

Cookies on GOV.UK

We use some essential cookies to make this website work.

We'd like to set additional cookies to understand how you use GOV.UK, remember your settings and improve government services.

We also use cookies set by other sites to help us deliver content from their services.

[Accept additional cookies](#)

[Reject additional cookies](#)

[View cookies](#)

 **GOV.UK**

▼ Menu



[Home](#) > [Parenting, childcare and children's services](#) > [Safeguarding and social care for children](#)
> [Children's social care providers](#) > [Inspection of children's social care providers](#)
> [Inspections of fostering and adoption agencies](#)
> [Thematic inspections of regional adoption agencies](#)



Guidance

Thematic inspections of regional adoption agencies

Published 1 September 2023

Applies to England

Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Legal context](#)

[The thematic inspection principles](#)

[The focus of the thematic inspections](#)

[Thematic inspection methodology](#)

[Concerns or complaints](#)

[Safeguarding and child protection concerns](#)

[Use of personal data](#)

Introduction

1. The government's ['Regionalising adoption' paper](#) and the [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#) laid the foundations for establishing regional adoption agencies (RAAs). The aim was to improve outcomes for children by delivering services at a larger scale and encouraging innovative approaches to practice.
2. On 1 August 2023, there were 32 RAAs delivering services on behalf of 149 local authorities. Local authorities have statutory responsibilities for adoption but may delegate some or all of this work to RAAs. RAAs carry out varying degrees of the recruitment, assessment, training, approval and adoption support services on behalf of a group of local authorities.
3. The government's aim was for the sector to establish operating models that responded to local need. However, this sector-led development has resulted in a range of operating models being established.
4. Ofsted does not have the powers to directly inspect RAAs. Two of our inspection frameworks look at some aspects of adoption practice:
 - The [social care common inspection framework \(SCCIF\)](#) covers inspections of voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies
 - [Inspections of local authority children's services \(ILACS\)](#) includes an element of inspection of local authority adoption services. If a local authority is delivering adoption services partially or fully through an RAA, the inspection would look at the local authority's governance of that arrangement

5. RAAs now carry out most adoption activity in England. This means that much of the adoption practice is currently operating outside of the scope of inspection.

6. In response to this, the Department for Education set out in its [‘adoption strategy’](#) that it would explore with Ofsted ways to ‘improve the current inspection and regulation arrangements so that there is the right level of scrutiny and reassurance across all key elements of adoption practice’.

7. We will carry out inspections of a sample of RAAs, looking at several different themes on these (known as ‘thematic inspections’). The inspections will take place between October and December 2023. This guidance sets out the arrangements for them, including the principles of inspection and the expectations of RAAs and Ofsted. Learning from them will inform plans for future adoption inspection arrangements.

Legal context

8. The inspections will take place at the request of the Secretary of State for Education. See [section 118 \(2\) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006](#), which explains how we act on requests. This gives Ofsted the same inspection powers for these thematic inspections as we have for inspections under the SCCIF and ILACS, for example in terms of having the right of entry.

The thematic inspection principles

9. Ofsted’s [corporate strategy](#) outlines how we will carry out inspection and regulation that are:

- intelligent
- responsible
- focused

10. Our approach to the thematic inspections is further underpinned by the following 3 principles that apply to all social care inspections:

- to focus on the things that matter most to children’s lives

- to be consistent in our expectations of providers
- to prioritise our work where improvement is needed most

The focus of the thematic inspections

11. The thematic inspections of RAAs will focus on the following 5 areas that the Department for Education has specified:

- the effectiveness of the RAA's recruitment, assessment, family finding and matching practice in providing safe, child-focused and timely adoptive placements for children
- the effectiveness of adoption support for adoptive families, birth families and adopted adults
- the extent to which the RAA leader understands the service's strengths and areas for development and is able to take decisive and effective action for improvement
- the extent to which the views of those with a lived experience of adoption inform service delivery and improvement
- the extent to which the RAA's governance arrangements enable the RAA to deliver effective services and provide the necessary assurance to member local authorities and other RAA partners

Thematic inspection methodology

12. Inspections will take place between October and December 2023. Inspectors will visit 6 RAAS. A team of up to 3 inspectors will spend up to 4 days on site at the RAA.

13. We will select RAAs for the inspections, taking into account:

- location
- geography
- local demographics
- how long the RAA has been operating
- operating model of the RAA

- number of local authorities linked to the RAA
- ILACS judgement of the local authorities linked to the RAA

14. Some RAAs are registered with us as voluntary adoption agencies. This means that we inspect them under the SCCIF. Given the aim of the RAA thematic inspections to look at adoption services we currently do not see, and the potential burden of inspection, we will not select those RAAs.

Notice of the inspection

15. We will notify RAAs by phone and in writing 5 working days before the on-site inspection is due to start. Notice will usually be given on a Monday before the fieldwork starts on the following Monday.

16. We will email [a letter of notice](#) to the leader of the RAA, usually before 10am. This will be followed up by a call on this morning to the RAA leader. This will usually be made by the lead inspector or the quality assurance lead for the inspection. If the RAA leader is not available, we will ask the RAA to identify the most senior manager available during the inspection to act as the leader.

17. On the day that the inspection is announced, we will give the leader of the RAA information about the inspection to share with stakeholders. This will include:

- a letter for all the RAA's staff
- a letter for all adopters and prospective adopters
- a letter for those people receiving adoption support services (including birth relatives)
- a letter for panel members and panel chair(s)
- a letter for local authorities linked to the RAA
- information to share with children

Requests to defer an inspection

18. The legal provisions for these inspections and the request from the Secretary of State for Education give Ofsted the rights of entry that underpin all our inspections. This means that we do not require a RAA's consent to carry out an inspection.

19. If the leaders of a RAA believe that they have grounds for their inspection to be deferred, they can request that we consider this. We will grant deferrals in line with our [deferral policy](#).

Request for information from RAAs

20. We will ask RAAs to provide the following information by 4pm on the day after the inspection has been announced:

- completed [RAA A1 form](#), covering data from 1 October 2022 to 30 September 2023, which provides details of:
 - child-level data
 - adopter-level data
 - details of children, adopters and/or adopted adults receiving adoption support
- statement of purpose (or equivalent) for the RAA
- recruitment strategy for the RAA
- children's guide to adoption/adoption support
- the RAA's most recent annual report
- the panel's most recent annual report
- last 3 sets of adoption panel minutes
- last 3 board meeting minutes (or equivalent)
- contact details for all local authority link staff for the RAA
- the RAA's arrangements to evaluate the effectiveness of commissioned services, including through feedback from children and their families, and any responses to improve practice
- details of any prearranged meetings taking place during the inspection, so that the lead inspector can identify any to observe

21. The RAA will need to upload the information to a secure information-sharing portal. We will send a link to the portal, and information about how to access this, with the announcement letter.

Preparing for the inspection

22. As well as the information above, the inspection team will consider information that is publicly available, as well as information that Ofsted holds that is relevant to the inspection. This includes:

- the RAA's website
- data the RAA has submitted as part of previous adoption and special guardianship quarterly data collections
- information from ILACS that relates to relevant adoption services
- data analysis by Ofsted

23. The inspection team will use this information to make sure that they have the right focus during the on-site inspection. They will then be able to use their time on site in the best way to collect first-hand evidence.

The on-site inspection

24. Inspectors will carry out the on-site inspection at the main RAA base. If the RAA operates across multiple sites, the inspection team may ask to visit some of these locations. The lead inspector will discuss and agree this with the leader of the RAA when setting up the inspection timetable.

25. We ask that the RAA gives the inspectors access to premises, records and space to work. Inspectors may need some help to navigate the RAA's systems if records are electronic. The RAA does not need to provide files in hard copy unless it is already using them in this way. The inspector may ask for specific reports or documents to be printed or shared electronically.

26. If the RAA has hybrid working arrangements (for example, staff working from home), this may lead to some off-site inspection activity. This may include inspectors speaking to staff, children and adopters on the phone or using virtual calls, where it is appropriate to do so. Whatever the working arrangements may be, inspectors will arrange face-to-face meetings when this is necessary to secure the best evidence.

27. The lead inspector and the RAA leader will discuss the inspection arrangements during the pre-inspection phase. The lead inspector will ask the RAA leader to set up a timetable for the inspection and will provide information about who the inspection team is likely to want to talk to. The lead inspector will also seek the RAA leader's views on who inspectors may find it useful to talk to, considering the scope

of the information.

The start of the inspection

28. At the start of the inspection, inspectors will confirm their identity by producing their Ofsted identification. They do not need to carry paper copies of their Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. They understand the confidential nature of inspection and abide by this throughout their inspection practice, in line with Ofsted's policies and procedures. Inspectors are not required to sign individual confidentiality agreements with RAAs to do their roles.

29. The inspection team will meet representatives of the RAA (as defined by the RAA leader) at the beginning of the inspection to:

- review and agree the plan for the inspection
- provide the opportunity for the RAA leader to give an overview of the RAA
- share any current information or personal issues relating to any children, adult service users or staff members that the inspectors need to be aware of

Case sampling

30. Inspectors will sample the experiences and progress of children and/or adults across the range of the RAA's work. The size of the RAA and the nature of any emerging themes will determine how many cases they sample. Inspectors look at elements of practice within individual cases to follow lines of enquiry and inform their findings.

31. The lead inspector will select the case sample from the pre-inspection information provided by the RAA. They will confirm before the on-site inspection starts which cases they intend to sample. This will allow RAA leaders to begin arranging for the inspector to speak to relevant service users and professionals. The inspector will discuss the selection with the RAA leader to ensure that meetings or calls are appropriate.

32. During the inspection, inspectors will also identify themes or areas of practice that they want to sample. This case-sampling activity will be in addition to the cases identified at the pre-inspection stage.

33. We take into account individuals' starting points and circumstances during inspections. We recognise that even slight progress in a particular aspect of their lives may represent a significant improvement for some children and adults. We also recognise that for some service users, because of their experiences of trauma, abuse or neglect, progress is not always straightforward. Progress in one area may result in deterioration in another as they work through the impact of their past experiences.

34. When sampling cases, the inspectors may review:

- the recruitment, preparation, training and support of adopters
- prospective adopters' reports, including those who withdrew from the process
- the approval processes for adopters and the records kept
- the effectiveness of matching children's needs with the capacity and skills of the adoptive family, taking into account the views of the adopters and the needs of the children
- information provided to adopters before placement
- panel minutes
- the impact of children's views and feedback on planning for their futures
- adoption support assessments and plans
- adoption support records
- life story work and support for children who are being adopted
- disruption meeting minutes
- referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism
- complaints

35. Inspectors will usually discuss case files (either electronic or paper-based) with the allocated member of staff (unless on leave), using their knowledge of the case file structure and recording systems. In the absence of the allocated worker, they will ask a suitable colleague to assist.

36. Case records are only one aspect of sampling children's and adults' journeys. Inspectors increase their understanding of service users' experiences through evidence from other sources. For examples, they may observe practice and have discussions with individuals involved, including children, adopters and adopted adults, where appropriate.

37. Inspectors will ensure that inspection evidence records only use initials or RAA case record IDs (where applicable) to indicate children, prospective adopters, adopters, adult adoptees, staff or contributing professionals who have been

sampled and/or interviewed as part of an inspection.

Listening and talking to children and adult service users

38. The views of children and adult service users provide important evidence of their experiences and progress.

39. Inspectors may speak to a range of adult service users, including (where applicable):

- adult adoptees
- birth relatives
- adoptive families, at any stage of the process, including those not yet approved

40. Inspectors will gain the views of children, prospective adopters, adopters and adult adoptees, birth parents, staff and wider professionals using a range of communication. This may include:

- face-to-face meetings, individually or in groups
- prearranged phone or virtual calls
- observing activities/meetings/groups that are scheduled to take place during the inspection
- emails

41. Inspectors recognise that children and prospective adopters, adopters, adult adoptees and birth relatives may have limited availability during the usual working day. Inspectors will be flexible about speaking to these people outside of the normal working day when necessary. Inspectors will not visit families at home as part of the inspection unless there is a strong justification for this in a particular case.

42. Inspectors demonstrate safe inspection and sensitive practice when gathering the views of children and adult service users by:

- telling staff and carers when and where conversations with children and adult service users are taking place and who is involved
- being sensitive to the fact that some service users, including children, may not want to be involved in the inspection
- explaining to children and adults that they will not include comments that will

identify them in the inspection report, or in feedback to staff, without their permission

- ensuring that staff are aware of any meetings between inspectors and service users, and that children or adult service users may leave the meeting at any time
- where appropriate, explaining to service users that they will pass any information suggesting that a child or adult is at risk of harm to an appropriate person who can take necessary action

43. When inspectors speak to children during the inspection, it is usually with their adoptive family present and only with consent from the person with parental responsibility.

44. It is entirely voluntary for prospective adopters, adopters, children, adopted adults and birth family members to contribute to the inspection process. The pre-inspection information for them makes this clear. Inspectors will also confirm this at the start of any interviews.

Gathering views of other professionals

45. During the inspection, inspectors will want to hear the views of a range of professionals. This will usually be in the form of a phone call. People that the inspectors may speak to include:

- the chair of the management/strategic board (as applicable)
- the director of children's services (DCS) of the host authority (as applicable)
- the chair(s) of the adoption panel
- recruitment lead
- the agency decision-maker
- children's social workers
- contracted staff and/or therapists
- the link person for each of the local authorities linked to the RAA

46. Inspectors will ask RAA leaders to provide the relevant contact details and to arrange calls and meetings as necessary. The lead inspector will agree these arrangements during their pre-inspection contact with the RAA leader.

Discussions with staff and managers

47. The needs of children, adopters and adopted adults take priority during the inspection. Inspectors will be prepared to alter interview arrangements if staff have to attend to the needs of children or other service users.

48. Inspectors will hold individual interviews with the lead of the RAA, the chair of the board and, where relevant, other staff.

49. The lead inspector will arrange for a daily 'keep-in-touch' meeting with the RAA leader. This will allow both parties to review the progress of the inspection and identify any areas for further discussion and emerging themes. They will agree the timing of these meetings during the inspection planning stage.

End of the inspection

50. At the end of the inspection, the inspection team will meet with the RAA leader (or relevant RAA manager) and, where possible, the chair of the board. At this meeting, the inspection team will give a verbal summary of the inspection findings. The summary will identify strengths and areas for development for the RAA under the [5 inspection areas](#). The lead inspector will not provide a written summary of the inspection. The RAA leader and chair may choose to take their own notes at this meeting.

51. This inspection focuses on the performance of the RAA. It is not an inspection of the participating local authorities. For this reason, inspectors will not provide verbal or written summaries at the end of the inspection to individual local authorities linked to the RAA. The RAA leader will determine how they will share the findings of the inspection with relevant stakeholders.

52. Once all of our RAA inspections have ended, the quality assurance officer will want to gain feedback on the inspection process and experience. They may offer to meet each RAA leader individually or all together in one group meeting.

Report

53. In spring 2024, we will publish one report that covers all the RAA thematic

inspections. The report will detail findings under the [5 inspection areas](#). It will confirm the names of the 6 RAAs sampled.

Conduct during inspections

54. Our [code of conduct](#) applies to all inspections. RAA leaders should ensure that they have read the code of conduct as soon as possible after the inspection is announced.

Concerns or complaints

Concerns

55. Most of Ofsted's work is carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns do arise during an inspection, they should be raised with the lead inspector as soon as possible during the inspection visit. This provides an opportunity to resolve the matter before the inspection is completed.

56. If the RAA leader is unable to resolve the matter with the inspector, they should contact the quality assurance officer for further discussion. Their contact details are located in the inspection announcement letter.

Complaints

57. If it has not been possible to resolve concerns, a formal complaint can be raised under our [complaints procedure](#).

Safeguarding and child protection

concerns

58. If serious issues of concern arise during the inspection, such as a failure to follow child protection procedures or if a child is discovered to be at immediate risk of harm, the inspector must notify the RAA leader and the child's responsible local authority as soon as possible.

59. Inspectors will always follow our [safeguarding policy](#).

60. Inspectors should contact the quality assurance officer for the RAA thematic inspections project if they need advice.

61. The quality assurance officer will ensure that the referral is made to the relevant local authority children's services and the child's allocated social worker and/or the relevant local authority adults' services and, where appropriate, the vulnerable adult's allocated social worker. You can find further guidance in [Safeguarding concerns: guidance for inspectors](#). If the concerns relate to allegations against staff, they will be referred to the designated officer.

62. Inspectors must ensure that concerns about the safety and welfare of a child are communicated immediately to the DCS for the responsible placing local authority, where this is relevant. They must keep a record of this. The regional Senior His Majesty's Inspector should follow up the action that the local authority has taken.

Use of personal data

63. As part of these thematic inspections, Ofsted may gather personal data that is necessary to help us evaluate the practice of the RAAs sampled.

64. We will use the information gathered to plan our inspection activity and to inform findings. We will not share the information gathered with third parties. We will not publish any information in the final report that may identify individuals.

65. We will hold this information securely for a period of one year from the date of publication of the final report, following which we will securely dispose of it.

66. Our [personal information charter](#) sets out your rights and the standards you can expect from Ofsted when we collect, hold or use your personal information.

Is this page useful?

Yes

No

Report a problem with this page

Services and information

[Benefits](#)

[Births, death, marriages and care](#)

[Business and self-employed](#)

[Childcare and parenting](#)

[Citizenship and living in the UK](#)

[Crime, justice and the law](#)

[Disabled people](#)

[Driving and transport](#)

[Education and learning](#)

[Employing people](#)

[Environment and countryside](#)

[Housing and local services](#)

[Money and tax](#)

[Passports, travel and living abroad](#)

[Visas and immigration](#)

[Working, jobs and pensions](#)

Government activity

[Departments](#)

[News](#)

[Guidance and regulation](#)

[Research and statistics](#)

[Policy papers and consultations](#)

[Transparency](#)

[How government works](#)

[Get involved](#)

[Help](#) [Privacy](#) [Cookies](#) [Accessibility statement](#) [Contact](#) [Terms and conditions](#)
[Rhestr o Wasanaethau Cymraeg](#) [Government Digital Service](#)

OGI

All content is available under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#), except where otherwise stated



[© Crown copyright](#)