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Research and analysis

Regional adoption agencies – thematic inspection report

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Applies to England

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Executive summary

Ofsted carried out this thematic inspection between October and December 2023. It was the first time that we had visited regional adoption agencies (RAAs). RAAs have been developed across England since 2017. They are responsible for delivering a range of adoption services on behalf of local authorities.

Ofsted Inspectors visited a sample of 6 RAAs. We chose these to be representative of the sector, taking into account factors such as location, size and model of service delivery.

Our inspections of adoption services in local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies have consistently identified adoption practice as a strength. The move to regionalisation, therefore, built on a sound, established base. The evidence from this thematic inspection indicates that, overall, day-to-day practice remains generally strong. However, despite this good practice, some of the challenges that led to regionalisation remain unresolved.

Recruitment, assessment, family-finding and matching remained consistently strong. Agencies supported prospective adopters well through a thorough assessment process, which included good preparation training. However, despite the regional approach, there remained a shortage of adopters, particularly for those children who were more likely to wait longer than their peers to be linked with adopters.

Several RAAs had struggled to recruit and retain suitably skilled and experienced staff. With limited resources, staff and leaders worked hard to make sure that the services available were those with the greatest impact on children, adopters, birth parents and adopted adults. However, different models of service delivery contributed to a disparity in the experiences of families, birth parents and adopted adults.

For some local authorities, regionalisation had increased and strengthened the services available. The people who received timely adoption support felt it made a positive difference to their children and families. Other adoptive families were not always able to access the support they needed when they needed it. This left some people feeling isolated. Some families were anxious about the stability of funding from the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF). This was impactful and left them feeling that there were barriers to accessing the support that their child needed. At times, the short-term nature of funding prevented parents and RAA leaders from planning long-term responses to need.

Leadership of the RAAs was stable, which meant that leaders had a good understanding of their agencies' strengths and weaknesses. Partner local authorities relied heavily on self-reporting by RAAs to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the services provided on their behalf. A lack of partner audit or independent scrutiny meant that some were unaware of significant shortfalls in the experiences of adopters, children, adopted adults or birth parents. In addition, the collective views of those with lived experience of adoption, particularly children, had limited influence on service planning and development.

The inspection identified some challenges for RAAs in achieving changes in response to these findings. These include:

- the different starting points of partner authorities
- the availability of resources and funding arrangements, including the arrangements for the ASGSF
- frequent changes in the senior leadership of partner local authorities
- the power imbalance between those who want or need services and those who provide them

Introduction

RAAs have developed in England since the government's [‘regionalising adoption’ paper](#) in 2015 and the [Education and Adoption Act 2016](#). The aim was to improve outcomes for children by delivering services at a larger scale and encouraging innovative practice. Local authorities retain a statutory responsibility for adoption, but delegate some or all this work to RAAs. On 1 August 2023, there were 32 RAAs delivering services on behalf of 149 local authorities. This means that RAAs are responsible for delivering most of the adoption practice in England.

RAA leaders work together as Adoption England. The group aims to improve adoption practice, for example by introducing national standards.

Ofsted did not receive powers to directly inspect RAAs when they were established. Instead, adoption practice has been inspected, in part, through 2 separate inspection frameworks.

- [The social care common inspection framework \(SCCIF\)](#) covers the inspections of voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies. Ofsted is required by regulation to inspect these services. This framework also applies to local authorities that are operating alternative delivery models (for example, operating as a trust), where they must register their adoption service as a voluntary adoption agency.
- [Inspections of local authority children’s services \(ILACS\)](#) includes an element of inspection of local authority adoption services.

In both SCCIF and ILACS inspections, if a local authority is delivering adoption services partially or fully through a RAA, Ofsted considers the local authority’s governance of that arrangement. This is the most proportionate approach available under current regulations and legislation.

In 2021, the Department for Education (DfE) 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’ [\[footnote 1\]](#) Subsequently, the DfE and Ofsted agreed that a direction from the Secretary of State for Education offered the most proportionate legal provision for Ofsted to inspect RAAs. This direction was issued in August 2023.

A summary of the methodology for these inspections, along with details of the 6 RAAs visited, is in the [Annex](#).

This report sets out our inspection findings under the 5 areas for inspection that were established

for the project.

Inspection findings

The effectiveness of the RAA’s recruitment, assessment, family-finding and matching practice in providing safe, child-focused and timely adoptive placements for children

Summary of findings

- Recruitment, assessment, family-finding and matching, when carried out by the RAA, were consistently strong. This was in line with our wider inspection findings on adoption services. Prospective adopters felt welcomed and supported through a detailed assessment process, with effective preparation training to prepare for adoption.
- In some RAAs, regionalisation has contributed to an increase in local matches for some children and adopters. However, this was not always the case. Some local authorities continued to experience an increase in the number of children placed through other adoption services.
- There were not always enough staff to assess prospective adopters. This resulted in delays in assessment.
- The profile of children who are more likely to wait longer than their peers to be linked with an adoptive family remained unchanged. This included brothers and sisters and children with more complex needs.

Recruitment of adopters

The RAAs in our sample took a similar approach to recruiting adopters. Most reported that word of mouth remained a key source of recruitment. All RAAs attempted to maintain a community identity by attending local events. Most RAAs carried out targeted recruitment. This resulted in increases in the number of Black and LGBTQ+ adopters, and adopters who wished to consider early permanence. Some RAAs found strength in this area through joining pan-regional recruitment initiatives with other RAAs.

Despite a focus on sustained recruitment, the problem of insufficiency of adopters impacted all the areas of the country visited during the project. Compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living challenges on families, ultimately this resulted in less choice for some children waiting for adoption. Children’s social workers working with 2 RAAs reported sometimes only having a single prospective adopter report to consider when they were looking for a suitable match for a child. This situation was not unique to children with more complex needs.

Example of positive impact of targeted recruitment initiative

One Adoption West Yorkshire (OAWY) was established on 1 April 2017. The regional agency is working on behalf of Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield councils.

OAWY has carried out focused work over several years to better understand the barriers to people from ethnic minority groups, particularly people of Black Caribbean and Black African heritage, becoming adopters.

In response to adopters' feedback, OAWY:

- changed its messaging at the initial point of contact for those interested in adopting
- updated recruitment materials to reflect the diversity of the families it works with
- implemented a recruitment and marketing strategy to recruit adopters for children who wait longer
- allocated 2 days per week of team managers' time for 1 year to developing RAA practice in relation to recruiting, assessing and supporting Black families
- offered one-to-one support from a culturally matched member of staff to Black adopters during their assessment and matching process
- commissioned specialist resources, including training and development opportunities, to improve the cultural competence of RAA staff and make sure they are equipped to adequately support Black adopters
- began work to achieve the Cultural Cohesion Quality Mark; this involved helping the workforce to become more comfortable with difficult conversations
- changed staff recruitment processes to support the recruitment of a more diverse workforce
- worked with the National Adoption Team to increase the diversity of the adoption panel membership

As a result of these changes, in 2022/23, 21% of OAWY's approved adopters were from Black and ethnically diverse backgrounds, compared with 10% in the previous year.

Prospective adopters felt that they were given enough information when they began to explore adoption to make an informed decision about whether it was right for them. Materials provided either online or face to face helped them to explore adoption at their own pace. RAA staff recognised the need to break down as many barriers as possible to encourage a range of people to explore adoption. Adopt South staff created an online video that allowed people to 'walk through' attending an information session before the event. Adopters reported that this eased their nervousness about this first contact.

Assessment and training

Analytical assessments, undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced staff, considered applicants' motivation and demonstrated why they had the skills and resilience needed as adopters.

“Our assessing social worker was supportive every step of the way. She explained the

process in detail and was sensitive and human in her approach. Not leaving any stone unturned – but also being mindful of our own emotions through the process. We honestly can't fault her approach.”

Adopter

In 2 RAAs, single adopters reported that assessment activities were 'couple focused'. One adopter spoke about feeling a constant 'empty chair' next to them, which led to awkwardness. One of the RAAs had identified a single adopter to act as a mentor for the applicant, and the applicant felt supported by this. However, the experience was still an avoidable source of anxiety.

RAAs that carry out assessments had changed their practice as a result of learning from recent serious case reviews. For example, there was increased social work contact with children in prospective adopter households and with prospective adopters' support networks. Inspectors saw examples of how this work was being further developed. One example was the development of therapeutic training for the friends and family of adoptive families. This recognised the essential role that these people play in supporting adoptive families.

Training during assessment and after approval equipped adopters to understand the impact of a child's early childhood experiences on their development. Prospective adopters felt that they were well prepared for their adoption journey. They highly valued the involvement of adopters and birth parents in their recruitment, training and preparation, where this was implemented. OAWY had developed training for adopters that took place 6 months after a child joined their household. Social workers reported this was a helpful opportunity for adopters to refresh what they had learned during their assessment at a point when they had real-life experience to draw on.

“The pre-approval training was of excellent quality – clear and 'real' with exploration of toxic stress, loss, family connections, therapy and telling a child their 'story'. The trainer had lived experience of being an adopted child as well as a wealth of experience as an adoption social worker and parent.”

Adopter

Increasingly, RAAs were taking different therapeutic approaches to their practice. These aimed to better equip adopters for adoption. However, individual RAAs were at different stages of establishing their model of choice. Those where the therapeutic model was used in management practice, staff supervision and case management systems reported greater overall success.

Example of embedding therapeutic approaches at all levels of the RAA

Formed in 2018, Adoption Central England (ACE) is the RAA that provides services on behalf of Warwickshire, Coventry, Worcestershire, Solihull and Herefordshire local authorities.

When leaders were considering what therapeutic approach to take, they built a relationship with a consultant who specialised in their chosen approach. Together, they developed a plan to support staff with training, consultation and skills development opportunities. This

established the ethos of the approach in all aspects of practice, at all levels within the service and at every stage of adoption.

The RAA has received certified accreditation in its chosen approach. The principles of the approach are evident throughout the RAA. PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy) is central to the approach and is used by therapists, parents and practitioners who, together, make up the network around the child. Leaders identified this as an intervention that can meet the therapeutic needs of the children alongside the support needs of the parents and practitioners caring for them.

Adoption support workers consider the needs of adopters alongside those of the children. The RAA's chosen approach leads to flexible intervention packages that provide parenting support and guidance, as well as advice for the wider network around the child, such as schools and professional networks. This approach has also been used in work with birth family members and adult adoptees.

Managers model the approach and have found it to be invaluable as a support tool in periods when staff are experiencing stress, for example during periods of workload pressure. This has, in turn, enabled the staff group to sustain their empathically attuned relationships with service users.

Although our evidence shows that the quality of assessment and training for adopters was strong, the challenges of limited resources were apparent. Staff and adopters both spoke about a national shortage of staff to undertake assessments, with 4 of the 6 RAAs not having enough staff, either due to staff vacancies, or to a lack of capacity in the staffing structure. In RAAs where local authority partners were carrying out the assessments, these services were subject to the local staffing and workload pressures in that local authority. This meant that prospective adopters' experiences varied depending on the RAA that was assessing them.

Adopters also experienced delays that were beyond the RAA's control, such as delays in the RAA staff receiving the medicals and statutory checks required for assessments.

Not all RAAs were transparent with adopters or local authority partners about the impact of staffing shortages. Inspectors saw examples of prospective adopters being asked to carry out research, training or work with children because no one was available to start their assessment, or to move the assessment to stage 2. This resulted in delays of up to 3 months. These imposed and unexpected breaks left adopters feeling frustrated and misled. One adopter reported such a significant delay that they opted to apply to another RAA a considerable distance away to have a timelier assessment.

We heard anecdotally of RAAs being unable to accept any more expressions of interest, but did not see any direct evidence of this.

Family-finding and matching practice

Not all the RAAs visited took sole responsibility for matching and introducing adopters and children. Instead, individual RAAs developed processes that reflected both their own model and local working arrangements.

RAA staff had developed strong working links with local authority children's teams. This gave them

a good understanding of the children who needed adoptive families. A range of meetings and tracking systems had developed in each region to identify children with a plan of adoption as early as possible and make sure delays in the plan were understood and monitored. Despite targeted recruitment, the profile of children who waited longer for an adoptive family remained consistent and in line with pre-RAA practice. These included brothers and sisters and children with more complex needs.

All but one RAA retained a sequential approach to matching. This meant that they had to explore and exhaust all options within the RAA before they could look at potential matches, first across the region and then across different agencies (for example, approved by a voluntary adoption agency). When RAA leaders were responsible for decision-making and budgets for inter-agency placements, this removed potential delays for children in accessing these arrangements. Inspectors did not identify any significant delays for children or adopters in family-finding or matching that arose from taking either a sequential or a non-sequential approach.

The use of 'in-RAA' adopters had financial cost savings for some partner authorities; some talked of the reduction in inter-agency spending because of regionalisation. This was not the case for all partners. For some, inter-agency spending continued to be high, and 2 local authorities reported their inter-agency spend had increased in the past year. In those partner local authorities, there were broader implications than the immediate financial costs. Children placed outside the RAA were often living out of the local area. This meant it was more difficult to visit or support them, or to link them to adoption support services.

Where regionalisation was well embedded, RAA staff had a clear sense of regional identity and a shared focus on meeting the needs of children and adopters across all partner authorities. However, some of the RAAs at a later stage of development were not yet providing a regional service or one that partners felt was equitable. As a result, some local legacy practice remained, for example a reluctance to match adopters with children outside their home authority. Although this was not evident across all RAAs, it did highlight the challenges that arose when developing a regional approach without clear guidance on structure and operations. Wider elements of this challenge are explored later in the report.

The effectiveness of adoption support for adoptive families, birth families and adopted adults

Summary of findings

- The availability of adoption support varied significantly across the RAAs visited. For some local authorities, regionalisation had increased and strengthened the services available. However, the need for adoption support often exceeded the available resources. This meant that some families waited a long time to receive the support that they needed. It left some families in an extended state of crisis, at times risking family breakdown.
- Where families received the right adoption support for their family, they were positive about its impact.
- As RAA arrangements are still relatively new, the lack of history with adopters has limited RAAs' ability to predict future need and resources.

RAA leaders have been creative in developing services that make best use of resources with the widest reach.

- Limitations in the way the ASGSF was applied sometimes prevented a holistic consideration of children’s needs in complex situations. Funding is time-limited, which increased adopters’ anxiety and was a barrier to setting up long-term approaches to supporting families.

Effectiveness of adoption support

The provision of the right adoption support at the right time was often powerful, helping families to remain living together.

“This support has made me feel empowered to keep going and it gives me strength and confidence as we parent our children and journey through the many struggles we have faced and are facing. At no point have we felt alone or abandoned. And I am extremely grateful and as a family, thank full (sic), because words cannot express how much this support has meant to us.”

Adoptive parent

In local authorities where adoption support had previously been limited, regionalisation had, for some, strengthened this offer for families. The services available included advice lines, individual consultation meetings, mentors, adopter training, children’s groups and direct work with health and education professionals to advocate for adopted children. Individual RAAs had developed strong in-house resources. They employed educational psychologists, and psychologists who supported staff and adopters directly. This included them providing individual and group consultations for staff and adopters, as well as training, therapeutic play sessions and support with life-story work. Skilled staff worked creatively to make sure that the limited resources benefited as many families as possible. This empowered adopters to use skills and approaches they had learned in order to avoid co-dependence.

Family activity events supported adopters and children to develop relationships with other adoptive families. These links helped adopters and children to develop self-sustaining support networks where adopters felt both they and their children were understood and accepted.

“We also engage in post-adoption support events, such as family fun days, days out, and under-5 stay and plays. We find these fantastic as we can surround ourselves with other adopters, and our children get to know other children who are also adopted. It’s great to be around people who have shared similar experiences with you. We have made some great friends throughout our adoption journeys.”

Adopter

Availability of adoption support

For some individuals and families, responses to requests for support were timely, recognising the challenges that the family was facing. Early assessment and triage of need ensured that risks were understood and managed. Speedy identification and provision of appropriate support

achieved long-lasting progress for these people.

“We have also contacted [name of RAA] more recently for some additional support for our [child] who was experiencing some attachment challenges that we did not feel equipped to deal with. [Name of RAA] were quick to respond to our request, seeking further information to understand our position to consider what support was needed, and offered myself and my husband 6 sessions of 1:1 parenting support. Our worker ... was excellent and flexible in her availability to enable us to both attend around work. She provided us with the space to talk through and reflect on what was happening with our [child] and gave us a number of tools, techniques and supporting information to help us know how to best respond now, and in the future. I am pleased to say that we are definitely in a better position as a family now and we feel that we can understand our [child] to best meet [their] needs.”

Adopter

However, this was not the experience of all families. Five RAAs reported challenges in providing adoption support services directly. Some had made more progress in addressing these than others. The issue of not having enough staff was also apparent in adoption support.

Some people seeking adoption support experienced extensive delays in obtaining an assessment of need, or any form of support. These families were often in crisis at the time they reached out, and the impact was highly detrimental. This was primarily a capacity issue within the RAAs. However, it was compounded for adopters by the complexities of changing geographical area and not understanding how to access support, or of being misinformed about their entitlements or the services available to them.

Delays in support left families in need feeling isolated. Our evidence showed waiting lists of up to 6 months for an initial assessment in some regions. In some situations, the volume of requests for adoption support made it difficult for the RAA to keep monitoring and overseeing these families.

In one RAA, the lack of contact between RAA staff and families waiting for assessment or support meant that staff did not always have an up-to-date understanding of risk in families. In one RAA, an expectation that adopters must update RAA staff about their situation was unrealistic and failed to recognise families’ lived experiences. Inspectors heard from 5 families where children had either become the subject of child in need plans or had become looked after while the family tried to access or were accessing adoption support. In 2 cases, children were wrongly denied access to adoption support, as RAA staff believed that their involvement with other specialist teams made them ineligible. Another adopter spoke of ‘tick-box’ procedures. They experienced a rigid approach to form-filling rather than an empathic response when they asked for support. For families already in a heightened emotional state, this was traumatic.

“Not one adoptive family will think that they are going to need help and think to establish links well before they are going to need them. Everyone thinks they will be able to cope and so when the time comes, they already need help immediately. We have decided to fund therapy ourselves until the system has caught up with us. We are managing. We are lucky.”

Adopter

Those in need of support had often begun their adoption experience many years previously, before the RAA was developed. They had no ongoing link with the service until this point of contact. The RAA's ability to predict need was therefore significantly limited. The inability to predict unmet or future need meant that staffing for this area of the service had not always been fully considered when the RAA was set up. As a result, 3 of the RAAs reported that their services were at capacity, with demand continuing to increase.

Some RAAs had reviewed their structure to better meet the demands for adoption support. This included introducing systems to support adopters awaiting an assessment or support, using duty lines or offers of training to maintain a link. Adopt South had implemented audits of all adoption support cases. This enabled managers to better understand the profile of demand in the system. Adoption Central England had introduced a panel to review the impact of adoption support. After 4 periods of ASGSF support, the family were reviewed at panel. This not only considered the impact of work to date but considered whether alternative or additional support was required, ensuring best use of resources to meet the individual needs of families.

Example of RAA restructuring current resources to meet the demands for adoption support

Adopt North East was established in 2018 and provides services on behalf of 5 local authorities: North Tyneside Council, Gateshead Council, Newcastle City Council, Northumberland County Council and South Tyneside Council.

Adopt North East provides support for all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptive families, adopted children, adopted adults and birth relatives. Since its formation in 2018, the agency has experienced a substantial year-on-year increase in the number of requests for adoption support. This has put more pressure on it to provide an effective 'first response' to those seeking support. The original model was to allocate the task on a duty rota basis. While there were some advantages to this approach, not least the ability to share work across the staff group, by late 2022 it became clear that it was not working for families. A management review found that:

- the model resulted in more variability in the agency's response to families
- some staff did not feel that they had the skills required to support families well
- there remained a perception that the duty function detracted from longer-term work

More than one member of staff said that the approach led to the team being 'spread too thin'.

The agency changed its delivery model. Using existing funding and staff, it created a new front door team. This small group of staff is protected from other tasks and specialises in providing a timely, high-quality first response. The team has proved particularly effective at supporting distressed callers and providing trauma-informed advice and support. By protecting the team's time and space, the agency has made the initial response its first meaningful intervention. This has reduced the number of contacts that progress to assessment. Where assessment is required, the first response has been effective in managing expectations and establishing coping strategies for those seeking support. Most significantly, it has improved the timeliness of the agency's response by providing an

effective triage of need. This has influenced the whole system and strengthened its resilience to increased demand.

Staff and adopters spoke of the challenge of finding appropriate commissioned services once their needs have been assessed. Although [recent changes to the regulations](#) aim to reduce this challenge for adults, they have not yet had an impact on the sector.

Adopters told inspectors that the criteria for using the ASGSF (which is for essential therapeutic services) meant that children with more complex and competing needs (such as autism or foetal alcohol syndrome) were not considered holistically. This left parents struggling to get the right support for their child. Some families relied on self-funding to secure the right resources.

Adopters were anxious about the stability of ASGSF funding, both in terms of the annual application process and the current fund end date of March 2025. Adopters found that this uncertainty prevented them from making long-term plans to meet their child's needs. In addition, time-limited funding made it difficult for RAAs to recruit staff, as posts could only be offered on a temporary basis.

Access to records

Research has identified that the response to adults wishing to access their birth records varies across different parts of the country. [\[footnote 2\]](#) This inspection found that these services were also affected by a lack of staff. The responses across the RAAs inspected were also inconsistent. Despite this, we identified sensitive, empathic practice. Staff ensured that adults seeking information about their adoption felt well supported through this process. However, one RAA had decided to stop providing non-statutory support (intermediary services) because it did not have the resources to do so. This further reduced services in the area.

“At first the whole concept was incredibly overwhelming but my social worker had such a calm, reassuring manner and was obvious from the very beginning that she had a deep understanding of all the complexities of the journey of an adopted person and how to support in a manner that was used to empower and guide me rather than overshadow my journey. Once we had the information it was lovely to meet in person and read through my adoption file with her to hand to translate any information that was not understood. I can only say that my experience has been incredibly positive and without my wonderful social worker I would be lost!!”

Adopted adult accessing their birth records

Support for birth families

We saw examples of positive work with birth family members in several RAAs, and we cover this more extensively later. Adoption Central England had established a specific team to involve birth family members in planning for and remaining in contact with children who had been adopted. It supported birth parents in final face-to-face visits and helped them to produce letterbox submissions. The service also offered support groups for birth families. By maintaining links with birth families, the staff were often the first people able to identify if family members were struggling. This work not only helped birth family members to better understand the child's

adoption, but it also helped the child to maintain links with their birth family.

Additional funding

Three of the RAAs visited had received extra funding from the government to develop targeted services. This had enabled them to focus on specific practice areas, such as multidisciplinary adoption support. The RAAs were at different stages of implementation. Some projects were still in their first year of funding, and it was too early to measure impact. Some of the developments had strengthened the services available in those regions. Other RAAs had also invested in similar focused initiatives from their internal budgets. For example, Adopt London West had funded additional therapeutic work with children, families and schools, which was improving the outcomes for those families and children. In the 6 RAAs visited, inspectors did not identify any measurable greater impact in the RAAs that had received grants than in those that had not. In particular, there was no demonstrable impact on the capacity challenges in the services concerned. As a result, adopters in these regions were no less likely to wait than in other regions.

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

Summary of findings

- Established RAA leaders had a good understanding of their RAA's history and its strengths and areas for development.
- As with any structural change, it has taken time to establish new ways of working and the right conditions for practice. Initial staff turnover in response to change has stabilised in RAAs that have been in place for longer.
- Board members from the partner authorities have sufficient seniority to make decisions. This enables RAA leaders to take decisive and timely action in response to emerging changes.

Leadership and change management

Leadership was stable in the RAAs visited. Most RAA leaders had been in post since the RAA was established. They understood the history of the RAAs' development, any difficulties in this process and the impact of change on the staff and the region. Most RAAs had found it challenging to manage change and establish a regionalised approach, particularly those moving the greatest proportion of local authority practice under the RAA umbrella. Arrangements such as staff [TUPE](#), and centralising processes and practice expectations had, at times, caused differing levels of anxiety for staff and local authority partners. Leaders had managed this at all levels of the partnership and the service.

In some RAAs, staff turnover had increased because of the changes, and this was still apparent in one service. Some staff found it difficult to adapt to changes in long-established working practices and cultures. It was also difficult for RAAs to establish consistent levels of practice quality across staff who all had different starting points. Leaders tried to make changes in a supportive way, with additional training and individual support. Despite this, some staff found the different expectations too high and opted to leave. Because of this staff turnover, children and adults who accessed

services had to continually retell their story to new people. For some, this made it harder to trust the service. Positively, staffing in the more established RAAs has become more stable – 4 of them reported that staff changes had become less frequent, which has improved consistency for those accessing services.

“It has been quite a journey and in the near four years I have been here I have observed the agency go from its infancy into a well-established service which is going from strength to strength... One of the challenges has been working across the... local authorities as they have different systems and ways of managing situations such as match funding when we run out of therapy money from ASF.”

“We have also recently gone through quite a lot of changes in [IT system] workflows which has taken time to absorb and get used to... with all changes it takes time to settle in however I feel that we are now seeing the positives of these changes and overcoming the initial hurdles.”

Member of RAA staff

RAA leaders knew their services well, and were able to identify areas of strength, and areas for further development. Overall, these reflected the individual inspection findings for each RAA. Leaders had a good level of autonomy, which gave them the flexibility to respond to changing service demands. Some RAAs have managed this well, for example prioritising adoption support services over assessment at times when demand for support services has been high. This made the service responsive to local need. However, this was not consistent and, in some services, there were weaknesses that were not acted on quickly enough. This was particularly evident in adoption support. This area is covered in more detail later in the report.

In some RAAs, board members had sufficient seniority in their local authorities to make decisions about service developments and priorities. This meant that decisions could be made quickly. In these circumstances, RAA leaders could be responsive to emerging challenges. However, in RAAs where decision-making was not devolved in this way, it was harder to make progress with development plans and RAA leaders could not respond as quickly.

The extent to which the views of those with a lived experience of adoption inform service delivery and improvement

Summary of findings

- The strength of the voice of those with lived experience of adoption was inconsistent. In particular, the voice of children was noticeably absent.
- Although we saw examples of good practice, this was not established across all RAAs, or across all areas of adoption practice.

The role of adults who have experienced adoption in service delivery

All RAAs involved adopters and, to varying degrees, birth parents in their recruitment, preparation and training services. Sensitive work with birth family members had resulted in birth parents speaking to adopter groups or providing videos to inform workshop discussions. This ensured that learning from the experiences of birth family members remained a key consideration in the adoption process.

Mentor schemes in 5 RAAs provided new adopters with the support of a more experienced peer as they navigated the new processes of adoption. These schemes were often quite large: one had approximately 40 mentors with over 150 mentees at different stages of their adoption journey. The schemes were sometimes extended to incorporate adoption support roles. Overall, mentees found these arrangements helpful. They felt that the scheme gave them a meaningful link to someone who understood their situation. Mentor arrangements were managed differently across the RAAs. Some schemes were managed internally and others were commissioned externally. More formal arrangements carried less risk for adopters and mentors, with clear expectations of mentors and consistent support and training regarding the management of safeguarding challenges.

Hearing from people who use the service

There were broad similarities in some of the feedback sought by RAAs. For example, adopters were asked about their experiences of assessment or adoption panels. However, this feedback was limited to the individual's experience of the process. The RAAs did not consistently take a broader approach that brought together the views of adults and children and analysed them at a more strategic level. This was a missed opportunity to regularly hear in detail about the experiences of adults and children and use this information to drive service development. Most RAA leaders and board members recognised this as an area for further development.

“They do not request feedback as standard, instead, if you want to send feedback, it is just an email to an inbox. I am part way through compiling my feedback. It takes a bit of time after feeling deep within the process to be able to look back and see things as they were and how they should be.”

Adopter

The people interviewed by inspectors or who gave online feedback were open in their comments. Most were incredibly positive about their involvement with their respective RAA. Those who accessed services spoke of empathic staff and of receiving support that made a significant difference to their family.

Some of the people who were less satisfied with their experience had felt unable to share this with the RAA or to make a complaint about their experience. A small proportion of these people were also unwilling for inspectors to raise the situation directly with RAA leaders for fear that this would affect their ability to access services. These scenarios highlighted the impact of the power imbalance in the adoption process. People who relied on a service being provided to them, either through assessment or as support, were reluctant to be totally honest in their feedback for fear of repercussions.

“I felt like I could never voice my feelings as I knew that they will use it against us.”

Adopter

Inspectors found that the level of complaints to RAAs was low. RAAs are not legally required to have an internal complaints process, as complaints are directed to the relevant partner local authority. Some RAAs did have good internal systems for managing complaints, and collaborated with local authority staff in the process. This ensured that local authorities understood the service that was being provided on their behalf. However, considering the relationship between the partner local authorities and the RAA, this did not provide independence in the complaints process.

Example of engaging adopters across the RAA

Adopt South was established in April 2019. The RAA is a partnership between 4 local authorities: Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth and Isle of Wight.

The RAA has established processes for gathering the views of those with lived experience of adoption. It aims to ensure that their perspectives have a direct impact on practice at both an operational and strategic level.

The RAA ensures that those with lived experience of adoption are included by:

- making sure they are represented in the RAA staff team
- involving adopters in adoption information sessions alongside staff
- providing adopter Q&A sessions during stage 1, focusing on targeted topics such as early permanence
- involving adopters in preparation training and workshops
- involving adopters in support groups
- maintaining a mentoring scheme available to all adopters, from assessment through to post-adoption orders; this aims to link families with mentors who have had a similar or relevant adoption experience
- developing 4 focus groups, which include birth family members, adoptees and adopters. The RAA uses these forums to consult on proposals for development. The RAA has expanded the role of these groups to involve them in bids for early permanence and multidisciplinary grants
- introducing a 'you said, we did' feedback system, and sharing the outcomes with individuals, including the reasons why a change may not have been made

The opportunity to consult with those with a lived experience of adoption has helped leaders to rethink plans, confirmed their thinking on some developments and enabled them to deliver messages of change at key times. Fundamentally, adopters value the support, views and advice of those who have already been through the process, from all perspectives.

Engaging with children

The voice of the child was noticeably underrepresented in the RAAs visited. However, we saw

some excellent examples of how children’s views could inform services. In Adopt London West, children had helped to develop drama groups. OAWY had set up a group for teenagers. This had empowered children to speak about their experiences. One child had spoken at a regional conference and another at a gathering of over 50 professionals. In these cases, the voice of the child was powerful.

“Overall it is a good place for children to get a second chance, they are supporting children to find their families.”

Child [about RAA]

However, these examples were limited. Most RAAs had not yet found ways to engage children in a meaningful way, or had stalled at the early stages and were yet to review this to understand why. As a result, the RAAs we visited did not fully understand children’s experiences. Leaders recognised this as an area for further work.

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

Summary of findings

- RAAs and partner authorities relied on self-reporting, and did not carry out regular audits, either internally or externally. This meant that they did not always fully understand the quality and impact of the services being delivered.
- A lack of central direction about the structure and governance left some RAAs spending disproportionate time on this in the set-up phase for regionalisation.
- The 6 RAAs all operated different models and structures, which meant that Ofsted was unable to suggest that one was ultimately better than another.
- Without collaboration between local authorities and RAAs, there is a risk in some RAA models that adoption knowledge and expertise could sit outside of children’s social care.

The impact of regionalisation

All 6 RAAs operated different models and structures, each with their own strengths and challenges. The number of variables across the RAAs prevented us from making a like-for-like comparison. Therefore, it was not possible or realistic to suggest that one model was ultimately better than another.

Our evidence shows that some of the objectives for regionalisation have been achieved. RAAs have been able to achieve economies of scale, for example by pooling adoption support resources. In some cases, this has increased the availability and range of provision. Some local authorities reported that their inter-agency budget has been reduced because regional placements are being used more. However, this was not the case in all local authorities. Some local authorities

said that a fall in the number of children needing adoptive placements was equally responsible for these reductions.

In areas where local authorities had established partnership arrangements before regionalisation, the process had strengthened these relationships and had enabled innovative pan-regional developments between RAAs.

Example of the impact of pan-regional links for RAAs

Adopt London West (ALW) is the RAA providing services on behalf of Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, and Hounslow. Together with 3 other RAAs who operate in London they form Adopt London.

An example of the benefits of the close collaborative working across the Adopt London RAAs, and the opportunities that this has made possible since regionalisation, is the partnership that has developed between Adopt London and We are Family (WAF), an adopter-led peer support organisation.

Using pooled financial resources, Adopt London has made a long-term commitment to provide an annual grant to WAF. WAF has used this additional funding to develop its online digital resources, which are all delivered in partnership with Adopt London. WAF membership in London is now over 900, with over 200 new London members joining in 2023.

Examples of the pan-regional activities made possible through this work include:

- 10 different WAF support groups now run across London; these offered 138 WAF activities in 2023.
- WAF Talks (digital programme): There were 499 live attendees at webinars in 2023 and 1,125 on-demand views across all webinars.
- Adoption Shared (podcast series): 3 seasons so far, with 18 podcasts. A fourth season is currently in production, focusing on children with additional needs. There were 4,431 podcast downloads in 2023, and, to date, a total of 10,307 downloads since the first episode.

A recent survey showed that 83% of WAF members agree or strongly agree that, since joining WAF, they have had access to more resources, information and support to manage the challenges of adoptive parenting.

As part of the partnership with WAF, all Adopt London staff have access to the WAF member hub. This enables them to review the range of resources and materials to share with families.

WAF also has a stakeholder group in Adopt London's Black Adoption Project. This new project aims to provide tailored support and information to Black adopters.

For those RAAs developing new inter-authority relationships, several leaders felt that the lack of central direction provided about operating models at the outset had resulted in a lot of time

invested in developing, establishing and reviewing systems and governance arrangements. One RAA leader referred to ‘making it up as we went along’, and 2 said that the lack of a consistent model or guidance was a challenge. In those situations, RAA leaders reported this was at the expense of the timely development of services for adopters and children.

Five of the RAAs visited had implemented a centralised approach. The direct line management by the RAA leader across all aspects of adoption meant that leaders could establish consistent practices within the challenges already identified regarding assessments and adoption support. For example, they were able to develop service standards. Leaders’ ability to develop and use limited resources meant that they could target responses to regional need. However, for some adopters, this led to a reduction in what they felt was available to them in their local area, such as support groups or family activities. Those who were not able to travel easily, or not confident in accessing online resources, felt that support was not always available in the way that they wanted.

In contrast, the decentralised model saw adoption services retained by the individual partner authorities. This meant that they were subject to the resource and budget pressures of the individual authority. Adopters across the region had different experiences, depending on where they lived. However, providing services at a local level gave adopters the local links and responsiveness that some adopters in centralised services felt that they lacked.

A few local authority leads expressed concern that regionalisation, and the movement of staff most experienced in adoption into the RAA, left local authorities with a lack of knowledge and practice in this area. Concerns related to a loss of the previously close working relationships between children’s social workers and adoption social workers in individual local authorities. This was mitigated where RAA leaders had arranged for RAA staff to provide training and support directly to staff in children’s teams, for example about writing child permanence reports, later life letters and life story books. A range of formal and informal approaches, for example ‘lunch and learn’ events, helped staff in the children’s workforce to develop skills and improved the quality of children’s information. However, the long-term impact of events varied, depending on the turnover of staff in partner local authorities.

Each RAA had a host local authority that employed RAA staff. This provided a central base and support services. Governance boards included representation from each member local authority, with differing arrangements for chairing the board. In some RAAs, this responsibility remained with the host authority; in others, it rotated between the partner authorities. At the time of the inspection, only one RAA had kept the same chair from the start. Inspectors did not identify any significant difference in the impact of these 2 arrangements. None of the RAAs had opted to use an independent chair of the board.

Most RAAs had experienced change in the senior management of partner authorities. This had an impact on board membership. For RAA leaders, it presented a constant challenge in re-establishing relationships and understanding. Despite this, all boards and their respective chairs reported confidence in, and positive working relationships with, the respective RAA leader. This view was reflected in the findings of this inspection.

Audit and oversight

There were significant differences in the levels of monitoring and reporting across the 6 RAAs. It was not easy to manage information centrally in RAAs when it was drawn from multiple and different local authority data systems. Family Adoption Links had invested in a specialist member of staff to focus on analysing data. This ensured there was clear, regular reporting about the work

of the RAA. Other monitoring and reporting systems were less developed. Some data systems were held by the host authority; other RAAs had developed their own monitoring arrangements using a range of individual spreadsheet systems.

In most cases, the systems worked well and helped RAA leaders to understand their services. However, in one case where there were significant delays in adoption support services, the system did not give the RAA sufficient oversight of its families' levels of need and risk. Not only did this prevent the service from understanding the families' situations and planning responses, but it also meant that partner local authorities were not consistently aware of the significance of the service shortfalls.

Local authority partners relied too much on self-reporting by the RAA. All RAA leaders provided regular performance reports to the board. However, in all but one RAA, arrangements for regular internal thematic auditing of practice were limited or in the initial stages of development. In the main, RAAs used audits to inform requests for funding or developments. We saw only one example of a thematic audit being used to improve the experiences of children. In some of the partnerships, this left local authorities without accurate, up-to-date information about the services being provided on their behalf.

Some partner authorities did not know about the challenges and areas for development identified by inspectors during these inspections. For example, one local authority reported that the RAA had excellent adoption support services, but was unaware that families in crisis were waiting up to 6 months to be assessed for the service. Similarly, partner authorities were unaware of delays in assessing prospective adopters, as reporting focused on assessment stages rather than overall timeframes. This lack of understanding meant that partner local authorities did not have a clear view of the day-to-day experiences of children and families.

Where local authorities had asked for localised auditing, this tended to be reactive, in response to challenges in practice (such as an increase in episodes of adoption break down) rather than a proactive plan of auditing and evaluation.

Adopt North East had made significant use of peer auditing as a quality assurance and development opportunity. This had not only helped to improve partners' engagement in the RAA but had also led to wider development opportunities within the service.

Challenges to change

Inspectors identified challenges that RAAs had experienced when they were being set up, and challenges that affected their ability to respond to the areas identified in this inspection. These included:

- The different starting points of partner authorities: the RAAs' partner local authorities had received a range of judgements in their most recent inspection of children's services. RAA leaders highlighted the difficulties in aligning practice within a RAA with such a wide variance of starting points, and the time that this took. This also affected the quality of practice RAAs experienced from children's social workers. Factors such as high staff turnover in social work posts made it difficult to achieve long-term change.
- Resources and funding: many services were already at full capacity, in terms both of staff

providing the services and of the number of people accessing them. There was no indication that demand was reducing. This particularly related to adoption support. In financially challenging environments, there was limited funding to increase capacity. Some local authority RAA funding agreements had been frozen. In some partnerships, the local authority's financial contributions had not been reviewed since the RAA was established. Local authority partners faced challenging decisions about the best use of resources across all their service areas. We identified that, overall, adoption practice was strong. When faced with the need to prioritise services, local authority leaders are more likely to allocate resources to front door services that carry higher levels of risk.

- Frequent changes of senior leadership in partner local authorities: this affected working relationships and sometimes resulted in changes to previously agreed areas of focus for the RAA.
- The power imbalance between those wanting or in need of services and those providing them: people with experience of adoption can be reluctant to share their views with RAAs because they fear this may affect how and if they can receive services in the future.
- Impact of the ASGSF: the fund focuses on therapy, which can at times prevent RAAs from taking a holistic approach to supporting children. The short-term nature of ASGSF funding is a barrier to long-term planning to meet children's needs. This also applies to the government's funding commitment and review cycles.

Conclusion

This thematic inspection demonstrated that, when people get the adoption services that they want or need, their experiences are generally positive. When people receive the right adoption support at the right time, this can have a significant impact, with lasting positive change for children and families. Practice is provided by skilled, experienced staff supported by effective leaders and managers. However, there continue to be longstanding pressures within the adoption sector, which predate the development of RAAs.

As similar arrangements, such as regional care cooperatives, are developed, there is an opportunity to learn from the experience of establishing RAAs. For example, there was no consistent blueprint to inform RAAs' models and governance. At times, this has slowed the pace of development, as new protocols and procedures have had to be implemented. Similarly, clearer expectations for independent scrutiny and audit may have helped partner authorities to better understand the quality and impact of the services being provided on their behalf.

Areas for improvement

For regional adoption agencies

Take greater account of the views of those with lived experience of adoption when developing services. Consider the role of independent systems to strengthen the ways in which those accessing services can give open, transparent feedback about their experiences.

- Ensure that those in need of adoption support are recognised and responded to in a timely way.

For central government

- Review the funding arrangements for ASGSF, which should include:
 - considering the relationships between the ASGSF and partners in health and education to clarify and address some of the barriers experienced by families
 - considering the short-term nature of the funding arrangements for families and of the fund overall.
- Learn from the development of RAAs to inform any new initiatives, such as regional care cooperatives, with particular attention to operating models and accountability.
- Consider the right level of scrutiny and the overall accountability system for adoption practice, including a risk-based and proportionate use of inspection and regulation.

For Ofsted

- Work with the DfE on the next steps for regulation and inspection of adoption services.
- Consider the learning from this thematic inspection in any review of current adoption inspection frameworks.

Annex: inspection methodology

Ofsted carried out 6 thematic inspections at the direction of the Secretary of State for Education, under section 118 (2) of the [Education and Inspections Act 2006](#). The directions identified 5 themes for inspectors to consider:

- 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

Three teams of 3 inspectors visited 6 RAAs between 30 October and 7 December 2023.

When selecting RAAs to visit, we considered a range of factors, including location, geography and local demographics. We also considered how long the RAA had been operating, its size and its operating model. Three of the RAAs had received additional funding from the DfE to develop services.

We also considered the size and judgement profile of the partner local authorities. In planning the thematic inspection schedule, we were mindful of the burden of inspection. We decided that we would not inspect RAAs where ILACS or special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) inspections were scheduled in partner local authorities at the same time. We also decided not to inspect any RAA that is registered by Ofsted as a voluntary adoption agency, as this would duplicate inspection activity under the SCCIF.

The 6 RAAs visited, and the dates of inspection, were as follows:

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Adopt North East | 30 October to 2 November 2023 |
| Adopt London West | 6 to 9 November 2023 |
| Adoption Central England | 13 to 16 November 2023 |
| Adopt South | 20 to 23 November 2023 |
| Family Adoption Links | 28 to 30 November 2023 |
| One Adoption West Yorkshire | 4 to 7 December 2023 |

These RAAs are responsible for varying levels of adoption activity on behalf of 30 local authorities. They range in size from 4 participating local authorities to 7. The RAAs cover a range of metropolitan, urban and rural locations, including island services across England. The earliest began operating in 2017, and the most recent in 2022.

We considered the DfE’s RAA model typology, which was set out in its [‘Evaluation of regional adoption agencies’ inception and scoping report](#) in November 2018. Inspectors visited a range of the 5 models, including decentralised, hosted centralised, and hosted hub and spoke. All 6 RAAs operated in a partnership arrangement between the participating local authorities.

Inspectors spent up to 4 days on site during each inspection. They sampled practice that was representative of each RAA’s work. They spoke with prospective adopters, adopters, children, adopted adults, birth parents of adopted children, RAA and local authority staff, representatives of commissioned services, the RAA leader and lead officers from member local authorities. In addition, all stakeholders were given the opportunity to submit online feedback to the inspection team. During the thematic inspections, inspectors heard from over 500 individuals. The most represented group was RAA staff, followed by adopters and adoption support users.

The inspections focused on work carried out by the RAA. Inspectors did not consider the elements of adoption practice retained within individual local authorities, as these are considered within the ILACS framework.

1. [‘Adoption strategy: achieving excellence everywhere’](#), Department for Education, July 2021, quote on paragraph 149, page 48. [↩](#)
2. A Murphy, E Neil, J North and D Oates, [‘Seeking connection: how adoption agencies respond to requests from intermediary agencies to support reunions between adopted adults and their birth families’](#), Joanna North Associations and University of East Anglia, October 2022. [↩](#)

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