leaders, supported by DfE. The thematic sub-groups created documentation and a common risk matrix which was then shared amongst the RAAs. The RAAs could then further develop the documents to suit their own context and settings.

I think the ability to bring people together and the fact that the structures are in place to do that is probably the single most impactful part of the RAA programme. – National Stakeholder

## **New virtual practices that RAAs are making permanent**

The restrictions in place over the course of the pandemic led to forced digitalisation of adoption services, which created an opportunity for RAAs to trial a virtual approach. The success of virtual delivery encouraged RAAs to embrace the prospect of a more hybrid approach moving beyond the pandemic. RAAs recognised some of the benefits and efficiencies that were exposed through the forced virtual delivery and home working.

We do think working in this way has shown that there are some benefits to it, and at the moment we are seeking views really from our staff in terms of the way forward. The word hybrid has been used, so it could be potentially a mix of virtual working and returning to the office. - Manager

## Virtual sessions

A common theme across RAA interviews was that prospective adopters also found it convenient to fit AIS, training, assessments, and review meetings around their existing commitments and without having to travel. RAAs felt that virtual delivery improved attendance at virtual AIS, particularly where the geographic footprint of the RAA was large. One non-case study RAA reported an average of between 2 and 12 people attending their in-person information sessions pre-pandemic compared with up to 25 households attending virtual sessions: over double the number. Interviewees highlighted the value of families being within the comfort of their own home during sessions.

“The AIS, being able to sit at home in the comfort of your own home and go through the information. You know it was great having a group of adopters together for an information evening, but I think just being able to be in your own environment and slowly digest the content at your own pace and formulate questions that you can ask in the AIS follow up. I think that that's really been great for the adoptive families coming through.” – Recruitment team

RAAs reported that adopter feedback was that families who lived further away from the RAA benefited from more regular informal visits.

Visits and training that did not involve prospective adopters or children directly were also perceived to be effective when delivered online; this included referee visits and family and friend sessions.

Virtual family and friends' workshops have been really positive because it's meant that family and friends from across the country can attend it, so we will probably carry on doing that virtually. That has been recorded too, so we can send it out to people to watch at whatever time they wish, so we're probably use it much more. – Head of Service

## Panels

A commonly held view amongst RAA interviews was that panels were thought to be the service which was most likely to continue virtually. During the periods of restrictions, panels had remained virtual across the nation, with several RAAs opting for a hybrid (mix of virtual and face-to-face meetings) or permanent virtual approach

to delivery moving beyond the pandemic. Three key benefits in keeping panels virtual were identified by RAA staff and HoS interviewees:

**1. Feedback from prospective adopters to RAAs suggested that adopters found panels less daunting.** Panels can be daunting for adopters, in having such a significant decision about the future decided by others. The research with adopters found a minority reported feeling intimidated at panel<sup>63</sup>. RAA interviewees said the feedback showed that some adopters found attending panels easier when at home and not physically sitting across from panel members. In some panels, they adopted a process of panel members introducing themselves but then turning off their cameras, so that the prospective adopters only saw the chair, leading to a more relaxed virtual session for the family.

I think from speaking to some prospective adopters, I wouldn't say it's a clean sweep across the board, but I think some people find it easier in the comfort of their own home when they're faced with such a monumental significant event as attending panel. -  
Senior management team

**2. Virtual delivery had made panels more accessible to adopters** by eliminating the barrier of geography and travel time. Before, many adopters were having to wait until there was an available panel date close by or having to travel across the footprint of the RAA, sometimes to another county.

For me it's shown just how much more accessible panels can be to those coming to panel, and also that the idea of having additional panels is not such a task now to put them together, so there are pros and cons, and I certainly would favour some sort of hybrid approach in the future. – Panel member

**3. Easier to increase panel meetings, where necessary.** When more capacity was needed, RAAs had been able to convene additional panels more easily. Panel members had greater flexibility in their calendar now that travel time was not a factor. Paper use and costs were reduced.

However, panel members missed out on meeting the adopters in person and seeing the non-verbal cues such as body language. One panel member, though,

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1025935/The\\_views\\_and\\_experiences\\_of\\_approved\\_adopters\\_in\\_5\\_regional\\_adoption\\_agencies.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1025935/The_views_and_experiences_of_approved_adopters_in_5_regional_adoption_agencies.pdf)

emphasised that the purpose was not to reassess the prospective adopters, and therefore virtual delivery should not change the decision-making process.

But then you have to remember, you know, we're not reassessing the couple and they don't have to attend. So, I don't think we're missing out on anything significant by doing it the virtual way. – Manager

## Introductions

A common theme in the interviews was that introductions were better if they took place face-to-face. Yet, in having to adopt at least partially remote meetings during the pandemic, the benefits of a hybrid approach to introductions were recognised. One RAA referred to the virtual elements of introductions as 'chemistry meetings.' RAAs felt that for younger children, there were benefits of the adopters becoming a familiar face prior to the physical introduction, which the research with adopters also highlighted<sup>64</sup>.

RAA interviewees provided examples of where adopters were reading bedtime stories through Facetime, recording clips of themselves singing nursery rhymes and making regular calls throughout the day to be part of the child's routine. For older children, the process of remote familiarisation created less pressured opportunities to get to know one another.

When I think about some of my introductions, I've included foster carers and adopters exchanging little video clips like adopters reading stories and singing nursery rhymes... you know those are things we never did but have been absolutely fantastic. I'd love to continue with that sort of thing. - Local authority

## Improved capacity

Whilst maintaining an effective service for children, some staff members from across the evaluation reported a better work-life balance during periods of more flexible working. The improvements for staff predominantly came from time efficiencies and a reduction in the demands to travel. Pre-COVID, social workers sometimes spent all day travelling to attend a one-hour meeting, but the forced digitalisation had shown

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1025935/The\\_views\\_and\\_experiences\\_of\\_approved\\_adopters\\_in\\_5\\_regional\\_adoption\\_agencies.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1025935/The_views_and_experiences_of_approved_adopters_in_5_regional_adoption_agencies.pdf)



that some meetings could be effective when conducted remotely. Social workers had been able to fit more into their workday due to the reduction in travel. For example, they could complete their paperwork following virtual visits rather than having to drive cross county to get back to the office. On a more personal note, staff members valued not having a long commute into the office, the ability to be home with their children, and the flexibility to fit in walks between their meetings.

My case notes have never been so up to date. We were always really like late and behind, but now I am virtually meeting my adopters, typing the notes, and then whacking it straight on. You know, whereas before you would spend an hour after the visit travelling home, then you'd be tired and it was delayed. – Local authority social workers

## Aspects of service provision that are likely to return to face-to-face

Whilst the learning from the pandemic has shown that a hybrid approach to delivery could be beneficial, the interviews highlighted some aspects of adoption services that needed to remain in-person.

I think it's about finding the balance of that blended approach, isn't it? Moving forward and not compromising on certain aspects that need to be face-to-face. – Assessment team

## Recruitment assessment and training

**There was consensus across the RAAs that some visits, assessments, training, and support sessions must return to face-to-face delivery.** Across the board RAAs were positive about their abilities to adapt practice to the challenges of delivering adoption services during a pandemic. But there were concerns about matching and placing children virtually. While their efforts had enabled children to be placed through periods of restrictions, risk assessments were taking up much more capacity, and so were negotiations with foster carers. Family finders were concerned about the quality of introductions and that the negative effects of very short introductions may not be seen for some time:

It's so much more complex, more layers of processes in an already complex time... Not only did we not get to meet adopters

[as assessment teams would have met] but we didn't get to meet the children, so everything is done from paper and word of others. We have been super reliant on carers and risk planning, whether they are okay with our visits or not. Transitions are shorter or less involved than you would like. - Family finding social worker

**In recruitment and assessment, social workers missed the ability to go into families' homes to get a true feeling of the environment and the people within them.** Social workers felt that they did not get a complete picture through the 'little window' on the screen. There were also micro-behaviours, such as body language, that were much more difficult to observe during virtual family meetings. Although social workers felt that they had adjusted well and were able to retain that 'gut instinct' despite most meetings and assessments being virtual, there remained some questions over the quality and long-term impact of virtual assessments. Over the trajectory of the pandemic, when restrictions allowed, many RAAs increased the number of face-to-face interactions between social workers and prospective adopters moving through the process.

I look back and I'm hoping it's not the case, but I do look back and think, "Would I have made a different decision if I actually got out and physically met somebody?". It's hard though isn't it because obviously all the assessments, or, the majority of assessments, have been done virtually over the last 11 months. I have tried to start going out and visiting families and foster carers but only since coming back after Christmas, and they are subject to risk assessments. - Family finding team

## **Delivering specialist adoption support**

For social workers within adoption support teams, there was a consensus that some elements of their work should only be delivered face-to-face. Many of the decisions made about whether a face-to-face session was needed were based on the individual needs, complexities and vulnerabilities of the child and their family. Social workers and commissioned providers worked flexibly to enable in-person support to take place where needed. For example, enabling socially-distanced meet and greets with families in public parks. There were some support services that social workers did not feel comfortable delivering online. For example, some of the more intensive training around caring for a child with trauma and therapeutic parenting was deemed

incompatible with remote delivery. Social workers recognised the need for a physical presence to ensure the wellbeing of families following intensive sessions.

[Trauma training] just did not lend itself to being done virtually because we felt we needed to keep people safe, psychologically safe, and so there are one or two of our trainings where we've said, "No". We can't do it safely, and we've had to look at what else we can offer instead. – Adoption support team

Engaging children and young people in-person was seen as important for building relationships, picking up on their non-verbal cues, gaining a deeper understanding of the children's personality and providing an insight into the family dynamics. It had been difficult for social workers to replicate direct work using virtual methods.

I think with kids you have to pick up on body language, don't you 'cause they don't always say what they're feeling. Kids definitely in my experience, are not very comfortable with video calls because you're literally sat staring at each other. Whereas if I was doing a session with the child at home, depending on their age, I'd probably be doing like a bit of colouring and stuff with them in there. – Manager

## **Work with birth parents**

Where RAAs were supporting birth parents, providing these services virtually had proved challenging. Social workers recognised the necessity of face-to-face work, as some birth families had limited access to digital devices; Skype and even telephone conversations could be difficult. Instead, social workers valued building relationships with birth families over in-person conversations in neutral spaces such as coffee shops. When face-to-face meetings were not permitted, social workers found it difficult to engage with birth families and to provide the practical support they needed (e.g., support with letter writing for letterbox contact).

Some birth families attend a final goodbye contact when their child does not have ongoing contact planned or they meet the prospective adopters, but these meetings had to be postponed in line with government guidelines. When guidance allows, RAAs will move back towards in-person work with birth families.

We support birth parents to meet the prospective adopters of their children and none of that has happened during this

pandemic. It is something that is not easy, and we would not want to do that digitally. It is not easy to do virtually. The whole idea of them is they meet face-to-face, and you get a feel of somebody, it is all about trust. It's about looking someone in the eye and feeling that you can trust them, trust the adopters to take good care for their children. - Manager

## **Helping adopters gain experience of caring for children**

Prospective adopters are encouraged to get as much childcare experience as possible to help prepare them for adoptive parenting. Facilitating childcare experience in Stage One for prospective adopters who were childless had been a challenge. Many of the usual routes to gaining more experience of caring for children had closed in line with restrictions. In one RAA, a buddy scheme between the prospective adopters and foster carers was established. The foster carers would have one-off conversations with applicants to talk about a variety of children they had had in their care and answer any questions. Some groups, such as Scouts, were running virtual sessions during lockdown. Prospective adopters were able to drop into these groups and do some observations. Social workers were concerned that whilst the virtual methods of gaining childcare experience had served as an important stopgap during restrictions, they could not replicate that in-person experience.

## **Family finding events**

During lockdown, family finding teams had delivered virtual profile events. However, they struggled to replicate the engagement that they saw during physical events. One RAA described an online event where no families were found for the waiting children. Normally the event would have been in-person, where foster carers and children would attend the event alongside prospective adopters and social workers. Everyone would have the opportunity to meet, engage and ask questions of one another, a chance to explore the connection between prospective adopters and children. The lack of connection between adopters and children could not be replicated online. Some socially-distanced family finding events had taken place, mainly for children who wait the longest. However, the children and their foster carers were not there in person, instead there were paper profiles placed around a room. This approach was also unsuccessful as families were unable to get a true sense of the child from a paper profile. Therefore, family finding teams recommended that these events move back to an in-person format.

## An office presence

Finally, staff members across the RAAs reflected on the need for an office presence to support team and multi-agency working. Despite RAA staff adapting to meetings, family visits and training taking place virtually, social workers did feel the strain of spending their whole day behind the screen. Adoption workers described experiencing fatigue with back-to-back meetings and missing the informal reflection time that came with travelling to visits and meetings. Staff missed the office-based interaction with their peers, particularly informal conversations, and opportunities for support from their colleagues. The physical presence of staff in a central space also facilitated the building of relationships for new members of staff. When working virtually, staff members had to deliberately seek out opportunities to engage with others and gain that support from their colleagues. There was concern that some staff members could be left increasingly isolated.

The part that has affected me and my wellbeing is we're dealing with people in crisis and in trauma. The fact is you can be on the phone for an hour, an hour and a half and then taking all that on. When we were office-based and you shared an office with someone, they could hear a bit of what was going on, so you had that direct support there and then. That's the bit that I have struggled with. - Post Adoption Support team

Before you had that time in the car to have some down time and some thinking time. The pressure now is to fill every single hour of every day with meetings. There's no time really to take a step back, reflect, play your thoughts, ... People are finding it has got its positives in terms of productivity, but it's also got its negatives as well. - Head of Service

A lack of a physical presence within the office had not only had an impact on RAA staff but also on working with the LA's children's social workers. Interviewees described that a reduction in collaborative working was seen in both hosted and hub/spoke models of RAA, where communication and relationships between the central services of the RAA and the LAs were key in maintaining a good service for children and families. Pre-COVID-19, staff members from the RAA hub or host LA would often spend time in the LA offices to forge relationships through a physical presence. Interviewees expressed concern that this has diminished over the period of restrictions.

What's harder has been keeping the connections with the local authority. At the LA, people haven't been able to go in and sit in the office and meet people, and at the time of restructure, that's been quite difficult to do that. Virtually we have lost touch a bit about who's who in the LAs, but our permanence coordinators have the links there and they're up to speed. – Head of Service

## **Conclusion**

The evidence presented demonstrates that RAAs adapted well to the challenges presented by the pandemic. Across the RAAs, adoption services were digitalised to enable families and children to continue to move through the service with as little disruption as possible – though inevitably disruption did occur. Adaptations were made in the immediate response to quickly move provision online, with RAAs thinking creatively to adapt their service in the longer term to meet the needs of children and families remotely. Despite the challenges, the pandemic has presented opportunities for the RAAs to recognise the benefits of digital delivery for some strands of their service that will likely remain even after restrictions are lifted. It has presented an opportunity for change and a digital overhaul of the service.

## Chapter 8: Conclusions and implications

The final wave of research for the evaluation took place in early 2021, almost a year after the COVID-19 pandemic began and restrictions on face-to-face contact were introduced, forcing large-scale changes to adoption practice and bringing additional unforeseen pressures. Therefore, the conclusions may not be as might have been expected at this stage of the evaluation and policy development, over three years since the first LAs joined together as RAAs.

The findings from this evaluation paint a complicated picture. The evaluation data consists of three broad sets – quantitative administrative data, qualitative data from stakeholder interviews, and survey data from adopters. Generally, these different sets of data do not fully align. The qualitative research commonly provided positive perceptions of certain changes brought about due to the introduction of RAAs (amidst challenges resulting from systems change and the COVID-19 pandemic), and a main theme was that RAAs have led to improved collaboration and practice. However, this was only partially reflected in outcome data – with some positive impact around timeliness but negative impact in relation to adopter sufficiency. Furthermore, whilst the amount of adoption support appeared to have increased, adopters reported long delays in accessing it. Trying to interpret and understand this complicated picture is challenging. The complexity is likely due to a number of factors:

- Due to lags in the data, the time periods over which the data was collected differ (with the quantitative data covering 2018-2020 and the qualitative data covering 2018-2021); it is possible things are gradually improving over time, and so the qualitative perceptions paint a more positive picture than is reflected in the quantitative data.
- The shift to RAAs had caused short-term disruption which was still showing in the administrative data (even though the evaluation found this disruption to be minimising in the later years).
- It was too soon to see improvements in practice being consistently reflected in the ultimate outcomes of timeliness and efficiency.
- The ultimate outcomes were affected by other elements (COVID-19 and decisions in other parts of the adoption ecosystem) that were outside of the RAAs' control.

The remainder of this conclusion builds on these points.

The qualitative data collected showed that largely, the RAA programme had transformed the adoption system by regionalising LA adoption services, with just four LAs not yet part of an operational RAA or RAA project in March 2021. More established RAAs had worked through the early teething problems and commonly RAAs reported greater collaboration and stronger leadership, which they identified as encouraging reflection and a more coordinated effort to improve practice and improve outcomes.

Throughout the evaluation, individual RAAs' achievements in relation to the four main outcome areas had been mixed and subject to external factors, for example, COVID-19, local government reorganisation, decision-making by the Courts, as well as ease and difficulties faced recruiting adopters. Positively, pre-COVID, the impact analysis showed that RAAs appeared to have sped up the time taken to place a child relative to LAs not in RAAs. However, there was limited partnership working outside of RAAs and a tendency to prioritise placements in-house.

There was a small negative effect associated with RAAs on the sufficiency of adoptive families over the period when RAAs started to go live (April 2017 to March 2020). Relative to LA-led adoption services, analysis indicated there was a small (3%) but statistically significant decrease in the percentage of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with an adoptive family. Although, adopter enquiries had also increased, this had not substantially changed the profile of adopters to meet the needs of children waiting in RAAs. Placing children who wait the longest remained a challenge and an area for improvement. The research with adopters found that when adopters were interested in adopting siblings, they were frequently matched with a single infant child.

A main theme in the RAA interviews was that they were offering increased and more consistent adoption support and believed they were beginning to demonstrate their potential. But RAAs also recognised the need to improve how they measured the impact of their support offers. Based on the evidence from the support survey with adoptive families, researchers found there was little evidence that adoption support services had improved in the 4 RAAs involved in the survey, since their formation. The survey found that there was an improvement in adoptive parents feeling that they were better informed about available support services, however, the same issues that had been reported in previous research were being repeated, for example, lengthy delays in assessments and waiting lists for services. Gaps remained, especially support services for SGOs and birth parents.



Costs data collected from six of the seven case study RAAs indicated that the programme had been cost neutral. So, whilst savings predominantly came in the form of cost avoidance, efficiencies meant more could be done within budget through, for example, smarter commissioning of adoption support on a larger scale.

Positively, a main theme from the stakeholder interviews in early 2021 was that RAAs had shown to be resilient structures, adept at working at scale in partnership to address many of the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought and strengthening some links between RAAs and LAs whilst doing so. Regionalisation was thought to have facilitated an effective response to COVID-19 because HoS had the support of each other to share ideas at a national scale. However, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived when several RAA projects were going live or in the early stages of life as an RAA, and the declining trend in the number of children given placement orders was exacerbated by court closures. This unique situation challenged the progress RAAs were making.

For new RAAs, the interviews found it was too early in their development for staff to feel a real sense of shared identity, cohesion, and clarity, and it had been a challenging and frustrating time. Generally, COVID-19 left RAAs reporting that they were dealing with a backlog of cases, needing to place more emphasis on work around Early Permanence and managing high volumes of requests for adoption support when the much-valued additional COVID-19 funding had stopped and the longer-term future of the ASF funding was unknown. Virtual delivery did help staff to manage some capacity challenges but the extra work and changing nature of the adoption and wider permanence systems may offset those benefits in the medium to longer term.

One of the evaluation aims was to understand the different RAA models that were being implemented and any relationships to impact and effectiveness. The qualitative research and the RAA model survey found the shape of RAA models had changed, with earlier RAAs adopting more centralised models, and later RAAs opting for locality or decentralised/partnership models. Over time, it had become clear that their shape matters less than the presence of certain core elements, which were integral to success irrespective of the structure or size of an RAA. Stakeholders reflected that the most important core elements were having a single line of accountability, core functions and a single, pooled budget. They felt these elements helped to support strong leadership, better strategic management and planning, and more shared practice across partners. Also important were the strength of relationships between RAAs, LAs and VAAs. VAAs were sometimes part of RAA strategic board

arrangements, delivered core services or provided commissioned services but were less involved overall than the original policy intention, which as interviewees said, was a concern given the aim was to work together to develop a culture of excellence.

Strong leadership was central to the implementation of the RAA programme at regional and national level. For newer RAAs or those which did not have stable leadership, there were negative consequences, and it was harder to make that shift where different LA voices were felt to be dictating how things were done in the RAA, making it challenging to adopt a standardised approach. Having a leader who could create and maintain the RAA vision proved to be vital in ensuring the effective implementation of a consistent approach across the operation of the RAA. Where this had been achieved, there was more evidence of mutual understanding, respect, and joint working to better support the needs of waiting children, prospective adopters, and adoptive families. This will be even more critical to the success of RAAs in a post-pandemic future. RAAs will need to work closely with local leaders (including Directors and Assistant Directors of Children's Services, Lead Members for Children and Young People and other local services) to manage changes in the adoption numbers and to overcome challenges external to RAAs (e.g., local government restructuring, funding pressures) which as we have already seen, have presented risks to the impact and effectiveness of RAAs.



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For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:

[maura.lantrua@education.gov.uk](mailto:maura.lantrua@education.gov.uk) or [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)

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