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Guidance

Thematic inspection of regional adoption agencies: phase 2

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Applies to England

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This is an update of the [first methodology](#), which was published ahead of the first phase thematic inspection in September 2023.

Introduction

RAAs have been developed across England since 2017. The foundations for establishing RAAs were set out in the government's '[Regionalising adoption](#)' [paper](#) and the [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#). The aim was to improve outcomes for children by delivering services at a larger scale and encouraging innovative approaches to practice.

RAAs are now responsible for delivering the majority of adoption practice in England. These arrangements may comprise voluntary adoption agencies, local authorities or a mix of both. All local authorities in England are now part of one of

the 34 RAAs currently operating.

Ofsted evaluates adoption practice through inspections of voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF). However, we do not have powers to inspect RAAs, even though the majority of adoption practice now takes place under regional arrangements. Therefore, we evaluate local authority governance of adoption services delivered on their behalf through RAAs as part of the inspecting local authority children's services (ILACS) inspection framework.

The Department for Education commissioned us to carry out the first thematic inspection of regional adoption agencies in 2023. This involved inspection visits to 6 RAAs (selected based on their size, location, demographic and model of operation) with a view to understanding practice relating to the recruitment, assessment, matching and support of adopters. [The report of this inspection](#) was published in March 2024.

The thematic inspection found that, although day-to-day adoption practice remained strong, some of the challenges that led to the establishment of regional adoption agencies remained. In addition, the voices of those with lived experience of adoption were not strongly represented in RAAs. Significantly, although this regionalisation had resulted in increased support services in some local authorities, in others adoptive families found it difficult to access the right support at the right time, which resulted in some families feeling isolated. Challenges in the arrangements for the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund had, at times, compounded the experiences of families.

As a result of the thematic inspection, we recommended that the Department for Education and Ofsted work together to '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'. This second thematic inspection is the next step in this work.

We will carry out inspection visits to a sample of RAAs between September and December 2026. This guidance sets out the arrangements for these inspection visits, including the principles of inspection and the expectations of RAAs and Ofsted. Learning from the thematic inspection will inform planning for future adoption inspection arrangements by the Department for Education and Ofsted.

Legal context

The thematic inspection visits 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 us the same inspection powers for the thematic inspection as we have for inspections under the SCCIF and ILACS frameworks, for example in terms of having the right of entry.

Thematic inspection principles

Our [corporate strategy](#) sets out how we will carry out inspection and regulation that are:

- intelligent
- responsible
- focused

Our approach to the thematic inspection 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

Focus of the thematic inspection

The Department for Education has commissioned the second thematic inspection of RAAs to focus on the provision of adoption support. The thematic inspection will look at 'The right support at the right time? The effectiveness of adoption support in promoting stability and family life after adoption orders have been granted'.

Ofsted will consider the following evaluation criteria when undertaking the thematic inspection:

- The provision of adoption support, including assessments of need, is timely and effective – practice takes account of individual needs and the lifelong impact of adoption.
- Adoption support is sensitive to the cultural identity and family history of children, adoptive families and adopted adults.
- Barriers and inequalities to accessing adoption support are well understood – practitioners and leaders respond promptly to prevent instability or disruption, including for those in crisis.
- Adoption support is of a consistently high quality across the country and meets, or exceeds, national standards.
- The voices of those with lived experience informs the development, delivery, and review of adoption support services.
- Local authority governance ensures senior leaders in partner authorities within

the RAA retain effective oversight and take appropriate responsibility for services delivered on their behalf.

Safeguarding is a central feature of all inspection activity and will be considered across each of the evaluation criteria.

Thematic inspection methodology

We will carry out inspection visits between September and December 2026. Inspectors will visit 6 RAAs. A team of up to 3 inspectors will spend up to 4 days on site at each RAA.

When we select RAAs for the inspection visits, we will take into account:

- location
- geography
- local demographics
- number of local authorities linked to the RAA
- most recent ILACS judgement of the local authorities linked to the RAA

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

Notice of the inspection

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

We will email a letter of notice to the leader of the RAA, usually before 10am. This will be followed by a call to the RAA leader on the same morning. This will usually be made by the lead inspector or the quality assurance officer for the inspection visit. 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. This initial call will allow for introductions and for the RAA leader to ask any early questions. It is also an opportunity for the RAA leader to request any adaptations to the inspection visit process due to a protected characteristic, or any reasonable adjustments due to a disability.

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

include:

- a letter for all the RAA's staff
- a letter for those people who have contacted their local authority or RAA requesting adoption support services within the inspection data collection window, including all those currently receiving adoption support
- a letter for local authorities linked to the RAA
- information to share with children
- information about how to raise any issues about inspector conduct or process matters during the visit

Requests to defer an inspection visit

The legal provisions for these inspection visits 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 an RAA's consent to carry out an inspection visit.

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

Request for information from RAAs

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

- completed RAA A1 form, covering data from 1 September 2025 to 31 August 2026, which provides details of children, adult adoptees, adopters and birth relatives receiving adoption support; and additional RAA data
- statement of purpose (or equivalent) for the RAA
- children's guide to adoption support
- the RAA's most recent annual report
- last 3 board meeting minutes (or equivalent)
- contact details for the nominated local authority link member of staff for the RAA
- the RAA's arrangements for vetting services that work under contract to the RAA, including arrangements for reviewing suitability
- the RAA's arrangements to evaluate the effectiveness of commissioned adoption support services, including through feedback from children and their

families, and any responses the RAA has made to improve practice

- details of any universal adoption support provided by the RAA, including, for example, arrangements for any peer support offer (including support groups), training, children's or family events, or children and young people's groups; this includes those elements provided directly by the RAA and those that are externally commissioned
- details of any prearranged meetings taking place during the inspection visit that are relevant to adoption support, so that the lead inspector can identify any that they may wish to observe

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 visit

As well as the information above, the inspection team will consider information that is publicly available, and any information we hold that is relevant to the inspection visit. 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
- our data analysis

The inspection team will use this information to support inspection activity. They will then be able to use their time on site in the best way to collect first-hand evidence.

On-site inspection visit

Inspectors will carry out the on-site inspection visit 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 visit timetable.

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. 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. 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.

If the RAA has hybrid working arrangements (for example, staff working from home), this may mean that some inspection activity will take place off-site. This may include inspectors speaking to staff, children and adopters on the phone or using virtual meetings, 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.

The lead inspector and the RAA leader will discuss the inspection visit arrangements during the pre-inspection phase. The lead inspector will ask the RAA leader to set up a provisional timetable for the inspection visit 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 inspection visit.

Start of the inspection

At the start of the inspection visit, 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) certificates. They understand the confidential nature of inspection and abide by this throughout the inspection, in line with Ofsted's policies and procedures. Inspectors are not required to sign individual confidentiality agreements with RAAs to do their roles.

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

- review and agree the plan for the inspection visit, including finalising the timetable
- provide an opportunity for the RAA leader to give a general overview of the RAA and an overview of adoption support arrangements
- 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
- provide the opportunity to raise any issues or concerns, or to seek clarification about the inspection visit, and to explain how the RAA leader can raise any matters during the inspection visit itself
- provide an opportunity for the RAA leader to request any adaptations to the inspection process due to a protected characteristic, or any reasonable adjustments due to a disability

Evaluating practice

Inspectors will sample the work of the RAA to help understand the experiences and progress of children and/or adults who are receiving adoption support within the scope of the inspection. The work sampled will depend on the size of the RAA, the amount of adoption support work in the scope of the inspection and any themes that emerge as a result of information gathered before or during the inspection visit. Inspectors will examine elements of practice relating to individual children, adult adoptees, adopters and birth relatives to follow lines of enquiry and inform their findings.

Inspectors will evaluate practice relating to a sample of individual children and adults receiving adoption support, selected from the information supplied by the RAA during the notice period. During the inspection visit, inspectors will also identify themes or areas of practice that they want to sample.

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.

When sampling practice, the inspectors may review:

- the impact of children's views and feedback on planning for their futures
- adoption support assessments and plans
- adoption support records
- disruption meeting minutes
- complaints
- ongoing case recording

Inspectors will usually discuss case records (either electronic or paper-based) with the allocated member of staff (unless they are on leave), drawing on that worker's knowledge of the case file structure and recording systems. In the absence of the allocated worker, inspectors will ask the RAA leader to identify a suitable colleague to assist

Case records are only one way of looking at children's and adults' experiences. Inspectors increase their understanding of these through evidence from other sources, such as by observing practice and holding discussions with the individuals involved.

Inspectors will ensure that inspection evidence records only use initials or RAA case record IDs (where applicable) to indicate children, adult adoptees, adopters, birth relatives, 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

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

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

- adult adoptees
- birth relatives
- adoptive families

Inspectors will gain the views of children, adult adoptees, adopters, birth relatives, staff and wider professionals using a range of communication methods. These 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 visit
- emails or surveys

Inspectors recognise that children, adult adoptees, adopters 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 visit unless there is a strong justification for this in a particular case.

Inspectors demonstrate sensitivity and safe inspection 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 nothing will be included in the inspection report, or in feedback to staff, that will identify them 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 the necessary action

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

It is entirely voluntary for children, adult adoptees, adopters and birth relatives to contribute to the inspection process. The pre-inspection information for them makes this clear. Inspectors will also confirm this at the start of every interview.

Gathering views from other professionals

During the inspection visit, inspectors will want to hear the views of a range of professionals and stakeholders. This will usually be in the form of a phone call but may also include email contact. People that the inspectors contact may include:

- the chair of the management/strategic board (as applicable)
- children's social workers
- contracted staff and/or therapists
- representatives of commissioned services
- the link person for each of the local authorities linked to the RAA
- representatives from local authorities, as identified by the lead inspector in discussion with the RAA leader

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

The needs of children, adult adoptees, adopters and birth relatives take priority during the inspection visit. Inspectors will be prepared to alter interview arrangements if staff have to attend to the needs of children or other service users.

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

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 visit and identify any areas for further discussion and emerging themes. They will agree the timing of these meetings during the inspection planning stage.

The quality assurance officer will meet with the RAA leader on day 4 of the inspection to enable the RAA leader to provide feedback about their inspection

experience.

End of the inspection

At the end of the inspection visit, 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 visit findings. The summary will identify strengths and areas for development for the RAA. The lead inspector will not provide a written summary of the inspection visit. The RAA leader and chair may choose to take their own notes at this meeting.

This inspection visit 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 visit to individual local authorities linked to the RAA. The RAA leader will determine how they will share the findings of the inspection visit with relevant stakeholders.

Once all 6 RAA inspection visits have ended, the thematic project team will collect feedback on the inspection process and experience. They may offer to meet each RAA leader individually or all together in one group meeting.

Report

In spring 2027, we will publish one report that summarises the findings from all 6 inspection visits. It will confirm the names of the 6 RAAs visited.

Conduct during inspection

Ofsted's [code of conduct](#) sets out the expectations for both inspectors and providers. At the start of the inspection visit (usually during the preparatory conversations) the lead inspector will explain these expectations and will ask providers to read the code. Inspectors will work constructively with providers and staff, demonstrating professionalism, courtesy, empathy and respect at all times.

Concerns or complaints

During each inspection visit, the quality assurance officer for the inspection will join the team on site at the RAA. This will provide them with direct observation of the inspection activity and support consistency across all visits.

When on site, the quality assurance officer will arrange to meet with the RAA leader individually to discuss their experience of the inspection process. The quality assurance officer will also join the final feedback meeting with the inspection team.

Concerns

Most of Ofsted's work is carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns do arise during an inspection visit, 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.

If, during the inspection visit, the RAA leader is unable to resolve the matter with the inspector, they should contact the quality assurance officer for further discussion.

If an issue remains unresolved, the RAA leader can contact Ofsted after the end of the inspection visit. This will be an opportunity to raise informal concerns about the inspection process or outcomes, ask about next steps or highlight information that they feel was not fully considered during the inspection. This will be directed to a quality assurance officer who is independent of the inspection, to discuss and (where appropriate) resolve at the earliest opportunity.

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 will be in the inspection visit announcement letter.

Complaints

If it is not possible to resolve concerns during the inspection, or through a telephone call after the inspection visit, the RAA leader may wish to lodge a formal complaint. The inspector will ensure that the RAA leader is informed that they are able to make a formal complaint, and that [information about how to complain](#) is available on GOV.UK.

Safeguarding and child protection concerns

If serious issues of concern arise during the inspection visit, 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.

Inspectors will always follow [Ofsted's safeguarding policy](#).

If inspectors need advice on a safeguarding issue, they should contact the quality assurance officer for the RAA thematic inspection project.

The quality assurance officer will ensure that the referral is made to the relevant local authority children's services, 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.

Inspectors must ensure that concerns about the safety and welfare of a child are communicated immediately to the director of children's services for the responsible placing local authority, where appropriate. They must keep a record of this. The thematic team will ensure that any concerns are shared with the regional Senior His Majesty's Inspector to enable them to follow up the action that the local authority has taken.

Use of personal data

During the thematic inspection visits, Ofsted may gather personal data that is necessary to help us evaluate the practice of the RAAs sampled.

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.

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.

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.

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