Evaluation of regional adoption agencies

First report: 2018 to 2019

July 2019

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Acknowledgements

Summary

The evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) runs from January 2018 to December 2021. Ecorys is leading the evaluation and working with Professor Julie Selwyn of the Rees Centre, University of Oxford[1]. The overall purpose of the evaluation is to assess the impact of RAAs on improving the delivery of adoption services.

The aim of this second report[2] is to present findings from the first stage of the three-year evaluation, based on (i) analysis of Adoption Scorecard and cost data and (ii) extensive qualitative research with six case study RAAs. The RAAs were at varying stages of delivery when the research was carried out in autumn/winter 2018/19; four RAAs had been in operation for over a year, one RAA had just launched and one RAA was about to go live. This report reviews the advancement and achievements of RAAs up to early 2019 and shares initial learning.

Overview of the RAA programme

The regionalisation reforms[3] intend to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services and create 25-30 RAAs to pool resources resulting in: targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters; speedier matching with a larger more diverse pool of adopters; and an improved range of adoption support services and regulatory compliance. Overall, in the longer term RAAs are expected to provide: better outcomes for children and adopters; reduced practice and performance inconsistencies; more effective strategic management of the service delivering efficiency savings; and a culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with the Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) sector.[4] Throughout the course of the evaluation, the Theory of Change (ToC) will be tested, including the assumptions and identified risks.

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[1] Previously at the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care and Studies, University of Bristol
[2] The inception and scoping report, published in November 2018, covered the background context to RAAs, the models that RAAs were developing and an assessment of progress in implementation - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/756164/Evaluation_of_RAA_scoping_report.pdf
[3] Department for Education (June 2015) Regionalising Adoption. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf
[4] http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16_Thurs_A.pdf

Summary of findings

Context

Analysis of the pre-RAA data showed substantial variation within and between RAAs in the average timeliness from a child entering care to moving in with an adoptive family, and particularly for larger RAAs. For the majority of local authorities (LAs) adoption timeliness was improving (based on three-year averages),[5] whereas nationally, in the run up to RAAs starting to go live, the number of children adopted was in decline. As the evaluation progresses, analysis will explore the extent to which the size and composition of RAAs is associated with changes in performance and the extent to which differences narrow over time.

The case study **RAAs' models** had not changed significantly from the inception and scoping stage. Variations in how case study RAAs reported structuring their services were usually a result of geographic considerations and the ease with which staff could work out of different offices. Several case study RAAs had reported they had made or intended to make changes to how they commissioned services to improve quality and efficiency. VAAs' involvement varied and ranged from them being RAA partners, to providing specific services, to involvement on the strategic management board without providing services.

Baseline costs and efficiencies

Based on the interviews and cost data provided by two case studies, the RAAs demonstrated they had adopted two types of financing models. They built on historical LA adoption service spend (this provided a baseline budget for RAAs to deliver the adoption services within), or based the model on historical and from this they forecasted activity-based spend (which took account of the number of children requiring support from each LA). Staff costs accounted for the majority of overall adoption service costs. It was too early to see cost-efficiencies yet, but over time stakeholders thought improved performance could lead to cost efficiencies. Economies of scale were at the margins and related to contracting and, for RAAs comprising many small LAs, there could be savings around management and leadership costs. However, RAAs highlighted several challenges and potential risks: additional/unanticipated costs; LA variation and expectations (i.e. internal factors); changes to the adoption landscape (i.e. external factors); and ability to make tangible savings.

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[5] Three-year averages used as per the Adoption Scorecard methodology. In future reports, one- and three-year averages will be used.

Findings on the early effects of RAAs

It was too early for this evaluation to assess the *extent* to which case study RAAs had changed the overall organisation and delivery of adoption services for the better as several case study RAAs were very much in the initial 'storming/norming' phase of group development[6] in autumn/winter 2018/19. Similarly, it is not possible to identify which RAA models appear to be the most effective at achieving the intended outcomes, as some models were very new. This will be assessed in future waves of research. However, the qualitative research found that in the more established case study RAAs (1 year + go live) many of the results identified in the programme's ToC were present to some degree. In particular, there was evidence of: improved collaboration at regional level; a single line of accountability via the Head of Service (HoS); greater data sharing between LAs and RAAs and in some cases other stakeholders (e.g. judiciary); social workers being able to access a wider pool of adopters; and increased access to more specialist and knowledgeable staff.

There was a common perception within and across more established case study RAAs that RAAs had created a **larger adopter pool** by sharing resources, introducing dedicated marketing resources and strategies, and doing more targeted recruitment activities. To date, the benefits appeared to have been greater for smaller unitary authorities. A key risk identified was a **broader adopter sufficiency challenge**, particularly as there were examples of more recent reductions in the number of adopter approvals, alongside ongoing staffing and capacity challenges.

Frequently, interviewees involved with the more-established case study RAAs reported they believed that RAAs had led to **speedier and better matching** with adopters, although this was not a universally held view, even within RAAs. This was a consequence of having immediate access to a larger pool of adopters. Also, they identified increased opportunities for staff to: pool knowledge and skills; work in specialist and locality team structures; and collaborate earlier, alongside joint training and joint panels, which facilitated speedier and better matching.

Improved adoption support was another early outcome. Commonly, stakeholders in case study RAAs said that RAAs had provided an opportunity to reassess approaches to adoption support, develop a more comprehensive training package, and address gaps. Facilitating factors identified included: pooled budgets; improved practice as result of developing the best examples from LAs in the RAA; and a more consistent offer arising

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[6] Tuckman (1965) created the 'forming, storming, norming, performing' model to describe developmental processes. This model asserts that developments go through four stages: Forming: The group forms and orientates itself to its task; Storming: Characterised by conflict and polarisation around interpersonal issues; Norming: In-group feeling and cohesiveness develop, overcoming resistance; and Performing: Issues have been resolved and the group is able to perform its task.

from increased training, collaboration and shared learning. It was difficult to assess the extent to which RAA reforms contributed to the delivery of adoption support services due to accessing several DfE funding streams. Other challenges for managers and practitioners included managing a backlog of historic cases, meeting heavy demand from adopters for adoption support, and concerns regarding future funding.

There was some evidence of **improved collaboration between the case study RAAs, LAs and other agencies.** This collaboration increased as the RAA moved to becoming live. However, the new partnership dynamic between LA and RAA staff had sometimes been challenging due to misunderstandings around practice and process, data sharing and a lack of full oversight in care planning. There were some ongoing concerns about the future role of VAAs.

Several interviewees pointed to the creation of a new **leadership** tier that had provided an opportunity for stronger leadership to support the achievement of the intended outcomes and RAAs had led to staffing changes. Commonly, case study RAAs were motivated to deliver a more consistent and cohesive focus on early permanence. Case study interviewees generally believed RAAs had helped or would help to widen their service offer.

Interim findings on factors affecting progress

The first report published by the evaluation[7] painted a picture of "frustration and challenge" and the research with case study RAAs found that many difficulties remained, almost a year on from the scoping research. However, strong leadership and the passing of time had helped to mitigate against some of the problems that had previously been reported from such large-scale structural change. Many case study RAAs identified they were dealing with a backlog of cases and working through capacity issues, due to delays and losses in staff at the transition stage. They had generally found it hard to marry up IT systems and lacked the full capacity to deliver adoption services. Delays to RAA start dates and ongoing staff vacancies compounded these issues.

Some RAAs appeared to have experienced a more difficult start because of variations in LA performance (and caseloads) pre-RAA, historical factors, the choice of model (e.g. whether adopting a hosted model working with known LAs or developing a new organisation as a Local Authority Trading Company (LATC)), and staffing and leadership-related challenges. Leadership was a key influencing factor for case study RAAs' progress, and a range of interviewees identified the quality of leadership as a facilitating (or limiting) factor. The transition to RAAs initiated a significant culture change for staff

who often struggled with the rationale for moving to regionalisation, so it was important that leaders and managers ensured that all members of staff understood the vision. Securing staff buy-in to the RAA was a long but important process, which helped staff to take ownership of the RAA and, over time, to feel part of the RAA identity.

Implications for DfE, RAAs and the evaluation

- It will be important to consider the impact of any future changes to the models on the success of RAAs through future waves of case study research.

- The ongoing challenge of adopter sufficiency highlights the risk posed, and the importance of developing innovative and effective adopter recruitment means and of measuring their success.

- The research also needs to consider the effects of an RAAs size and makeup on the quality and consistency of the adoption support offered, and what good (and improved) support looks like in the RAA context.

- It will be important for the evaluation, DfE and RAAs to explore the success of the leadership programme, and to consider what else is required to help equip the sector to respond to the policy requirements and intentions.

- Future waves of research with case study and non-case study RAAs and VAAs will seek to explore the experiences and views of VAAs further to be able to comment on the implications for the adoption system over time.

- It is too early to be certain that RAAs are having a positive impact on the intended outcomes, and to comment on the extent to which they are although the qualitative research does show some positive signs. In the future, it will be important to know the RAA progress reporting timescales so future reports can draw on the most recent MI data. The timing of the next phase of research aims to support that.

Next steps

At the points of the next wave of case study fieldwork, autumn 2019/winter 2020, all of the case study RAAs will be at least a year old. Additional research will inform the next report including:

- The first visit to the seventh case study RAA.

- Second wave visits to six case study RAAs.

- The adopter research strand.

- The first quantitative analysis of impact data.

- Further qualitative research with non-case study RAAs, those not yet in a RAA project and national stakeholders.

Chapter one – Introduction

The evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) runs from January 2018 to December 2021. Ecorys is leading the evaluation and working with Professor Julie Selwyn of the Rees Centre, University of Oxford8. Our inception and scoping report, published in November 2018, covered the background context to RAAs, the models that RAAs were developing and an assessment of progress in implementation. The aim of this second report is to review the advancement and achievements of case study RAAs up to early 2019 and share learning. In it, we present an analysis of the adoption landscape pre-RAA (performance and characteristics) and the interim findings on the early effects of case study RAAs on the size and diversity of the adopter pool, the speed of matching with adopters, and the quality of adoption support. The findings are largely based on in-depth research with six case study RAAs. The case studies involved extensive qualitative research, cost data collection and research with adopters, which is ongoing and the results will be included in the second report (see Method).

Content and scope of the report

- Chapter one introduces the RAA programme and the Theory of Change (ToC). It sets out the evaluation aims and objectives, outlines the evaluation method, and describes the data collection and analysis procedures.

- In Chapter two the findings from the analysis of national adoption data prior to any RAAs going live are presented, which provides a baseline against which to compare RAA performance when the data becomes available. This chapter also builds on the scoping stage of the evaluation to describe which models the case study RAAs were implementing during Wave 1 (of 3) visits, covering any changes made, fit with the RAA model typology, and how case study RAAs were working with or intending to work with the wider adoption system.

- Chapter three includes an early analysis of available cost data examining pre-RAA costs (including set-up), projected costs and expenditure.

- Chapter four presents the findings on the early effects of regionalisation on the size and diversity of the adopter pool, the speed of matching with adopters, and the quality of adoption support, drawing mainly on in-depth qualitative research with six case study RAAs.

- Chapter five explores factors affecting the progress of case study RAAs and interviewees' perceptions on how effectively RAAs had managed the change process. It is organised around key themes such as leadership and offers a more practical

8 Previously at the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care and Studies, University of Bristol

guide to share learning around what has worked, for whom and in what circumstances.

- Lastly, in chapter six, there is a summary of the main findings in spring 2019. The conclusion highlights the implications for RAAs and the DfE policy team to consider, in order to inform the future development of the programme. Reflections on the evaluation method and next steps are set out.

Throughout, it is important to recognise the fluid and evolving nature of the RAA programme development and to interpret the findings as reflections in spring 2019. RAAs continue to evolve as local authorities and partners launch and move beyond 'go live'. The longitudinal nature of the evaluation will enable us to examine the impact and effectiveness of these changes over time.

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

- **Case study RAAs**: The six RAAs that are longitudinal case studies (see Evaluation scope and method).

- **RAAs**: All DfE recognised RAAs involved in the research to date, including live RAAs and RAA projects.

- **Live RAAs**: RAAs which had launched at the time of the research and were operational (also known as the Leaders Group).

- **RAA projects**: RAAs which had not launched at the time of this wave of research and were largely within Cohorts 2 and 3[9]. Once the RAA HoS is appointed, they join the leaders' group.

RAA programme aims and intended outcomes

The regionalisation reforms[10] are intended to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services and create 25-30 regional agencies. It is hypothesised that larger organisations should be able to pool resources resulting in:

- Targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters.

- Speedier matching with a larger more diverse pool of adopters.

[9] Cohort 2; Cohort 3: The Department for Education (The Department) provided RAAs with tailored support and sought to obtain their input on key issues. Arrangements varied over time; at the time of writing, there were three groups: Leaders Group; Cohort 2 and Cohort 3, with Cohorts 2 and 3 meeting together before dividing later in the day. Membership of these groups changes as RAA projects move toward 'go live'.
[10] Department for Education (June 2015) Regionalising Adoption.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

- An improved range of adoption support services and regulatory compliance.

Overall, the RAAs are expected to provide, in the longer term:

- Better outcomes for children and adopters.

- Reduced practice and performance inconsistencies.

- More effective strategic management of the service delivering efficiency savings.

- A culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with the VAA sector.[11]

Table 1 details the key outcome measures for the evaluation. These outcomes will be explored quantitatively (when data becomes available) and qualitatively to understand the impact of RAAs and the mechanisms that facilitate this.

[11] http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16_Thurs_A.pdf

Table 1: Outcomes of interest

On matching • The number and characteristics of children matched. • The average time between entry to care, placement order, match, placement and order. • The number of inter-agency/inter-RAA placements. • The relationship of inter-agency payments with matching times and characteristics of children. • The number and characteristics of children with adoption breakdowns/adoption disruptions. • Number and characteristics of 'waiting' children.
On adopter recruitment • Number and characteristics of prospective adopters registering (Stage 1). • Number and characteristics of adopters approved. • The number (and proportion) and characteristics of registrations that are converted to approvals within 6 months. • The number (and proportion) and characteristics of approved families matched with a child. • The number (and proportion) and characteristics of approved families matched within 3 months of approval. • The number and characteristics of adopters withdrawing from the process (pre/post approval).
On adoption support • The number in receipt of pre-adoption support and the funding streams. • The number of requests for assessments for post adoption support. • The proportion of post-order assessments that lead to in-house/outsources/ASF support.
Efficiency analyses • Trends and patterns in number of children adopted. • Progress in a larger proportion of 'hard to place' children being placed. • The relationship between adopter recruitment, matching and the type of RAA structure. • Understanding the factors that predict delays, adopter withdrawals, matching reversals, and pre-adoption breakdowns.

Theory of Change

Figure 1 provides a ToC for the RAA policy, accompanied by the assumptions and risks (see Annex one). This was created by the evaluation team, based on the policy objectives as set out in *Regionalising Adoption*, and comments made during scoping stage evaluation interviews, and at the Research Advisory Group and RAA steering group meetings. In this first annual report, and throughout the course of the evaluation, the ToC will be tested, including the assumptions and identified risks.

Figure 1: RAA Theory of Change as at April 2018

Rationale / need

The adoption system has undergone substantial reform in recent years, resulting in areas of positive progress. Despite this, some challenges still remained:
- Delays within system reducing children's chances of being adopted, detrimentally affecting children's life chances
- Insufficient numbers of adopters recruited & assessed, especially for hard to place children
- Insufficient range of adoption support & infectively delivered
- Inconsistent practice across LAs
- Inefficient delivery of adoption support due to small scale of some adoption agencies
- Poor & under-developed commissioning practices

Inputs

Direct & indirect resources LAs, VAAs & Adoption UK

National support including:
- Grant
- Guidance
- Coaching
- Support groups
- Leadership programme

Outputs

Creation of Regional Adoption Agencies, including:
- Pooling of resources & budgets between partners
- Shared back office functions
- Sharing of adopters
- Possible movement of staff into new teams
- Joint delivery & commissioning of services
- Management Board

Results

Greater & improved collaboration at regional level, with focus on spreading best practice – 'learning from the best' in RAA

More accountability – i.e. single line of accountability via Head of Service in RAA plus adoption is sole focus in OFSTED inspections (as opposed to many functions within LA)

Greater sharing of data & information

Increase in targeted marketing & recruitment activities

More specialised & knowledgeable staff – either because staff working solely on adoption or commissioning of more specialist services – increasing staff morale

Social workers able to access wider pool of adopters

Improvements are shared with LAs

More effective commissioning, greater quality & range of, & more consistent, services that are able to meet demand

Stronger leadership & more effective strategic planning & management of services

Adoption is given higher profile & focus

Outcomes

Improved adoption ecosystem, including corporate parenting & permanency planning

Improved accessibility, quality & range of adoption support services

Speedier & better matches, especially for hard to place children

Larger & more diverse pool of adopters able to meet needs of children placed for adoption

Effective & efficient scale of operation

Better adopter experience for everyone, including children, leading to fewer disruptions

More adoptions take place for whom it is right

Reduced costs for state

Impact

Better outcomes for children & adopters

Evaluation aim and objectives

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the impact of RAAs on improving the delivery of adoption services.

There are three main aims:

- To understand the RAAs in further detail, including what models RAAs are adopting.

- To understand what impact these changes are having on four main areas:

  - Reducing unnecessary delay in **matching** and placing children with adopters.

  - The sufficiency of local and national adopter **recruitment**.

  - The provision of **adoption support** as defined in regulation.

  - Efficiencies and **cost savings**.

- To explore the effectiveness of the local plan in implementing each RAA in making progress towards achievement of the desired outcomes.
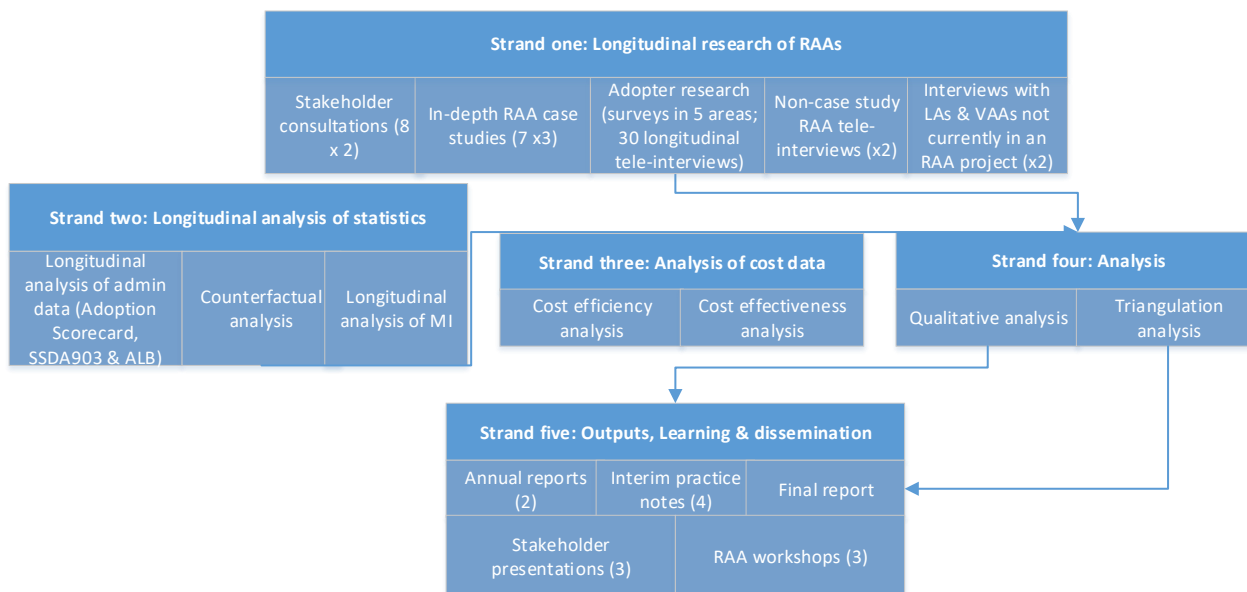
Method overview

The evaluation runs from January 2018 to December 2021. The first waves of national data analysis and case study research that informed this report are detailed below. **Table 2** lists the overall research objectives and the key tasks that will help to answer these. The research questions are provided in full in Annex two.

Table 2: Research objectives and key tasks

Research questions	Method										Analysis of costs data
	Inception & scoping		Longitudinal analysis of statistics			Longitudinal research with RAAs					
	Baseline visits	Typology development	Longitudinal analysis of admin data	Counterfactual analysis	Longitudinal analysis of MI	Stakeholder consultations	In-depth RAA case studies (7)	Adopter research	RAA tel-interviews	Interviews with non-participating LAs & VAAs	
Objective 1: Understand what RAA models are being implemented	X	X				X	X		X		
Objective 2: Explore the practice, governance and financial impacts of the RAAs on the speed of matching with adopters			X	X	X		X	X	X		
Objective 3: Explore the practice, governance and financial impacts of the RAAs on adopter recruitment			X	X	X		X	X	X		
Objective 4: Explore the practice, governance and financial, impacts of the RAAs on adoption support							X	X	X		
Objective 5: Explore the practice, governance and financial impacts of the RAAs on efficiencies and cost savings	X	X	X		X		X		X		X
Objective 6: Explore the lessons learnt and impact on wider elements of the adoption system	X					X	X	X	X	X	

Between 2018 and 2021, the evaluation will involve five key strands as shown in Figure 2 (further details provided in Annex one):

Figure 2: RAA Method overview

Strand one: Longitudinal research of RAAs				
Stakeholder consultations (8 x 2)	In-depth RAA case studies (7 x3)	Adopter research (surveys in 5 areas; 30 longitudinal tele-interviews)	Non-case study RAA tele-interviews (x2)	Interviews with LAs & VAAs not currently in an RAA project (x2)

Strand two: Longitudinal analysis of statistics		
Longitudinal analysis of admin data (Adoption Scorecard, SSDA903 & ALB)	Counterfactual analysis	Longitudinal analysis of MI

Strand three: Analysis of cost data	
Cost efficiency analysis	Cost effectiveness analysis

Strand four: Analysis	
Qualitative analysis	Triangulation analysis

Strand five: Outputs, Learning & dissemination		
Annual reports (2)	Interim practice notes (4)	Final report
Stakeholder presentations (3)		RAA workshops (3)

Work completed to date

The inception phase of the evaluation was completed in 2018 and this report comes at the end of the first of three waves of research.

Inception phase

The inception phase involved:

- Initial calls with 20 RAAs approved at the time of the research; baseline visits to 23 RAAs[12] involving interviews with 124 individuals (through 23 group interviews and three individual interviews) as part of strategic, operational or mixed groups, including wider stakeholders.

- Individual telephone interviews with the lead contacts in five new RAAs awarded funding as part of the expansion of the programme from April 2018, four LAs and two VAAs – one involved in multiple RAAs and one not yet involved.

- A combination of telephone, face-to-face, group and individual interviews with nine national strategic stakeholders including policy makers, organisational leads and advisors working in adoption services.

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[12] One RAA for London became four RAAs – North, East, South and West.

- An Inception and Scoping Report[13].

- Longitudinal data analysis.

The data source accessed for this wave of analysis was the Adoption Scorecard provided by DfE[14]. This data comprises key measures of timeliness of adoptions and the total number of adoptions for each LA. Analysis was undertaken to calculate RAA-level figures. The data covers the period 01/04/2014 to 31/03/2017 – this is prior to any RAAs going live. As such, the analysis is focused on the performance of adoption services pre-RAA – providing a baseline against which RAA performance will be compared and important context moving forwards.

The primary goal of assessing the impact of RAAs will be explored in all future reports as and when the data becomes available. This will include analysis of child-level adoption outcomes (SSDA903) data. This data comprises individual records of timeliness measures and characteristics for all children adopted and/or placed for adoption.

The evaluation also intends to analyse data from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (quarterly collection), covering outcomes related to adopter recruitment. This was not accessible for this wave of analysis due to data access and other considerations. Subsequent waves of analysis will seek to include these datasets.

Case studies

Over time, the case studies will explore the experience of implementing RAAs from a range of perspectives and contexts, capture quantitative and qualitative information to measure the outcomes being achieved, explore any changes and identify lessons learnt. Six of seven planned RAA case studies were completed to inform this report[15]. The sample was selected to broadly reflect the variety of RAAs operating across England and different models (see chapter two); locations; stages of delivery; sizes; history of partnership working; levels of VAA involvement; progress (based on self-reports during baseline visits) and performance (Adoption Scorecards, Ofsted). More details are provided in Annex two.

The first wave of research started in autumn 2018 and involved up to three days of interviews, through a mixture of one-to-one interviews and focus groups, both face-to-face and by telephone with six case study RAAs. A second wave of research is planned from autumn 2019 and a third wave from autumn 2020, both of which will include seven

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[13] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regional-adoption-agencies-evaluation-scoping-report

[14] DfE were able to provide the raw (unrounded) data by LA for the purpose of the evaluation. The publically available Adoption Scorecard includes rounded data. The Adoption Scorecards are available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards

[15] The seventh case study will be confirmed by summer 2019 and will inform the next annual report in 2020.

RAA case studies. The seventh case study is to be confirmed and will feature from the second (2019 – 2020) report.

Figure 3 shows the range of stakeholders interviewed across the case studies. In sampling the LAs, host/non-host LAs were included and covered differences in: size (geography and numbers of Looked After Children (LAC)/placement numbers); urban/rural split; and performance (Ofsted, Adoption Scorecard, self-reports).

Figure 3 Case study stakeholder sample
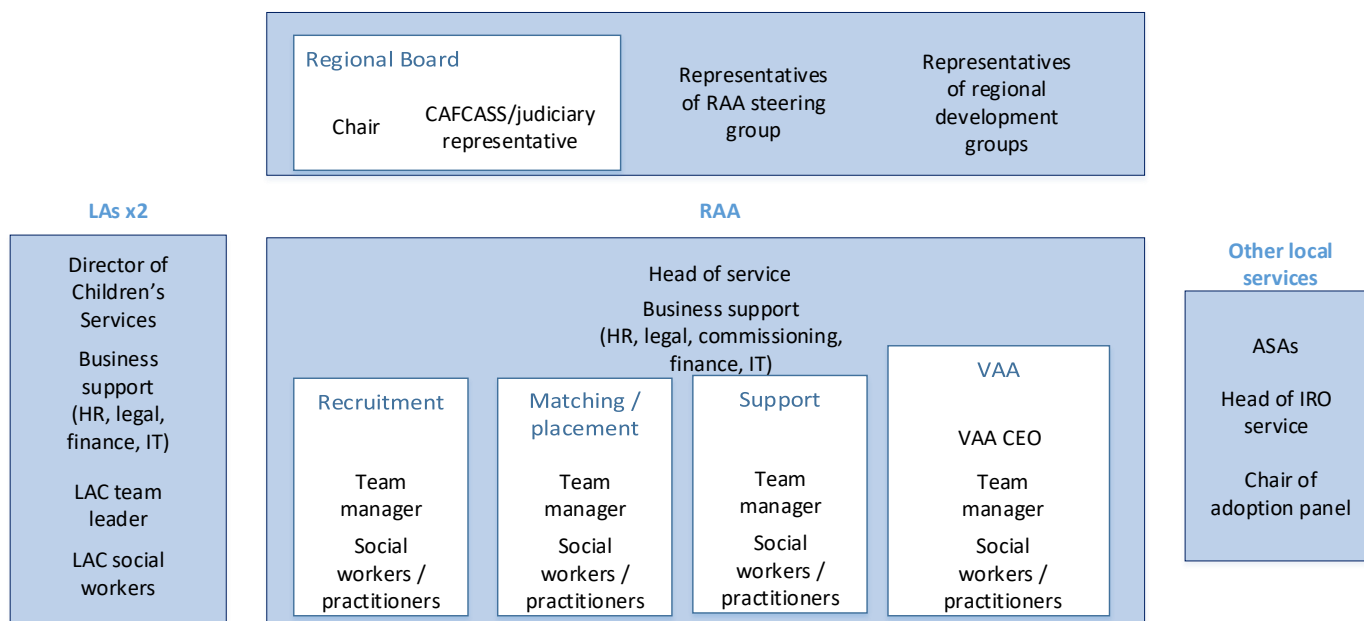
Across the six case studies for this report 186 individuals were interviewed as shown in **Table 3**. The 'Other' sample included regional bodies (e.g. CAFCASS, Councillors/Board Members, Directors of Children's Services (DCS)/Assistant Director of Children's Services (ADCS), Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), Panel Members). In most cases, face-to-face group interviews were completed (116 people took part in group interviews), the remainder were face-to-face individual interviews (29) or completed by telephone (40 people were interviewed individually or as a group by phone).

Table 3: Interviewee breakdown

HoS	Social work managers	Social workers	Business support/ finance	Other	VAA	Total
6	63	56	28	26	7	186

Annex two provides more details on the methods used. The cost data collection and analysis of available cost data is described in chapter three.

Ongoing case study work

Adopter research with 5 of the 7 RAAs

The aim of this strand of the evaluation is to understand the experience of prospective and approved adopters, using a mixed method approach. Three data collection tools are being used:

1.   Surveys of prospective adopters attending preparation groups.

2.   In-depth telephone interviews with adopters who have completed a preparation group.

3.   Surveys of adopters receiving adoption support.

At the point of writing this report, surveys have been sent out to prospective adopters attending preparation groups in four RAAs: 40 returned from two RAAs and five of the 40 adopters have been interviewed - none had a child placed and four were still being assessed. Interviews were delayed to give RAAs a chance to settle in.

Surveys evaluating adoption support have gone online in one RAA and will be distributed in the other RAAs after they have been functioning as a RAA for 6 months.

Chapter two - Context

Summary

Landscape pre-RAA

- The pre-RAA data shows that when grouping LAs at the RAA level, average timeliness (from a child entering care to moving in with adoptive family, for children who had been adopted, 2014-17) ranged from 280 to 568 days.
- Within RAAs there was substantial variation in the performance.
- For the majority of RAAs, adoption timeliness was improving (based on three-year averages).
- Nationally, in the run up to RAAs beginning to go live the number of children being adopted was in decline.

RAA Models
- The case study RAAs' models had not changed significantly from the inception stage and were evolving. Variations in service structure were usually a result of geographic considerations.
- There was some variation regarding whether - and when - the RAA took responsibility for the child from the local authority social worker, although the model the RAA took did not appear to shape this.
- Several RAAs had made or intended to make changes to how they commissioned services to improve quality and efficiency.
- VAAs ranged from being RAA partners, to providing specific services, to involvement on the strategic management board without providing services. Some RAAs incorporated– or were considering incorporating - Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) into their remit.

This chapter sets the scene for the discussions that follow. It presents a quantitative analysis of the pre-RAA landscape drawing on the Adoption Scorecard data and explains how this analysis will evolve to inform assessment of impact over time. Drawing on the first wave of case study research with six RAAs, the chapter describes their characteristics, and provides an overview of how RAAs were working (or intending to work) with the wider adoption ecosystem.

Adoption landscape pre-RAA 2014-2017

This section provides analysis of the pre-RAA adoption landscape (in terms of the number/timeliness of adoptions) between 2013 and 2017 to better understand regional variation in adoption and provide a baseline against which the impact of RAAs can be assessed in future stages of the evaluation. Whilst no RAAs were operational in the period covered by the data, analysis is presented at this level so that regional variation that may impact on delivery and the scope for improvement can be explored. Based on recent analysis by DfE, reference is made to 2018 data (when some RAAs had gone live) at the end of this section.

The primary goal of assessing the impact of RAAs will be explored when the data becomes available. This will include analysis of child-level adoption outcomes (SSDA903) data, which comprises individual records of timeliness measures and characteristics for all children adopted and/or placed for adoption.

Methodology

The data source accessed for this wave of analysis was the Adoption Scorecard provided by DfE[16]. The data comprise key measures of timeliness of adoptions (i.e. performance), and the total number of adoptions for each LA.

Analysis was undertaken to create RAA-level statistics. This involved aggregating data for LAs that are part of an RAA (or due to be) to derive overall averages and ranges within each RAA. A list of the LAs included in each RAA is provided in Annex three.

Analysis is provided for the following Adoption Scorecard measures where data was provided:

- The number of children who were adopted.

- Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family adjusted for foster carer adoptions, for children who were adopted (indicator A10)[17].

- Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family, for children who were adopted (indicator A2).

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[16] DfE were able to provide the raw (unrounded) data by LA for the purpose of the evaluation. The publically available Adoption Scorecard includes rounded data
[17] We have focused on this indicator rather than A1 (Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family unadjusted for foster carer adoptions, for children who were adopted) following guidance provided on the future development of RAA Scorecards by DfE: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/788515/Adoption_Scorecards_-_Updated_Policy_Paper_-_March_19.pdf
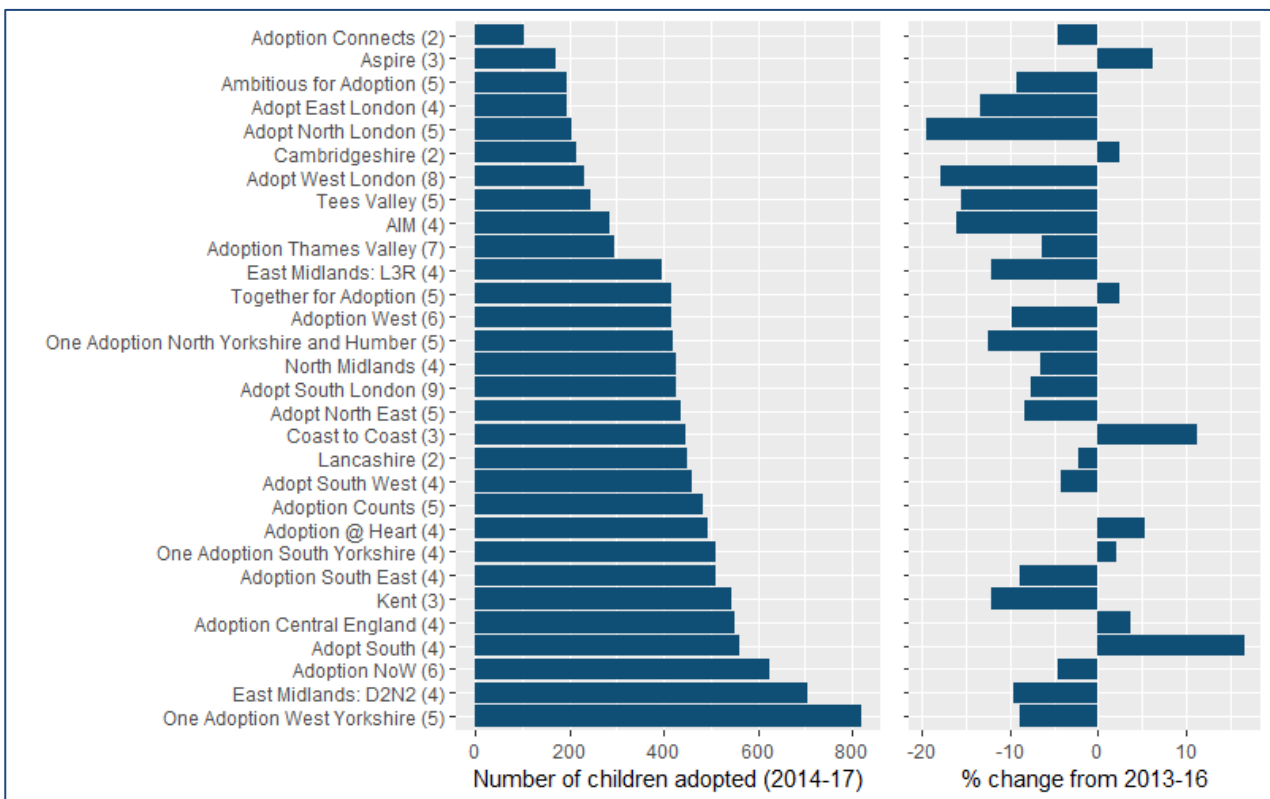
Number of adoptions

Figure 2.1 (left panel) details the number of children who were adopted in the period 2014-17 for each RAA – this includes children who were placed for adoption before this time. The right panel of Figure 2.1 shows the percentage change in the number of adoptions between the 2014-17 and 2013-16 reporting periods.[18] The parentheses next to each RAA name is the number of LAs the RAA covers.

It is clear that there is a substantial range in the size of RAAs, in terms of the number of children adopted and that this tends to be driven by the size of individual LAs rather than the number of LAs within the RAA. For example, LAs within One Adoption West Yorkshire supported 635 more adoptions than LAs within Ambitious for Adoption (185), despite both comprising five LAs.

Regarding changes in the number of children being adopted, most RAAs experienced a decrease. However, Coast to Coast and Adopt South saw a notable increase in the number of adoptions.

Figure 2.1: Number of children who were adopted (2014-17) and % change from 2013-16, by RAA

Note: parentheses next to each RAA name is the number of LAs the RAA covers.

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[18] Three-year moving averages have been used, in line with the Adoption Scorecards produced by DfE.

At a national level, analysis undertaken by DfE (2017) over the same period shows a decline in the number of adoptions in recent years[19]. The number of Looked After Children who were adopted fell from 5,360 in 2015 to 4,370.

As the evaluation progresses, the analysis will explore the extent to which the size and composition of RAAs is associated with changes in performance. Furthermore, and linked to performance, the evaluation will assess the impact of the number of children being placed for adoption and the supply of potential adopters on RAAs' ability to achieve cost-efficiencies.

Performance

In this section, analysis is provided on pre-RAA performance in terms of the timeliness of the adoption process[20].

Figure 2.2 (left panel) presents the average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, for children who were adopted, by RAA for the 2014-17 period. This has been adjusted for foster carer adoptions, in that if a child was adopted by their foster carer, the time considered is stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family. The figure also provides the range of averages (the bars extending from the RAA average) of LAs within each RAA. In the case of Adopt West, this can be interpreted as:

- The RAA comprises 6 LAs (provided in parenthesis).

- The average duration across the RAA was 401 days.

- Within the RAA, LA averages ranged from 280 days to 568 days.

The right panel of Figure 2.2 details the percentage change in the average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, for children who were adopted between the 2014-17 and 2013-16 reporting periods.

The key points from Figure 2.2 are:

[19] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664995/SFR50_2017-Children_looked_after_in_England.pdf

[20] In future reports (when data covering years where RAAs are operational is available), a counterfactual impact analysis of timeliness outcomes will be undertaken and a wider set of outcome measures (see Table 1.1) will be considered.

- There are substantial differences in timeliness across the RAA groupings. The average timeliness (from child entering care to moving in with adoptive family) ranged from 291 days in Cambridgeshire to 509 days in Adopt East London.

- Within RAAs there was typically substantial variation in LA-level performance, with some falling below the national average (denoted by the dashed vertical line) and others above. For example, for LAs that are a part of Adopt West, timeliness ranged from 280 days to 568 days.

- Five RAAs (Cambridgeshire, Aspire, East Midlands: L3R, Adopt South West and Adoption Connects) comprised LAs all with averages below the national average (i.e. good performance).

- Lancashire and East Midlands: D2N2 RAAs comprised LAs all with averages above the national average.

- In terms of changes in the average timeliness of adoptions, almost all RAAs had experienced a decrease since 2013-16. Exceptions included North Midlands and Tees Valley (both small increases), and Adopt East London.

Figure 2.2: Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (adjusted for foster care adoptions) (2014-17) and % change from 2013-16, by RAA
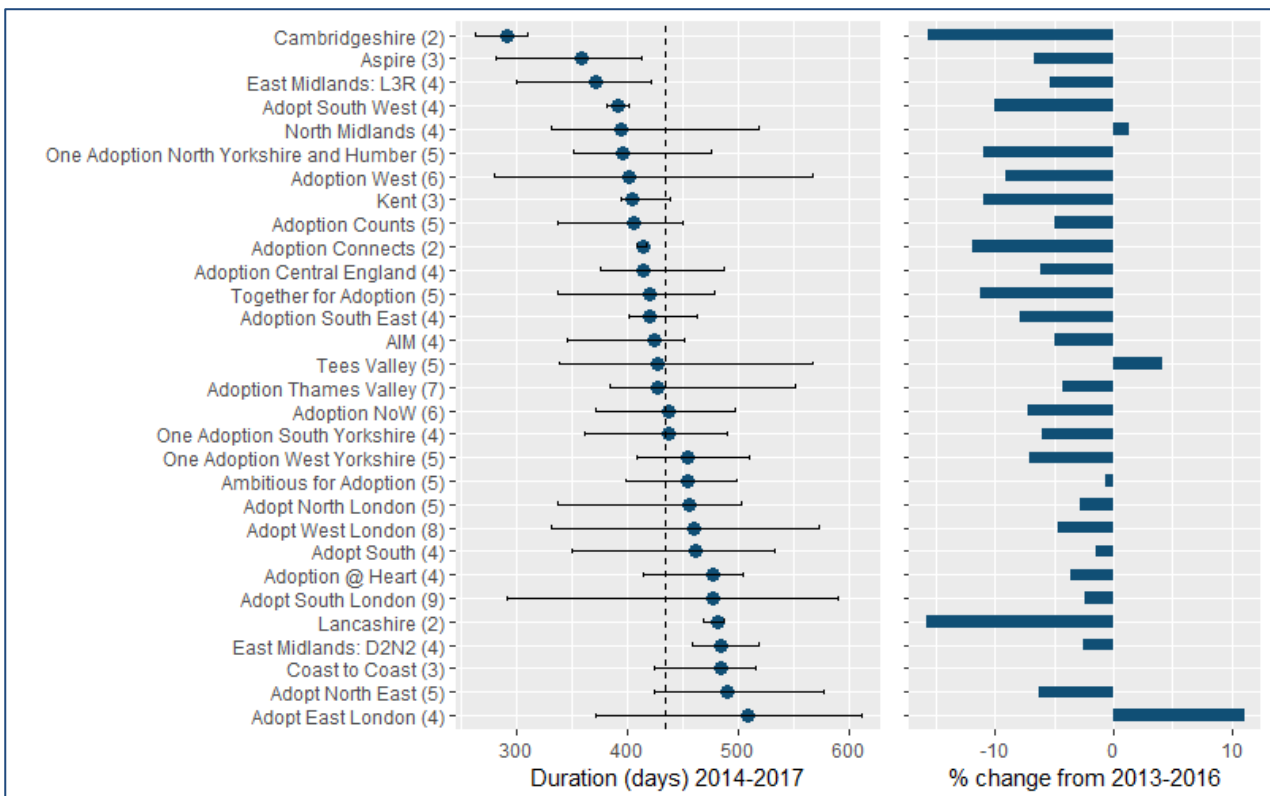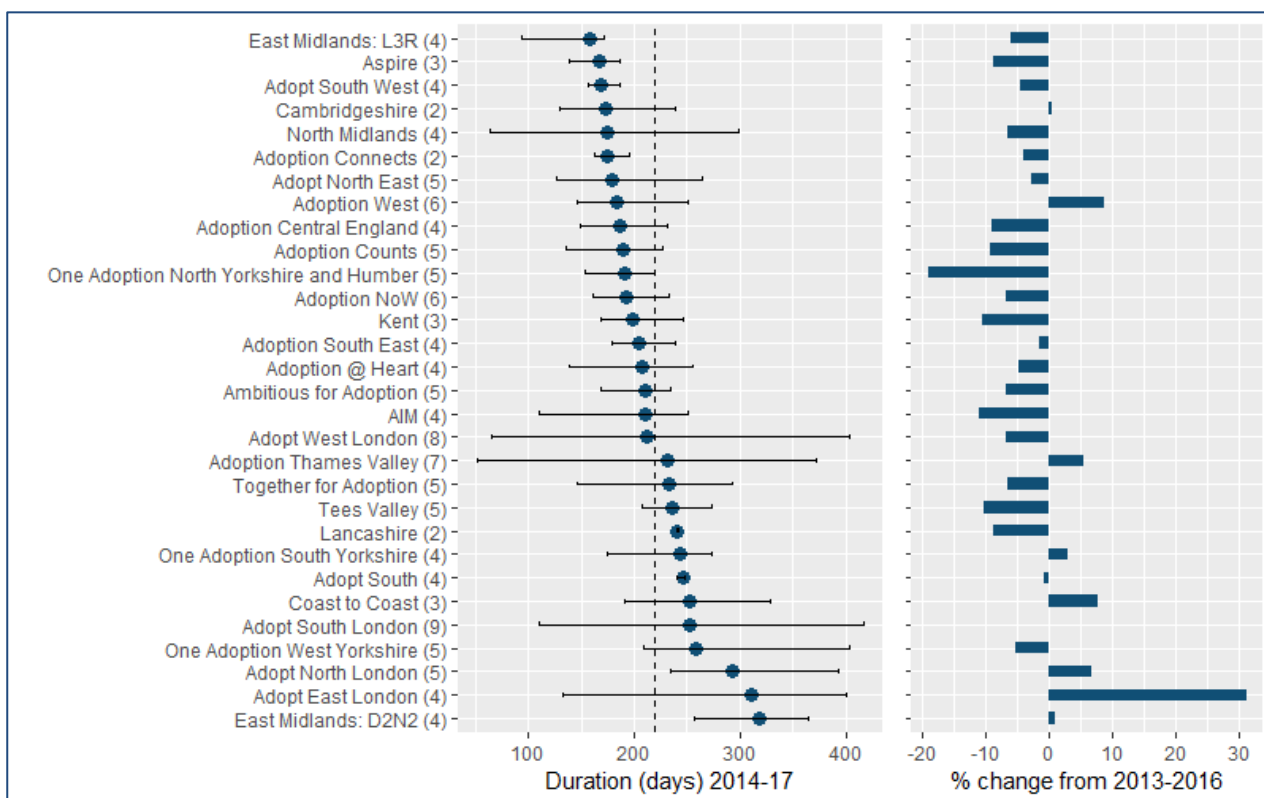

Note: parentheses next to each RAA name is the number of LAs the RAA covers.

Figure 2.3 (left panel) depicts the intermediate performance measure of the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family, for children who were adopted, by RAA. This shows a similar picture to Figure 2.2 and can be interpreted in the same way.

The right panel of Figure 2.3 details the percentage change in the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family, for children who were adopted between the 2014-17 and 2013-16 reporting periods. Most RAAs experienced a decrease in the average time. With the exception of Adopt East London, the RAAs that had a (slight) increase were different to those in Figure 2.2, indicating this increase was recovered at other stages in the adoption process.

Figure 2.3: Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (2014-17) and % change from 2013-16, by RAA

Note: parentheses next to each RAA name is the number of LAs the RAA covers.

Although not strictly considered within the pre-RAA period (i.e. some RAAs had gone live), analysis by DfE for 2017/18 highlights that the trend of a decreasing number of children being adopted and the shorter average timeliness of adoptions persists. In 2017, 4,370 children looked after were adopted and this decreased by 13% to 3,820 in 2018. The average time between a child entering care and being placed with a family, for

children who have been adopted, has reduced by 7 months since 2012-13, to 14 months in 2017-18.

In light of the trends exhibited in the pre-RAA (and more recent) periods, it will be important for future analysis to capture the additional impact of RAAs rather than the pre-existing trends (i.e. what would have likely occurred regardless of RAAs). Furthermore, the full impact of RAAs will take time to materialise in the data. For example, in the first-year of operation, the RAAs will be working with many cases that had begun the adoption process with LAs – this will likely affect outcomes such as timeliness of the adoption. To capture the impact, multiple quasi-experimental techniques (including time-series analysis) and triangulation with structured qualitative research are planned.

As more data becomes available and the impact of RAAs begins to materialise, comparing figures 2.2 and 2.3 to the same analysis for more recent years (and analysis of child-level data and triangulation with qualitative data) will provide powerful insight to the following key questions for the evaluation:

- Does the average timeliness increase or decrease as a result of forming an RAA?

- To what extent does the baseline position (in terms of timeliness) enable or inhibit improved performance?

- Within RAAs, how does their composition and the variation between LAs (in terms of performance and size) impact on performance? Specifically:

    o What is the scope for improvement for RAAs comprising fewer LAs / limited variation in performance?

    o Are RAAs comprising more LAs and/or exhibiting greater variation in timeliness at baseline able to reduce this variation?

    o What factors impact on the RAAs' ability to reduce this variation?

    o Do the practices/processes employed in the better performing LAs transfer to the LAs performing less well, thus, decreasing the average adoption process times for all children in those areas? (Is there potential for the underperforming LAs to negatively impact the better performing LAs?)

RAA Models

This section describes the different models that case study RAAs were implementing during the Wave 1 research. It provides an overview of the characteristics of the case study RAAs' models, and reflects on how these models fit within the overarching typologies that were developed during the inception and scoping phase of the evaluation. It then explores the changes that the six RAA case studies had made to their approaches and why and also considers how these RAAs worked within the wider adoption system.

Case study RAA models

As highlighted earlier, the sampling criteria was chosen to ensure our case study sample included RAAs from each of the four models identified in the inception and scoping report. These models, and their main characteristics are:

- **LA Hosted – centralised:** The majority of services and responsibilities are shifted from the LAs to the RAA. Staff are TUPE'd or seconded into the LA host, but typically expected to work in a mobile way across the RAA and maintain links with LAs they originated from.

- **Local Authority Trading Company (LATC) / Joint venture:** LAs set up a separate trading company, where each LA has a shared and equal responsibility for the RAA.

- **LA/VAA Hosted – hub and spoke**: Staff are TUPE'd or seconded into the LA host, where there is a centralised team (the hub) but also multiple teams in different offices.

- **Decentralised**: The majority of responsibilities, services and staff remain within the LA with a small pooling of resources for shared services.[21]

The case study RAAs' models had not changed significantly from the inception and scoping stage, and stakeholders agreed with how their models had been characterised. There were differences in how RAAs structured their services within these models, reflecting the observation in the inception and scoping report that the models can be seen as part of a spectrum of centralisation.

LA-Hosted Centralised

The case study RAAs that fell within the overarching LA Hosted Centralised model tended to span a relatively large geographic area. The rationale for having a centralised model was to support the development of a 'one' RAA identity. Stakeholders from one of these RAAs were concerned that a 'hub and spoke' model might lead to staff in the spokes feeling distanced from the hubs. The RAAs falling under this model varied in how they were arranged, particularly in relation to their **level of flexibility**. For example, one area had a centralised hub base, as well as mobile docking stations and software that allowed workers to access the systems from home. In contrast, another case study RAA

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[21] See for more detail: Evaluation of regional adoption agencies – inception and scoping report. Available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/756164/Evaluation_of_RAA_scoping_report.pdf.
The Department is in discussion with some of the decentralised models about the extent to which their model meets the policy expectations. For this reason and due to the timing of the case studies, this model was not represented in the case study sample.

aligned more closely to the model, in that there was one centralised hub that all staff worked out of, all of the time. However, this RAA did have 'outposts' in various locations across the geography, where families could access services.

LATC

One of the case study RAAs adopted the LATC model, which they chose partly because the LAs involved all liked the idea of taking a **partnership approach** in which there was **equal accountability**. The LATC was registered with Company House and is subject to VAA and Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) registrations, and Ofsted inspections as a VAA. The RAA had three hubs across the different LAs, offering all of the adoption services and was exploring additional foster care services. The hubs' footprints were largely coterminous with the LAs', but two of the LAs were represented in one hub. To prevent siloed working, managers were practice leads that worked across the LA areas.

LA/VAA Hosted - hub and spoke

Similar to the findings of the inception and scoping report, stakeholders from case study RAAs that fell under the 'hub and spoke' model agreed that **geographical area was the main driver** for how they arranged their services in that the spokes helped to cover a wider geographical area. Within these RAAs, there was typically a main 'hub' office, and several other 'spoke' offices elsewhere. While there was some variation between hub and spoke RAAs in terms of how their services were arranged, **the spokes typically offered the outward-facing services**, including adoption preparation and approval and adoption support services. Meanwhile, the **hub usually housed the back-office functions** and internal services including marketing, recruitment, panel administration, commissioning of services and finances.

However, even after going live, the case study research highlighted that there was still some fluidity in terms of how RAAs organised services between the hub and the spokes. For example, at the time of the wave one case study visit, one RAA was moving their family finding function from the spoke to the hub. The rationale for this was that it made more sense for the hub to know more about the child to facilitate the other activities done within the hub, such as the assessment and matching of the adopters.

Reflecting the notion that RAAs tend to fall on a spectrum of centralisation (rather than falling neatly into the models), one case study RAA had adopted what stakeholders coined as a 'locality' model. This RAA had two main 'base' offices in two locations, and a smaller 'satellite' office in a third location. While the RAA did not adopt the centralised model, because there were several offices that staff worked across, it also did not fall into the hub and spoke model because there was not a centralised 'hub' and all adoption services were offered across all offices.

Decentralised

None of the RAAs involved in the case study research so far had approaches that align with the 'decentralised' model in the typology. Future waves of research will explore how RAAs operate in a decentralised approach, and will consider how far this model fits within the typology.

Reflections on typology and stability

While it is too early to be definitive, the evidence from the wave one case study research would indicate that the typology is largely accurate as RAAs go 'live'. Within the differing structures of RAAs, some RAAs offered different services out of their hub and spoke offices, whereas others offered all services from all of their offices.

Within some of the case study RAAs, stakeholders mentioned the possibility that they might incorporate other LAs. Depending on the geography of the new LAs, this may change the structure of the RAA. For example, one RAA that sat under the 'hub and spoke' model might need to open another 'hub' if it incorporated two other LAs. Future years of the evaluation will explore this, where it has happened, and will identify how the incorporation of other local authorities in an RAA can impact on the chosen model.

Ongoing changes that RAAs were making to governance structures and processes

Governance

It was common for case study RAAs to have several layers of governance. At the highest level the RAAs had strategic management boards, typically comprised DCSs or ADCSs representing each LA, representatives from VAAs (even if VAAs were not formal delivery partners), representatives from health, the panel chair and, in some cases, representation from adopters. These boards typically discussed the 'bigger issues' and made strategic decisions regarding the direction of the RAA. The research highlighted that case study RAAs generally had not changed the structure of their strategic management boards. However, one LA-hosted RAA changed the chair to a stakeholder that was not from the host LA so that the LA did not dominate the RAA's leadership.

Several RAAs in the case study research had an operational management group or board, comprised of service directors and managers from each LA. These groups tended to focus on the more day-to-day issues, such as staff development or safeguarding. The case study research found that RAAs had not made significant changes to these groups or boards since the inception phase because they appeared to be functioning well.

Accountability

In the six case studies, typically the RAA (via the HoS) was accountable to the management board and LA partners. In LA Hosted models, the HoS was employed by

the host authority, but seconded into the RAA. If there was an operational management group or board, then this group was also accountable to the board. If not, the service managers were accountable to the HoS, regarding day-to-day matters.

There was some variation regarding whether - and when - the RAA took responsibility for the child, although this did not appear to be shaped by the model that the RAA took. Within most of the case study RAAs, the responsibility for the child remained with the children's social worker, with decisions made about placing the child being at the discretion of the LA.

> "As an LA we are absolutely clear that we are everything to do with the child. All the permanency lies with us. The RAA we are entrusting to recruit, family find, match and place. Only with our sign off and decision making." – *Head of Looked After Children services - Local Authority*

In another RAA, while the responsibility of the child remained with the children's social worker, the social worker was co-located with RAA staff in the RAA's hub office, so that the social worker had full oversight of the adoption journey. This provided a more integrated approach and ensured that LA staff were fully involved in the adoption process.

In one case study RAA, the responsibility for the child moved to the RAA at the point of the placement order, although there were differences between the different LAs involved in the RAA.

At this stage in the evaluation it is unclear if certain models are more likely to have a transfer of responsibility of the child from the LA to the RAA. Future stages of the research, including the annual interviews with non-case study RAA areas, will provide an opportunity to explore the rationale for any future developments, and the impact of these changes.

Commissioning processes

A key change that several of the case study RAAs had made – or intended to make - to their services related to how they commissioned both adoption support services as well as ad hoc services such as specialist recruitment or letterbox services. There was **no common approach** to the delivery of adoption support between the case study RAAs; some had created specialist teams, while another took a locality-based approach, with a more limited offer in each location. External agencies delivered most support in one RAA, while others (namely those that were more established) had a more comprehensive offer in-house.

The case study research found that after going live, some RAAs had reviewed their processes with the aim of commissioning higher quality services more efficiently. For example, one RAA with a hub and spoke model had built on one of its LAs' existing commissioning approaches to commission large pieces of work, such as staff training. Alongside that it also had a commissioning framework for specialist adoption support work, through which it ran mini-tendering competitions. Previously, adoption support workers would tend to go to a provider they might have worked with before. The new commissioning process ensured quality assurance, with the aim of ensuring that the quality of adoption support provision was consistent across the RAA, so that families experienced similar outcomes. For RAAs, this could lead to a more effective commissioning approach, with improved accessibility, quality and range of adoption support services. Chapter four of this report discusses the emerging evidence of the success of case study RAAs' commissioning approaches.

Links with wider adoption system

Working with VAAs

VAAs' involvement in the case study RAAs varied, ranging from being RAA partners, to providing specific services, to involvement on the strategic management board without providing services. There did not appear to be a clear relationship between an RAA's model and the extent they worked with VAAs. Rather, VAAs' involvement in the case study RAAs tended to be based on historical partnership-working with LAs. In some RAAs, the VAAs had worked with some of the LAs in the past but not others, meaning that some work was needed during the project set-up to establish these new relationships. In another RAA, a VAA had been commissioned to deliver the adoption support element. This VAA was commissioned because of their geographic proximity to the RAA but had limited experience working with the LAs involved. Again, in this case, a lot of work was needed during the project set-up phase to develop and strengthen these relationships. This is explored further in Chapter four.

During some of the case study interviews, some stakeholders indicated that RAAs' interactions with VAAs might still change in the future. From VAA representatives, there were suggestions of VAAs potentially forming regional strategic boards to solidify their role within the wider, changing adoption ecosystem. The reasons behind this are discussed later in Chapter four.

Special Guardianship Orders

There was evidence from the case study research of some RAAs incorporating – or considering to incorporate - SGOs into their remit. One RAA had incorporated both special guardianship assessments and special guardian support into their service, with the rationale being that it was important to keep it within one agency to provide a holistic approach to support permanence for children. Another RAA was considering

incorporating SGOs into their remit, because there was a preference amongst local courts for SGOs over adoption orders. Where SGOs were not part of the remit of the RAA, it was because RAAs felt that they did not fit with their model. For example, one stakeholder commented that *"[SGOs are] private law, non-agency work."*

Judiciary

At this point in the evaluation, across the RAA case studies, there were varied levels of engagement with the judiciary. A key aspect of working with the judiciary that several RAAs highlighted was that while regionalisation had occurred in the adoption sector, family courts were not co-terminus with RAAs, so often RAAs had to engage with, and navigate, multiple family courts. There was no clear relationship between how RAAs had worked with the judiciary and their model; instead, relationships were somewhat dictated by the extent of out-of-county adoptions that LAs had before regionalisation. For example, one RAA was working with three family courts in the area. While interviewees within this RAA highlighted that the different courts had varied views on the making of adoption orders, their working relationship had not changed too much. This was because before regionalisation, many of the LAs placed their children out-of-area, so were used to engaging with different court practices.

One RAA had sought to highlight good practice and establish stronger links with the judiciary by having the HoS sit on the Youth Justice Board. The RAA also held regular talks at the court, and had 'drop ins' for any interested parties that wanted to come (for example, families, staff and CAFCASS).

Several case study RAAs (especially those that had recently gone 'live') had not had much interaction with the judiciary. Stakeholders within these RAAs stated that working with the judiciary was something that they would focus on more in the near future.

Health

There was some emerging evidence to indicate that regionalisation had changed how adoption services interacted with health services. For example, in two areas, prior to regionalisation, medical advisors would usually be attached to a local authority and work in different ways. However, through RAAs, health trusts were required to work more regionally.

Conclusion

Analysis of the pre-RAA data shows substantial variation in the average timeliness from a child entering care to moving in with an adoptive family within and between RAAs, and particularly amongst larger RAAs (in terms of number of LAs covered). For the majority of LAs adoption timeliness was improving (based on three-year averages). Nationally, in the run up to RAAs going live the number of children adopted was in decline. As the

evaluation progresses, analysis will explore the extent to which the size and composition of RAAs is associated with changes in performance and the extent to which differences narrow over time.

The case study RAAs' models had not changed significantly from the inception stage. Variations in how RAAs structured their services were usually a result of geographic considerations and the ease with which staff could work out of different offices. Case study RAAs differed in their incorporation of SGO services into their RAA; currently one area had SGO services and others were considering including it. Several RAAs had made or intended to make changes to how they commissioned services to improve quality and efficiency. VAAs' involvement varied, ranging from being RAA partners, to providing specific services, to involvement on the strategic management board without providing services.

Chapter three - Baseline costs and efficiencies

Summary

- Case study RAAs interviewed had undertaken cost mapping exercises to develop budgets and agree LA financial contributions.
- Staff costs accounted for the majority of overall adoption service costs.
- Pre-RAA, LA adoption back office and overhead costs were typically subsumed under wider children's services budgets. Under the RAA model, these costs are more clearly accounted for and help reveal the 'true' cost of adoption services.
- Two types of financing models for case study RAAs had been adopted based on:
  - Historical LA adoption service spend.
  - Historical (and from this, forecasted) LA adoption service demand – i.e. activity-based.
- For most RAAs, budgets had been set with a view for the cost to LAs to be no more (accounting for inflation/pay rises) than what they had paid previously.
- RAAs reported it was too early to see cost-efficiencies yet but over time stakeholders thought improved performance (i.e. number of adoptions and the timeliness of different processes) could lead to some cost-efficiencies.
- In terms of economies of scale, it is anticipated that savings might be achievable around contracting and, where the RAA comprises smaller LAs, management and leadership costs.
- Challenges had included ensuring sufficient funding for all back-office functions, increased travel time and meeting varying expectations (from LAs and adopters) around post-adoption support.
- The key risks around costs centre on external factors, particularly demand: If the number of children being placed for adoption falls, cost-efficiencies (i.e. the cost per adoption) will be difficult to make. However, if demand increases too quickly/unexpectedly, RAA will struggle to keep within agreed budgets.

This section of the report presents interim findings around the costs associated with adoption prior to the formation of RAAs, the approaches adopted to finance RAAs, and consideration of efficiencies and challenges experienced to date. Evidence informing this section draws largely from consultations with finance leads and the interviews with other stakeholders (e.g. HoS) undertaken for the wider evaluation, rather than from the cost collection template.

The evaluation team developed a cost collection template in order to gather quantitative data on baseline (i.e. total spend on adoption prior to the RAA), and RAA finances. The template captures total annual adoption service costs and disaggregates by cost

categories (e.g. staff, training, premises and other overheads) to enable a comparative assessment of costs over time.

Encouragingly, two RAAs completed the template in time for this report and others were making good progress collecting the required information. Recognising that the costs data provided were forecasts (based on historical spend / adoption activity by LAs) rather than actual expenditure, RAAs had different baseline years (based on when they went live) and that the performance data required to develop a cost per adoption was not yet available, only headline baseline costs figures are provided in this report. Detailed quantitative analysis of costs will be provided in future reports when the following data becomes available:

- Adoption performance statistics for multiple years, pre- and post- RAA.

- Actual RAA spend (to sense check against forecast budgets).

- Follow-up consultations with RAAs to understand the costs per LA.[22]

The key early findings from consultations are detailed, by theme, in the following sub-sections.

Baseline (pre-RAA) adoption costs

All the case study RAAs consulted had undertaken a cost mapping exercise to understand how much each LA was spending annually on adoption services[23]. This enabled a baseline budget for the RAA to be calculated and informed decisions around each LA financial contribution to the RAA. The overall baseline budgets for the RAAs that provided costs data ranged from £2.4m for a relatively small-sized RAA (including SGOs at an approximate cost of £400k) to £2.7m for a mid-sized RAA (where SGOs were not covered)[24]. Staff cost accounted for the majority (75% to 90%) of baseline budgets.

The cost mapping undertaken by RAAs revealed the 'true' cost of adoption services (i.e. all costs, including those that were previously hidden, associated with operating an adoption service). Interviewees highlighted that there was variation between how LAs recorded and defined adoption service costs, in particular back office and overhead costs. Regarding the former, back office functions such as HR, accounting and legal advices were often subsumed in wider children's social care budgets due to these, typically, not being full-time adoption service posts. The total costs (across all LAs within

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[22] It was originally envisaged that this would be available in Section 251 returns. However, finance leads noted the variable quality/consistency with this data.
[23] The cost mapping exercises, at a high-level at least, were similar to our cost collection template format.
[24] Costs for large RAA will be included when data has been received and checked.

the RAA) associated with back office and overhead costs staff ranged from around £250k to £470k for the RAAs where cost data was provided.

Following the cost mapping exercise, some interviewees noted significant variation in the costs per adoption across LAs (one RAA highlighted up to £10k) and that this was explained by economies of scale / adoption demand (i.e. the cost in smaller LAs, where there are fewer adoptions, being higher than medium-large LAs). Furthermore, whether an LA was an exporter or importer of interagency placements influenced costs. The extent to which this applies to other RAAs will be explored in a consistent format when more data becomes available.

RAA approach to financing

Two main approaches to calculate the LA financial contributions to fund the newly forming RAA emerged:

- **Based on LA historical adoption service spend:** This approach provided a baseline budget for RAAs to deliver the adoption services within (after inflation) or aim to achieve (small) savings against.

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

Some RAAs had taken a two-stage approach to finance; in the first financial year of operations (and/or the transition year) LA financial contributions were based on historical adoption costs, but were moving towards an activity-based model in future years. This enabled the RAAs to focus on delivering a level of service that did not negatively impact children and adopters with budget contributions LAs were comfortable with, whilst the activity-based funding formulas were developed and fine-tuned.

RAA adoption costs

The case study RAAs reported that they had kept within budgets so far, which as mentioned previously were either in line with cumulative LA budgets prior to the RAA (adjusted for inflation and staff pay increases), or aiming to achieve a slight saving. However, some RAAs noted that there had been periods where they had had to rely on the good will of staff to meet higher than anticipated demand and/or busy periods.

As actual cost data becomes available, future evaluation reports will provide quantitative evidence around the running costs of RAAs.

Cost-efficiencies

Cost-efficiencies are defined as improvements (i.e. efficiencies) in processes that lead to potential cost-savings. RAAs stakeholders reported cost-efficiencies were anticipated but it was too early to say whether they had started to materialise. Stakeholders felt there could be potential future efficiencies linked to:

- Timelier matching/adoptions due to a greater pool of adopters and improved processes, which may lead to savings in foster care costs.
- Linked to the above, for some RAAs a reduced reliance on interagency placements and the costs/travel associated with this.

Economies of scale

Economies of scale are defined as cost savings resulting from pooling of resources. Again, stakeholders felt that it was too early for these to materialise. Interviewees anticipated these would occur over the longer-term but not all of the savings would be cashable. Potential economies of scale included:

- Savings on external contracts as suppliers now only had to deal with one organisation (rather than several LAs). Whilst this was not always the case (see challenges section) it is thought that over time as suppliers' systems/services evolve to reflect the new RAA structure, more savings might be possible.
- For RAAs comprising many small LAs, there may be economies of scale in terms of management and leadership costs.

Whilst economies of scale might have been expected around back office functions for adoption services (e.g., HR, accounting, and legal advice), RAAs reported that these roles were not always full-time adoption posts within the LA and were typically subsumed under wider children's social care budgets – these posts/functions still exist in the LA. Furthermore, overheads such as premises are a sunk cost within LAs.

Challenges and risks

As to be expected with a venture on the scale of regionalising adoption, interviewees highlighted several challenges experienced and potential risks related to financing. These can be grouped as followed and are discussed in turn:

- Additional/unanticipated costs.
- LA variation and expectations (i.e. internal factors).

- Changes to the adoption landscape (i.e. external factors).
- Making savings.

As longitudinal financial data becomes available, future evaluation reports will, as far as possible, seek to establish quantitatively the impact/extent of these challenges.

Additional and, sometimes, unanticipated costs noted by RAAs included accounting for the difficulties around the cost of back office and overheads, and increased staff travel costs.

Regarding back office and overhead costs, whilst RAAs took appropriate steps to ensure these were covered in their budgets, it was a challenge to calculate these due to the variation between LAs. Furthermore, although not the case for many RAAs, some back-office functions were thought to be underfunded, for example, marketing and legal advice. Increased staff travel time (due to the wider geographical coverage) had impacted on costs for some RAAs.

The variation in LA adoption service offers and their expectations of the RAA presented some challenges. Interviewees highlighted that prior to RAAs there was a mixed picture in terms of the use of interagency placements and post-adoption support (specifically, the Adoption Support Fund (ASF)). Generally, LAs reported being less reliant on interagency placements because of the greater matching pool resulting from the RAA. However, prior to the RAAs some LAs were net exporters of interagency placements and this was a substantial source of income to fund their adoption service. This presented a challenge in terms of forecasting budgets and agreeing LA contributions to the RAA. Similarly, LAs often had their own views on best practice around adoption support. Whilst the RAAs had worked hard to ensure best practice was carried forward, budget constraints meant that not all elements of support that individual (or groups of) LAs preferred could be funded – it could be difficult for the RAA to meet the expectations of all LAs.

External factors impacting on (or noted as a potential risk to) RAA costs included the expectations of adopters for post-adoption support, adoption demand and changes to national policy.

Interviewees noted that increasing awareness from adopters around post-adoption support available (see chapter five) had placed additional demand on some RAAs to provide this as funding, for this was developed on pre-RAA spend (when awareness was lower).

RAA budgets were developed using historical cost/activity trends and, in most cases, this had been able to meet demand. However, unexpected changes in to the adoption landscape could have a negative impact on costs. Examples were provided where the RAA had to rely on the good will of staff to meet higher than expected demand, adoption panels costs doubling due to the number of matches requiring approval, and, contrary to

other RAAs, higher than anticipated use of the interagency fee to find placements. The fixed nature of RAA budgets (i.e. annual budget agreed in advance and, potentially contrary to LA adoption services, unable to draw, financially or in-kind, on other children's social care services) may present difficulties in responding to unexpected sudden/unexpected changes to the adoption landscape. Furthermore, any dips in demand would create the appearance that the cost per adoption, on paper, is increasing.

Changes to the wider adoption environment in the lead-up and transition to RAAs had negative consequences on the assumptions built into some RAA budgets. For example, the increase in the interagency fee created a revenue stream to support adoption services for LAs with a surplus of potential adopters. In some cases, this revenue was built into RAA budgets. However, under the RAA model this surplus of adopters (within individual LAs) has often been used to meet in house (RAA) demand – rather than interagency placements (and the associated revenue) - and has thus impacted on the RAAs' financial assumptions.

Conclusion

It is too early in the formation of RAAs to capture the impact of the RAA model on adoption costs. The evaluation therefore focused on stakeholders' views of potential efficiency savings. Over the longer-term RAA stakeholders anticipated that cost-efficiencies could be possible. Some economies of scale are anticipated over the longer-term and relate to contracting and, for RAAs comprising many small LAs, savings around management and leadership costs.

RAAs highlighted several challenges and potential risks: additional/unanticipated costs; LA variation and expectations (i.e. internal factors); changes to the adoption landscape (i.e. external factors); and, the ability to make cashable savings.

Chapter four - Key findings – the early effects of RAAs

Summary

- Several case study RAAs were very much in the 'storming/norming' (i.e. building trust and developing a common goal) phase of development in autumn/winter 2018/19. It was still too early to judge the *extent* of the impact of the case study RAAs on the overall organisation and delivery of adoption services. However, our qualitative research found that in the more established RAAs (1 year + go live) many of the results identified in the programme ToC were observed to some degree.

Adopter recruitment

- There was a common perception within and across more established RAAs (1 year + go live) that RAAs had created a larger adopter pool for LAs within the RAA to access. The benefits had been greater for smaller unitary authorities.

- RAAs and VAAs shared concerns about the negative effect of a "hiatus" in recruitment activity during the transition period but expected this to be temporary.

- The broader adopter sufficiency challenge remained a key risk. There were examples of more recent reductions in the number of adopter approvals in case study RAAs.

The speed of matching with adopters

- In the case study RAAs that had been established the longest, interviewees commonly reported speedier and better matching with adopters. However, some felt it was too early to say.

Adoption support

- Commonly, interviewees cited that an emerging outcome for RAAs was improved adoption support. They had improved adopter training, reassessed approaches and improved (or were improving) commissioning arrangements to better meet families' specific needs.

- As a number of DfE funding streams were contributing to the delivery of adoption support in the case study areas, it was difficult to disentangle to what extent impact had resulted from regionalisation alone.

- Challenges included managing a backlog of historic adoption support cases, heavy demand and concerns regarding the future of ASF and other funds. Interviews with the more established RAAs indicated that they were starting to overcome the difficulties but capacity was stretched.

RAA links with other parts of the adoption system

- RAAs provided opportunities for stronger leadership and led to staffing changes.

- Commonly, RAAs were motivated to deliver a more consistent and cohesive focus on early permanence.

This chapter of the report focusses largely on the qualitative evidence of case study RAAs' progress against the main objectives of the policy. The regionalisation reforms[25] are intended to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services and create 25-30 regional agencies. It is hypothesised that larger organisations should be able to pool resources resulting in:

- Targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters.

- Speedier matching with a larger more diverse pool of adopters.

- An improved range of adoption support services and regulatory compliance.

Overall, the RAAs are expected to provide, in the longer term[26]:

- Better outcomes for children and adopters.

- Reduced practice and performance inconsistencies.

- More effective strategic management of the service delivering efficiency savings.

- A culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with the VAA sector.

Adopter recruitment

There was a common perception within and across more established case study RAAs that they had created a **larger adopter pool** by increasing the number of adopters and the ease of access for each LA in the RAA. However, there were concerns about maintaining a sufficient pool of adopters in the long term.

> "Well, the solution is that…almost immediately you've opened up a greater forum for adopters, so instead of looking in your authority, then looking on the national registers, almost immediately you have access and earlier..." - *M&C Lead*

Whilst quantitative data for all RAAs are not yet available, local Management Information (MI) showed that in the first six months after go live, one RAA had matched 78% of children with RAA adopters, which staff considered a success. Interviewees told of a high number of enquiries and a **favourable conversion rate** (1 in 7.6), compared to 1 in 10 before the RAA went live. In another example, the RAA had recruited double the number

[25] Department for Education (June 2015) Regionalising Adoption.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf
[26] http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16_Thurs_A.pdf

of adopters than the previous year as individual LAs (although this was partly due to a decrease in the number of placement orders in the year before they went live).

Marketing

Case study RAAs reported that the increased geographical footprint of RAAs in which LAs shared **dedicated marketing resources for adoption**, has so far led to an increase in **targeted marketing and recruitment** activities compared to LA activity before the RAAs were formed. These included the development of interactive and engaging RAA websites, (e.g. with support groups and a feedback facility), broadcast and social media, and advertising on local transport systems to broaden the RAA's reach. One RAA held "very well attended" information evenings, which led to lots of enquiries. Interviewees recalled a successful profile viewing evening, at which potential adopters were able to see a broader range of children in need of adoption than they would have previously. They highlighted the potential of larger events to increase the size of the adopter pool and the number of matches, including for harder to place children. However, the success of events like these was dependent upon RAAs having the staffing capacity to support them and to be sufficiently familiar with the children needing placement, which proved to be a challenge for RAA staff.

Working together and pooling resources

Prior to RAAs, some LAs already worked with neighbouring authorities and regional consortia to share knowledge of the pipeline of waiting children and identify potential matches. The transition to RAAs had provided an opportunity to **formalise existing links** at a **larger scale,** underpinned by **shared budgets**.

> "I think the other aspect of the collaborative working actually again, is the [NAME] Adoption Consortium, so in effect we were already pooling adopters, but across in that case X authorities." – *Panel representative*

The box below gives an example of how one RAA has pooled resources to increase their marketing activity and adopter numbers.

Example – pooling resources to increase marketing and adopter recruitment

"Because we've pooled the marketing budget, we can have some really big campaigns." – *HoS*

The RAA took part in a public arts event by sponsoring a sculpture on a city-wide arts trail to provide a new source of publicity. Because of this campaign and other marketing activities, managers of the 'spoke' offices were confident that they were getting higher numbers of enquiries from people completely new to the service. LA and VAA strategic leads reported that marketing at scale had led to a wider pool of adopters. In its first full year the RAA had recruited 85 adopters compared to 48 the previous year as brought forward by the individual LAs (although this was partly due to a decrease in the number of placement orders and a subsequent scaling back of recruitment in the years preceding the go live point). As a result, they felt they had now had a better choice of adoptive families compared with the previous pools of adopters.

To date, the benefits appeared to have been greater for smaller **unitary authorities**. There were examples where LAs had limited capacity to assess adopters before the move to RAA. Whilst benefitting greatly from the increased size of the adopter pool, LA staff in one case study RAA were now able to contribute to and learn from a recruitment-working group, which met regularly to discuss quality and standardisation.

Challenges to achieving adopter sufficiency

The inception and scoping report highlighted **concerns** about the negative effect of a "hiatus" in recruitment activity during the transition period to live RAA because staff were too involved with the structural changes that RAAs required. Case study RAAs and VAAs shared related concerns in autumn/winter 2018/19, but they expected any slowdown in recruitment activity to be temporary.

Of greater concern was the broader **adopter sufficiency challenge**, which many interviewees raised including staff in case study RAAs that talked about the benefits of creating a larger adopter pool and were apprehensive about, citing more recent **reductions** in the number of adopter approvals. This highlights the **risk** that the national adopter sufficiency challenges pose to the success of RAAs and the importance of monitoring enquiry and approval rates over time to inform their ongoing work. Chapter five discusses adopter sufficiency further in relation to the staffing and capacity challenges that RAAs experienced, which further compounded efforts to increase the size and diversity of the adopter pool when the initial demand was often higher than anticipated.

Furthermore, the interviews found a **mixed picture** regarding the **diversity** of the RAA adopter pools. Positively, Adoption Decision Makers (ADMs) and IROs, amongst others,

working with a number of RAAs talked encouragingly about having approved adopters in same sex couples, from different Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, and single carers and implied that their RAAs had a more diverse pool of adopters to explore matches with. In other examples, the qualitative evidence was less favourable. One HoS said that despite an increase in targeting marketing activity (e.g. local radio stations for BAME groups), the adopter pool remained predominantly white British. Other outstanding **gaps** included adoptive families for sibling groups or children with complex medical conditions.

> "It's [the pool of adopters] not where it needs to be." – *HoS*

However, the interviews suggest that there is scope for RAAs to **build momentum** to meet adopter recruitment objectives. In one case study RAA, the interviews found that the number of information meeting attendees at the end of quarter two was double the number for the first quarter. Interviewees reported a high (in their view) number of assessments in progress (49), which included people in single sex relationships (5), Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) (2), and potential adopters who were willing to consider early permanence such as fostering for adoption, however local MI did not show how well this compared to before the RAA.

There were calls from staff working within case study RAAs for more and better tracking to improve the success of recruitment activities and some of this work was ongoing. In one RAA, they had introduced a recruitment matrix to support family finding and matching and track each child's progress through the service (see chapter five on the management of the change process). Future case study research will explore the effectiveness of the different models in meeting the adopter recruitment objective of RAAs.

The speed of matching with adopters

Case study interviewees in RAAs that had been established the longest commonly reported speedier and better matching with adopters, although this was not a universally held view across or within RAAs. These RAAs were building the foundations for improving timeliness, if not yet able to quantify improvements.

> "How we are improving the number of matches and improving how quickly we are able to identify adopters is probably where we are starting to see some of those changes." - *Hub Operations Manager*

> "When I was a social worker in [LA] I had known about [RAA] but didn't know much about it and the experience was very similar to what it was with adoption before the RAA. [I] didn't notice any changes but did place in house with [RAA] adopters - it was a

fostering for adoption, [it] went at a quick pace, which was what the child needed and [I] was really impressed with how quickly [they] were able to do it." – *RAA social worker*

Larger pool of adopters

In part, the range of interviewees thought the speed of matching was the result of social workers having immediate access to a **larger pool of adopters**, evidencing one of the early results in the ToC that is expected to lead to the intended outcomes (as reported above).

Pooling of resources

Interviews with case study RAA and LA adoption teams reported that an important enabler to speedier matching had again been the **pooling of resources** to deliver joint training, share learning and deliver adoption services. There were accounts of **joint training** resulting in better and more timely reports, which helped to increase the speed of matching and reduce delays.

> "From an ADM perspective I've seen a real improvement in the consistency and the quality of the reports from the RAA, so when I started there was work in process…so I was seeing X LAs work coming together...what has been really impressive is that that [feedback] has been taken on board [e.g. more of an emphasis on safeguarding in adopter assessments] and [I] have absolutely seen evidence of that happening…" - *ADM*

Particularly for authorities that previously handled a smaller numbers of cases, the move from LA panels to RAA panels was considered a success and contributed to speedier matching. A Panel Chair said that the increased size, flexibility and frequency of **adoption panels** (now weekly compared to 1-2 monthly LA panels) helped to ensure that social workers got adopters to panel quicker and that the panels were full, which decreased waiting times.

Through sharing internal **activity days** with a local VAA, one case study RAA was able to match children more quickly.

> "Looking at matching our families with our children in [the] voluntary sector. We are looking at matching around 30% of children who went to them – it's been more successful than any matching we have done before." – *HoS*

Improved collaboration

Typically, the interviews suggest that case study RAAs had led to greater and improved **collaboration** (one of the early results in the ToC) both within the RAA and between RAA and LA staff, which had in turn resulted in speedier and better matching.

> "The choice of adopters, the speed of which we can place and I do think at [the RAA] there is more expertise there as wider pool of workers and [they are more] outward looking. [There is] increased knowledge and understanding, particularly for the more complex children. We're all rethinking what we should be doing and doing that more together now." – *LA social worker*

> "…It's also because our focus is adoption, rather than a multitude of other things. We also have the same drivers, want to meet the same outcomes and we're all really passionate about doing the job." - *HoS*

Earlier discussions about children's care plans had supported panel tracking as a consequence of becoming a RAA. An LA interviewee believed that they identified referrals to the RAA at the earliest opportunity, which gave staff as much time as possible to find suitable matches and helped to avoid delays. Interviewees across the different stakeholder groups pointed out that the RAAs encouraged greater cooperation to facilitate family finding. At the same time, managing relationships, particularly between RAA staff and LA social workers and between RAAs and VAAs, was an ongoing challenge and a risk to the success of RAAs (see chapter five).

In more established case study RAAs, staff benefitted from **cross-team learning** within the RAA because the structures and processes that had been put in place enabled them to work more closely together. For example, they used what they had learnt about overcoming children's problems from the adoption support team to support family finding and matching (e.g. thinking about whether to split up a sibling group if the evidence suggested that the children would thrive better in different families). From the point of view of staff, a further benefit of RAAs was that the RAA adoption support team was able to continue to assist adoptive families over time and offer a better and more consistent service (see Adoption support).

Both **specialist and locality team structures** set up as part of the transition to RAAs had helped to speed up the matching process, especially in areas where partnership working within and between teams and partners was strong.

> "It's enabled a more systematic methodical approach to the work. That is really helpful, particularly in one of the most sensitive areas of

childcare… Allowing busy social workers to concentrate on the core work at that end of the process and the family finding and the assessments elsewhere almost feels logical. As opposed to systems that can ask busy social workers to do all manner of things and not be commanding in any of them. The locus of control is more easily apportioned. Delivering us more adoptions and delivering us more placements." - *ADM*

Staff in one case study RAA, which operated a centralised model, said **co-location** and having **control** and oversight of the process were important (see example). In other models where the case responsibility stayed with the children's social worker, interviewees also cited the co-location/close location of teams as a facilitating factor. For example, hub-based social workers who worked from office bases near to LAs felt more able to share information with children's social workers quickly.

Example – co-location supporting collaboratively working to improve the speed and quality of matching

One RAA held transfer meetings at the point of placement order when they took case responsibility for children. They used these meetings to build on the LA's work to date in supporting Children in Care (CIC) reviews and the development of Personal Education Plans (PEPs).

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

The "early alerts" of children coming through helped to inform the work of the family finding team.

"It means we can hold off where special guardianship might work to avoid getting adopters' hopes up. It helps monitor LAC reviews and helps with planning and prioritizing the pipeline." – *RAA team manager*

Staff said that the process had become clearer and more efficient because the same social worker did the Adoption Placement Report (APR) and Annex A Report. Relationships with the judiciary had improved and the number of returned cases had become negligible, helping to avoid delays. Having a clear point of contact and line of responsibility had helped to speed up the matching process.

"When a decision has been made that adoption is the right plan for a child, there is early and effective liaison between the social workers and the adoption agency…The local authority has reduced the time that children wait to be placed with adopters from the granting of a placement order. However, a small number of children continue to experience delays until they move to live with their permanent family." – Ofsted report

Lack of evidence on speedier matching

In one case study area, RAA team managers said that, despite a lack of capacity, timeliness had been good in the first 12 months of operation, when they would have expected a dip whilst managing the transition to the RAA. This and other RAAs made **early placements quickly** with a backlog of cases and a larger adopter pool to choose from. They reported matches for children who

had been waiting a long time. Although it is worth noting that after the initial flurry of activity, which was a struggle capacity wise, staff in two RAAs then observed a "**levelling off**" of demand. They noted the wider context and said that the monthly peaks and troughs had to be worked through alongside and the ongoing adopter sufficiency challenge (see adopter recruitment and chapter four), which all case study RAAs identified as a key risk.

Within case study RAAs, there were however **mixed views** regarding how much quicker the matching process had so far become and whether there was yet sufficient evidence to confirm that RAAs led to speedier and better matches.

> "I don't think we're far enough in yet to say whether this is having an impact on how long children are in the system… I think anecdotally we are beginning to see that but the figures are not backing that up at the moment." - *ADCS*

Interviewees talked positively about individual cases where they had placed sibling groups and older children, but there was **limited evidence** to suggest that the process had become quicker for the majority of children who were **harder to place**.

In several case studies, LA interviewees felt unable to comment and inferred that RAAs had not yet brought improvements in terms of speedier or better matching. They remarked that performance was as good as it had been when adoption services were part of LAs, which will be examined quantitatively in future reports.

At this point, it is too early to judge which RAA models are most effective at achieving speedier and better matches. An assessment will be included in our next annual report in 2020, drawing on the longitudinal impact data and the second wave of the case study research.

Adoption support

Where interviewees were able to identify **outcomes** arising from the move to becoming an RAA, they **frequently cited improved adoption support**, and more established case study RAAs particularly highlighted examples at both pre- and post-adoption order stage. In this section, a broad definition of support has been taken and examples included of improvements to preparation groups.

Interviewees across the research expressed a number of ways in which they thought adoption support had improved since going live as an RAA. This was achieved through enhanced marketing and increased take-up of a wider range of better in-house and commissioned services. The interviews suggest that adoption support had begun to

improve through improved training for adopters, the development of enhanced peer support, better access to multi-agency support (see wider adoption ecosystem), and dedicated admin support. Interviewees also considered pooled budgets, improved staff training, collaboration and shared learning to be supporting factors.

> "[Improved support] wouldn't be happening if we didn't have a regional adoption agency, and family adopters have said that has made a real difference to adoptions continuing." – *ADCS*

There were, however, a number of funding streams contributing to the delivery of adoption support in the case study areas. This makes it difficult to disentangle to what extent early outcomes have resulted from RAAs alone. It is also important to emphasise that achieving improvements to adoption support was not always without **challenge**. Requests for adoption support were high across the case study areas, in part because adopters became more aware of the ASF, and requested an assessment of need. Some case study areas also saw LAs bringing a backlog of support cases into the RAAs. The timing of this report falls whilst surveys with adopters were ongoing, which means their views and experiences of adoption support from RAAs will be included in the next report.

Improved training for adopters

The interviews found that the drive across the case studies to improve adoption support manifested in a focus on improvements across the **whole adoption journey**. Case study RAAs generally began developing a more comprehensive package of **adopter training** as an important first step in improving adoption outcomes. Practitioners in one case study said they had not only increased access to training courses, but were also supporting families to use their training through peer groups and other avenues.

> "Training had completely fallen off the wall for [LA pre-RAAs]; we had no training at all". - *Practitioner*

Another RAA had developed a four-day preparation course for adopters, which it ran in partnership with a VAA. They had moved to a longer four-day prep course at stage one to give prospective adopters more knowledge and reduce drop out at a later stage. Adoption social workers and support workers felt this had improved the quality of the preparation courses, and as such, "it helps [adopters] to make more informed decisions". Adopter feedback had reportedly been very positive and adopters found the courses welcoming.

Reviewing approaches to support

A number of the case study interviewees remarked that the move to RAAs had provided the **impetus to reassess** approaches to adoption support, yet it was not clear whether the structural changes that RAAs have required were the sole contributing factor here.

"There were lots of things we had the opportunity to look at differently" – *HoS*

The case study RAAs had **reviewed processes for commissioned support** as described in chapter two. This happened regardless of the model or the length of time they had been live, or indeed the amount of support, which they commissioned out to external agencies. The review process enabled RAAs to consider where gaps existed in provision and develop a more complete offer.

> "This afternoon we have a workshop, facilitated by external consultants that is going to be looking at our commissioned services and where we're going to go in the future…. So, we've done some work about need and feedback and activity levels against budgets and all that sort of thing…" – *HoS*

In re-assessing their adoption support services, RAAs generally tried to identify and address gaps. For example, family workers in one RAA focussed on **life-story work** because they felt their service had neglected this before they developed the RAA due to a lack of capacity.

> "That was a big improvement as that [life-story work] was done by the child's social workers previously; they would have struggled to do that alongside other pieces of work. That's a very significant improvement for children." - *LA LAC Operations Manager*

> "Now we have a child-friendly model, [the Life Story book] starts with where the child is now with the adoptive family, then birth family, then back to end with the child in their new family…it's not just ticking boxes, it is thinking about what will help the child and family over the years." - *HoS*

Developing in-house provision

The move to RAAs provided LAs with the opportunity to create a broader range of universal and specialist **'in-house' adoption support** packages as this report goes on to explain. Echoing the importance of having adoption-focused teams working more closely together, one case study RAA had held learning workshops called 'time to share', where case discussions were encouraged. They expressed the "need to bring managers together" through a peer management support group and restorative learning models. This type of activity supported staff development and helped develop **a greater range of interventions**, including a more appropriate range of support (including online support, for example around therapeutic parenting) in-house.

In some cases, RAAs were developing early intervention approaches to prevent crisis, particularly for challenging older children. One case study RAA was developing a duty triage system alongside the development of therapeutic interventions including Theraplay and sensory assessments. In a similar way as the **pooled RAA budget** helped to improve adopter recruitment, it also helped to increase the support offered to adoptive families. Interviewees expressed that RAAs had expanded what was available to

adopters and families, particularly if they were able or willing to travel within the RAA's footprint. One manager gave the example of a family support day.

> "For families to come together to actually enjoy themselves… there were loads there, they were having an amazing day out at a super fun arts centre. And none of us [LAs] could have afforded it on our own." - *Adoption Support Manager*

As RAAs have brought staff together to draw on the best components of support provided in each LA area through things like whole-team adoption support meetings, interviewees perceived the **quality of support** to have improved, enabling staff to be more adaptive and responsive.

> "We are now seeing people being matched with the level of support that they are being offered… Also still receiving the communication about training available for adopters. That comes back to that there is a bigger resource not through financial terms but that everyone is together and can plan. What would've been available to me as an adopter in [particular LA], I am now also seeing what would have been available to the [other LAs] adopters too". - *Panel Chair*

Moving to an RAA had offered teams a chance to develop **knowledge and specialisms**, providing another opportunity to improve the quality and range of adoption support services; a result identified in the ToC. Staff in a number of RAAs had been able to access **training**, such as the Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) training, explored in more detail in the example below. One RAA felt that this offered an opportunity to bring a wider range of services in-house, and provided an opportunity to improve staff satisfaction, as staff wanted to deliver support services. Interviewees in one RAA said they were now also more able to make use of pre-existing skills previously under-utilised, primarily due to a lack of capacity in a smaller team.

> **Good practice example: Upskilling staff to provide adoption support**
>
> One case study area had trained RAA staff to provide Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) informed practice in-house. DDP is a therapy designed to treat complex trauma and attachment related difficulties and a framework for helping children through the parenting and support they receive.
>
> There is an ambitious project plan that underpins this work and the RAA aims to achieve its DDP certification within 2 years. The plan has ensured that administrative staff had also received training to ensure that a therapeutic approach began at first contact or phone call with a family.
>
> Practitioners found the training useful, and interviewees said that upskilling staff was a positive outcome of their RAA model. They had also developed training around DDP therapeutic parenting and started to bring the DDP approach into their supervision and meetings.
>
> The RAA had commissioned consultation from a Clinical Psychologist/ DDP Consultant whose role was to help embed the principles within the team's practice.

Barriers to improving adoption support

It was acknowledged that providing **adoption support was a challenging task** for staff, due to the emotional challenges of supporting families. Consequently, linking practitioners up in focused teams was beneficial for **morale**, as team members were able to support each other and reduce feelings of isolation.

> "It's a tough job adoption support - for workers. It's an emotionally draining job to stay there working in families where there isn't quick change. For us to keep those skilled staff in those posts, they need to work in an organisation that truly understands and values what it is. I think the good thing of coming together is that sharing of that isolation around this work." – *HoS*

In the more established RAAs, a further outcome highlighted by the research was that staff believed families experienced more **consistency in the range and quality of the support offer and the ease of access**. The ability to place more children within the RAA had been an enabling factor here; practitioners interviewed identified that RAAs could continue to support adopters throughout in a way that they would have struggled to when placing children out of area. However, one newer RAA explained that consistency took time to achieve, and that streamlining ways of working could be challenging, as discussed further in chapter five.

Furthermore, adoption support teams described **heavy demand** from adopters for their services; this was particularly an issue when RAAs were transitioning to live services and

moving away from their former local authorities, and when often there was a backlog of demand for adoption support. This was in part a result of the improved marketing of support (by RAAs and national marketing of ASF) as well as an associated increase in awareness of the RAA support offer.

> "What we have is a cohort of families who should have received support months ago, and I find that mortifying, as does everyone else." - *Adoption Support Manager*

> "I think that the model is better [than before the RAA] but the backlog has meant that there have been some changes for families, which has been challenging." - *HoS*

However, staff at some of the more established case study RAAs highlighted that demand for adoption support had **levelled out** and had become less crisis-focused over time.

Some interviewees attributed the high levels of demand for support to wider promotion of the ASF, prompting more adoptive families to come forward to access support. The ASF, alongside other DfE funding for adoption support such as Centre of Excellence grants, and the Performance Improvement Fund (PIF) had provided opportunities to buy in specialist support (e.g. clinical psychologists) to develop innovative in-house support provision, and had extended what the case study RAAs were able to offer families. However, funding for adoption support was also a source of some concern for interviewees across the case study RAAs. They were worried about the future of the Fund beyond the current spending review period (March 2020) and the impact the closure of it (and other additional funds) on the provision of support to families, despite the Government's announcement of additional funding for the ASF[27]. Managers were considering the sustainability of services, and in-part attributed the drive to upskill staff to addressing that potential gap, as well as being a benefit in its own right. They were concerned that they would not have the capacity to sustain the same level of support and expressed a need to manage family expectations as to what happens when the additional funds end.

> "It is anxiety provoking because we are going to have to be ready to in theory bring that back into service. If you think about the number of therapy hours that we are buying from psychologists and play therapists. Do we have the people available to do that kind of work? There is a big difference between being a play therapist and being a DDP level 1 or 2. You know, it takes a massive amount of time to sit with people and do that work." - *RAA social worker*.

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[27] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-more-families-to-benefit-from-the-adoption-support-fund

A number of case study RAAs had implemented new systems and services for families to address issues around capacity and managing down backlog and high demand, while still offering what they viewed as good quality provision. A common approach had been to develop processes for **triaging support requests** more efficiently and in a timelier manner, such as setting up a front door or duty team to take all initial enquiries. Another common approach was the development of a **broader universal support offer.** Consultation with adopters at one newer RAA highlighted that there was demand for **peer support** both pre- and post-adoption and they expected that the move to a wider operational footprint would allow them to offer a more comprehensive peer network. Adopter-led support also helped to address resourcing challenges whilst meeting the needs of families.

Interviews with the more established RAAs indicated that they were starting to overcome the challenges related to delivery of adoption support in a regionalised footprint over time. In these cases, managers and staff felt that they now had an improved offer of adoption support available to families as an RAA, but the extent to which adopters would agree is not yet known.

RAA links with other parts of the adoption system

This section examines links between case study RAAs and other parts of the adoption system and start by summarising interviewee's views on what they considered to be the broad benefits of new ways of working.

Positively, the case study interviews suggested RAAs had taken steps to make the wider adoption system **more child centred, address gaps** and **galvanised wider partnership working** with the child's best interests at heart. There was also qualitative evidence to suggest that RAAs provided an opportunity to develop **strong leaders** and **were helping with planning for early permanency pathways**.

More child focussed

The impetus RAAs have brought for LAs to come together and enhance ways of working has led to general improvements that some argued had resulted in a **better understanding of children's needs** and an "increasingly child focused" service. Interviewees in multiple RAAs referred to their approach shifting to put the child at the centre of provision, and developing more "child-friendly models" of practice. For some, this was linked to work with birth parents to **address gaps** they felt existed prior to the formation of RAAs. An example of this included one case study RAA's revised approach to **life story** books, which had been redeveloped to better mirror the child's journey and support them with the move to the adoptive family but also to support better engagement of birth families.

Improving links with birth families

There were other examples of improvements to work with **birth families**. One case study RAA had appointed a Birth Relative Support Worker to focus on revising processes around letter box contact and meetings with adopters. Interviewees highlighted that this had been beneficial for both birth parents and adopters, who were both better prepared, supported and reassured for these meetings. One RAA focussed on 'modernising' their approach, reassessing their stance on risk around contact, and introducing more regular contact through anonymised emails and access to photographs. While there was evidence of innovative practice emerging in some RAAs, practitioners in a number of RAAs expressed concern about this part of adoption work.

> "Birth parents don't have anywhere to 'drop in' to talk to someone about things now… [now they] have to navigate a new organisation." – *RAA Team Manager*

Wider partnership working

Positively, interviewees in several case study RAAs highlighted that alongside putting more of a focus on adoption, RAAs required them to work more closely towards a **shared goal** with partners outside the RAA**,** which was in itself a facilitating factor for wider partnership working. RAAs brought adoption staff closer together and they were working on a larger scale.

> "We are collaborating together as barristers, solicitors, social workers, the RAA, and managers just to provide a seamless protocol because there is so much confusion as every authority does it differently. We are trying to amalgamate it together to form consistency. That's something we are working on all together" - *LA Team Manager*

One case study RAA had specifically focused on developing connections between the RAA and external stakeholders and interviewees considered this to be a defining feature of their model (see example). In this case, the joint development of multi-disciplinary support panels with a VAA served to strengthen the partnership, and joint work with the Judiciary helped to reduce the number of adoption orders returned because of inaccuracies, but there was a sense that more could be done with additional resources.

Example: working collaboratively to support adoptive families

One RAA had commissioned the support of a Virtual School Head (working with a dedicated education team within the RAA 0.8 FTE), as well as clinical psychologists (0.4 FTE) who worked together with schools, staff and families in order to prevent mental health needs and education becoming a factor in adoption breakdown; one interviewee noted that there had been three cases of breakdown centring on education in the previous year.

The approach aimed to install an education support package as soon as they placed a child, which all stakeholders agreed to. The psychologist accompanied practitioners to visit the school in order to emphasise the importance of the support and secure buy-in.

The psychologist offered support directly to parents and the RAA. Interviewees explained that the psychologist was "a source of advice, someone to consult when needed". Interviewees also attributed this role of sounding board and source of specialist knowledge to the VSH, perceived to be particularly useful in complex cases involving older children or siblings.

"They help social workers to feel more confident in passing information back to school... it's really positive for adoption support for more complex cases, and their involvement in support plans for siblings for example has been tremendous." – *ADM*

A range of interviewees explained that the inclusion of these specialist roles within the RAA model has been beneficial for adoptive families, children and practitioners alike, particularly when struggling to manage heavy and complex workloads. It was seen to facilitate early intervention in adoption support; helping practitioners "when they know families are likely to struggle a lot because they can put support in place before crisis point." Furthermore, a staff member highlighted that "it makes practical sense" to offer a package of educational support in order to avoid the high costs related to bringing a child back into care after adoption breakdown.

As previous chapters of this report have demonstrated, the level of collaborative working with other agencies – namely VAAs and the judiciary – varied between the RAAs. Where relationships were well developed, the views were largely positive but particularly for newer case study RAAs at the start of their journey, wider collaboration was a work in progress. The transition to RAAs had caused some challenges for working with the wider adoption system. Regionalisation introduced the need for a **new partnership between LA staff and RAA staff**. There had been more challenges for RAAs where the case responsibility for the child remained within the LA, which had slowed progress. In particular, across a number of RAAs there were tensions between RAA and LA teams, relating to misunderstandings about practice and process (due to lacking knowledge and experience in adoption), a lack of robust data sharing and a lack of full oversight in the care planning process. Moving adoption staff from LAs to a RAA had left LA social workers less aware of the policies and processes in the RAA.

> "The family finder is never going to know the child as well as the social worker and if they do not liaise very closely there is a danger that some of the knowledge that the child's social worker has will be missed by the family finder, especially when they are not in the same office." – *LAC Team Manager*

The case study research also found that regionalisation had **introduced challenges for VAAs**. Although some VAAs delivered services through the RAA, others had just been involved as RAA board members. In the latter arrangement, VAA stakeholders had voiced their concern about how it was limiting their involvement in the new adoption landscape, a concern raised in the inception and scoping report.

> "Part of the original spec of the RAAs was to work jointly with the VAAs. I have a feeling that it is not as high on people's agenda as it was…" – *VAA stakeholder*

A small number of VAAs that were involved in the case study research highlighted how the move to RAAs had caused uncertainty about their future, because the nature of contracts had changed; as RAAs were starting to take shape they were often only tendering for short pieces of work. This meant that VAAs were finding it difficult to plan their future business activities. To overcome this issue, VAAs in one area were developing a VAA alliance so they could try to understand where they fit in the new adoption landscape. This uncertainty was a risk to the longer-term success of RAAs in relation to the outcome of a culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with VAAs and Adoption Support Agencies to be explored further in future research.

Case study RAAs operating over a vast geography found it difficult to complete timely assessments **with health partners**. For example, one interviewee highlighted that the medical advisers worked with individual LAs, rather than the RAA, and the medical advisers had different processes and pressures from their own LAs. Other RAA Panel chairs highlighted that in moving from chairing panels in one LA (where there was one medical adviser), to panels in an RAA (where there were several medical advisors), there was much less consistency in the quality of medical reports. This meant that they had to follow up with medical advisers for details, which **slowed down** the adoption process.

Raising the profile of adoption

There was a common view that the move to RAAs had been instrumental in **putting adoption on both the local and national agenda** through the structural change that was required, and the associated increased number of meetings and conferences, which focussed on adoption. Stakeholders' aspiration was that the more specialised services provided by the RAAs would make adoption a priority service.

"There have been a lot more conversations and people meeting nationally, networking and talking about adoption, that can only be a benefit for people learning from one another, sharing ideas and that kind of thing." – *Consortium Coordinator*

New leadership tier and adoption teams

Several interviewees pointed to the creation of a new tier of managers in adoption services which they felt enabled senior leaders to keep in touch at a strategic level. This was because RAAs created fewer HoSs, which gave them a wider view of the adoption landscape. Interviewees across the case study RAAs generally thought leadership was working well, yet there were some related barriers to overcome as we discuss in chapter five. **Stronger leadership** is one result in the ToC that could support the achievement of the intended outcomes.

The move to regional teams has tended to bring some **staffing changes**; some staff left or retired during the transition process, and others took on more specialised and focused roles within the RAA teams. One interviewee flagged that in the locality, adoption practice had become quite 'stale', with a workforce who had been in place for many years.

"[Workers move into the teams] at maybe 35 but then they would still be there at 65. So, adoption work would become quite cosy…" *RAA Practitioner*

In another RAA, one interviewee commented that while they had lost some staff during the transition to go live, this meant that they now had a more committed workforce who actively wanted to be there. Furthermore, as reported elsewhere in this report, there were examples demonstrating a positive impact on staff skills, knowledge and confidence by working closely with other adoption specialists (rather than in a general safeguarding team), and staff reported increased access to training.

Developing permanency pathways

Interviewees also noted that the regionalisation agenda had enabled RAAs to work in partnership together; for example, in one area they were starting to think about what RAAs across the wider region could do together around concurrent planning. As discussed earlier, a small number of case study RAAs had taken steps to widen their service offer, for example by taking on responsibility for **SGOs**. Whilst the decision to take on SGO assessment and support was "initially contentious", interviewees described a significant improvement to the service with better quality assessments and support arising from *"a place to think things through more consistently".* It has also allowed the RAA to look at putting preparation training and support in place for these families who might have experienced additional challenges regarding family issues and finances.

It is interesting to note the link highlighted by interviewees between RAAs taking on SGOs and a **more consistent and cohesive focus on early permanence**, which was a

common drive across the RAAs. The case study research found some evidence of RAAs having a positive effect on early permanence; social workers in one RAA stated that the RAA has improved organisational attitudes towards children fostering for adoption, with a number of placements made. In another RAA, team managers referenced improvements to processes for linking foster carers with adopters approved for early permanence. They developed this new protocol to ensure all partners understood the risks.

Conclusion

There was some early evidence from the case studies that the move to RAAs has had a positive impact on a number of areas of practice. In the more established RAAs the pooling of budgets and resources, improved collaboration and increased knowledge and expertise, and access to a wider pool of adopters, had all contributed to outcomes flagged in the ToC including speedier and better matching and improved adoption support. However, it was difficult to disentangle to what extent improvements in adoption support were attributable to the RAAs due to other DfE funding streams contributing to improved practice in that area. For a number of the case studies, interviewees felt that it was too early in the process to observe impacts arising from regionalisation, and it was also too early to draw links between RAA models and impacts. This is because the visits took place at an early stage for two RAAs, RAAs launched in the context of other changes (e.g. local government reorganisation) and we are awaiting the quantitative data and feedback from adopters to assess impact. It is therefore too early to make a judgement on the *extent* to which case study RAAs have changed the organisation and delivery of adoption services for the better.

Chapter five - Early findings – factors affecting progress

Summary

Context

- The RAA programme is being implemented as a rolling programme with variations in RAAs' starting points (including whether starting with stronger or weaker performance, history of partnership working and caseload), and their geographies, models and structures.
- A history of partnership working amongst RAA LAs was a strong enabling factor to operational progress.
- Many case study RAAs were dealing with a backlog of cases and working through capacity issues, due to delays and losses in staff at the transition stage. Other key challenges were marrying up IT systems and having the capacity to deliver alongside a national shortage of adopters. Delays to RAA start dates and ongoing staff vacancies compounded these issues.

Leadership

- Leadership had been a key influencing factor for RAAs' progress. Strong leadership was needed at different layers of management, from the strategic board level right through to team managers. RAAs struggled when they experienced instability in leadership.

Culture Change

- The transition to RAAs initiated a significant culture change for staff. Often staff struggled with the rationale for moving to regionalisation, so it was important that leaders and managers ensured that all members of staff understood the vision (for example by involving them in work stream development, or having an induction programme). Securing staff buy-in to the case study RAAs was a long but important process, which helped staff to take ownership of the RAA and over time feel part of the RAA identity.

This chapter explores factors affecting the operational progress of RAAs and interviewees' perceptions on how effectively RAAs had managed the change process. Its key messages are summarised and learning shared about what has worked and ways to overcome challenges. Some of the points raised are not particularly innovative, but the case study research found that they were very important, and the development of RAAs suffered when these aspects were not in place. The section is structured under three themes that the case study research found were important: local context; leadership; and the management of culture change.

Context

In this section we explore the influence of RAA's local context, looking in particular at their different starting points, geographies, models and systems. There are learning points at end of each sub-section.

Starting point

As outlined in chapter two, some RAAs included LAs that had varying levels of performance prior to the forming of the RAA. This meant that some staff members from the higher performing LAs were concerned about how partnering with poorer performing LAs would impact on them. There were ongoing worries about LAs bringing backlogs of adoption cases and over-using the RAA adopter pool.

However, the wave one research suggests that collaborating with poorer performing LAs did not always inhibit progress. There were examples where it made others LAs more determined to **maintain** their **performance,** pay **increased attention to detail** and **share best practice**, with some emerging successes**.**

> "There was such a drive for quality – two were judged as 'good', and two were judged as 'requires improvement'. That imposed a certain amount of either need for rigour in the process. Because the two that were good were determined not to let it slip." – *Operations manager*

A **history of partnership working** amongst LAs who were part of the case study RAAs was a strong enabling factor to operational progress, because they were able to build on established relationships and levels of mutual understanding. For example, in one case study RAA, four of the LAs' adoption services had previously worked together to pool resources around training, awareness-raising days, marketing and branding. In doing so, they had already established relationships and many of the LAs in the RAA had a shared vision of how it might work, which helped to speed up the development.

A challenge for several RAAs had been managing a **backlog of inherited cases from LAs** as reported in chapter four, which was compounded by the spike in demand for services as the RAA launched.

Geography

There was evidence from the case study RAAs to suggest that having a **larger geography had inhibited progress**, mainly because it usually required several office bases, which could be more challenging to manage. It brought practical challenges including increased travel time for staff, and difficulties reaching adopters through open-day/engagement events. The example below demonstrates how one RAA had overcome

the challenge of recruiting adopters over a large geographical area with social media. This mainly affected the hub and spoke models.

Example – reaching people across a large geographic area

One RAA was comprised of six LAs, which spanned across a very large geographic area. Staff had voiced their concerns about the size of the RAA, because they struggled to reach all of the potential adopters through their adopter recruitment events.

"I just don't have the capacity to set up events across to reach everybody, so it's tailoring it to that size I think and meeting everybody's demands." - Marketing and communications lead

To overcome this issue, the RAA changed its marketing approach, utilising more electronic resources and using social media campaigns. The RAA merged the LAs' social media accounts into the RAA format, so that potential adopters who visited their LA's social media account would know about the RAA. Future waves of evaluation research will aim to capture the impact of this activity.

Model and systems

Case study RAAs' overarching **model tended to be an enabler**, rather than an inhibitor of progress, because RAA partners chose their model based on factors like their size, geography, extent of partnership working and prior performance. Therefore, at the point of the wave 1 research, it appeared that the models chosen by RAAs were appropriate, although some still early on in delivery.

A key challenge for all had been **marrying up IT systems** to ensure that all staff, regardless of location, could access care planning systems. Case study RAAs also reported considerable difficulties with merging different LAs' data, because LAs often had different ways of storing, recording and naming their data. There was also considerable uncertainty amongst LA staff in relation to data sharing agreements. These issues **inhibited their ability to share data**, necessitated work-arounds to access records, which was inefficient and frustrating for staff during the first year of RAA implementation.

Example – managing the transition to 'going live' – IT systems

One RAA had a dedicated IT team within the host LA to ensure a single data system was in place in the RAA offices prior to going live. In preparation for the launch, they had a clear plan and detailed action log of how the IT systems would be delivered, and they had worked closely in the past with the IT company who fitted out the offices, so the process of getting that completed went well. The IT team delivered training to all staff as they went live, and there was a single point of contact for all IT queries (relating to both hardware and software) which enabled a quick response. In the first few weeks of implementation the IT team also did 'floor walking' to address any queries that adoption teams might have had. Staff commented that this worked well and they appreciated having direct access to support.

Adopter sufficiency and capacity to respond

As highlighted in chapter four, the **broader shortage of adopters further compounded** progress with adopter recruitment. Some interviewees reflected that in moving to RAAs, LAs stopped recruiting for adopters because they were uncertain about whether recruitment would still be their responsibility, or whether the RAA would be responsible. One stakeholder commented:

> "There is a national shortage of adopters for the first time – because of the uncertainties that were created because of RAAs as local authorities stopped recruiting. When you end up with children and adopter numbers being the same - that will lead to some delays" – Panel chair

The **delays to RAA start dates**, and **ongoing staff vacancies in recruitment teams** across a number of RAAs made it even more difficult to recruit adopters in this context. For example, one RAA went live later than planned, so they were unable to start their marketing and recruitment activities. This inhibited their progress in adopter recruitment and they did not have enough adopters for the children awaiting adoption. Another common concern was staffing capacity because RAAs went live with vacancies and a high demand for the service. Although this was a general problem, the recruitment teams lacked capacity to recruit enough adopters to meet the demand.

The box below highlights key learning points relating to context.

Learning points:

- **Consistently strong leadership, management,** and developing a **shared understanding** can mitigate concerns about collaborating with LAs with poorer performance.

- **Building relationships** early helps to facilitate a shared understanding, improve and formalise collaboration between existing and new partners.

- Drawing on **additional staffing capacity** in the short term is frequently required to help frontline staff to manage the backlog of cases and maintain the quality of service post launch.

- **IT systems** should be in place prior to go live with a **dedicated IT manager** to oversee the migration and merging of data, and comprehensive training for all staff on how to use the systems.

- RAAs were still working through how they could address the issues relating to **adopter sufficiency**. One RAA highlighted the possibility of doing some 'market-shaping' work, where VAAs focus their efforts on finding families for children.

- **LA social workers co-located** with the RAA adoption team can help to overcome transition challenges.

- So far there is limited evidence on how to overcome difficulties regarding medical reports; in one RAA a member of staff was developing guidance for medical advisers to help improve the consistency of reports across all localities.

Leadership

Leadership was a key influencing factor for RAAs' progress at the strategic level, and through different layers of management, from HoS to team managers. This section highlights the challenges that case study RAAs faced in relation to: stability; organisation and project management; and supporting people through the change management process. It also provides examples of where RAAs overcame challenges and what good practice in leadership looks like.

Stability

During the inception phase, interviewees stated that the **composition, stability and leadership of the RAA Governance Board** was central to the success of joint working. Changes in the members of their Governance Board had caused disruptions, resulting in a loss of direction and vision.

Case study interviewees commented that RAAs needed stable leadership from the HoS and managers to operationalise the vision in a timely and effective way. In some of the case study RAAs, there were vacancies and interim staff and the HoS changed from set-up to when the RAA went live. This required new leaders to spend a lot of time establishing and building up relationships with their staff.

Communications, project management and organisation

The extent of leaders' communications throughout RAA development, implementation and delivery had been a key influencing factor on case study RAAs' progress. Interviewees highlighted the importance of **project management and organisation skills** for ensuring regular updates to staff and keeping the momentum of the RAA going. Where this was lacking, there were significant challenges for frontline staff:

> "We had a nightmare when we started it all…that was really stressful and demoralising. We've turned a bit of corner with that now. But it was badly, badly done. It felt like doing your job with your hands tied."
> – *Social worker*

As at the inception stage, interviewees held mixed views on whether RAA leaders should be from an adoption or project management background and there was variable evidence on whether this affected RAAs' progress. For example, strategic stakeholders in one case study RAA felt that, while the HoS was incredibly knowledgeable about adoption, they lacked some of the project management skills needed to lead the RAA. This led to slippage in various tasks, which started to snowball because of the huge scale of the RAA.

> "Nobody seemed to know what the timescales for different things were, no one was sticking to any timescales and things just kept slipping and slipping." – *Strategic lead*

Ensuring leaders listened to staff concerns was particularly pertinent in the case study RAAs that had a change in strategic management before going live. For example, in one RAA, family finding social workers felt that their Team Manager was crucial for moving their team forward when they felt there was uncertainty around the overall RAA, by listening to them and acting on their concerns.

> "Having a leader as acknowledging concerns as seriously valid" –
> *Social Worker*

In the case study RAAs where stakeholders generally agreed about the strength of the leadership, they viewed the HoSs to be "approachable" and "available" because they

took the time to get to know members of staff. However, visibility could be difficult to achieve depending on the model.

Example – managing visibility in a new structure

Staff in one of the hub-and-spoke model RAAs described how they had experienced a change in their way-of-working because they had to get used to having less management presence in their office than before regionalisation. In these RAAs, HoSs had tried to increase their presence by rotating around the different offices. In an RAA where staff felt that the HoS was not visible, staff suggested that it would be helpful for the HoS to attend team meetings so that they feel listened to.

Supporting staff through the change management process

The change process had been challenging for case study RAA staff, because it had introduced a period of uncertainty, which had caused anxieties about their future role (see more in the next section on 'culture change'). Among one of the main areas of concern for staff related to human resources (HR). In several RAAs, staff were still employed by their LA and had been seconded into the RAA. This meant that staff in the same role were all on varying contracts, with different levels of pay, holiday allowance, and sick pay terms and conditions. This affected staff morale negatively because some perceived it to be unfair. To some extent, the Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE'ing) staff into the RAA overcame this issue, but there was reticence from some staff about being TUPE'd because they wanted to continue being an employee of their LA. There were also practical challenges with TUPE. For example, in one RAA, pensions had not been transferred over as anticipated. This delayed retirement for some members of staff.

The research identified a key role for leaders to support their staff through the change management process. In particular, this related to how case study HoSs had used their skills to **inspire and empower** the different layers of management so that they felt in control of the process. Speaking about their HoS in one RAA, a team manager reflected:

> "She lets managers manage…she enables people to be confident to manage, then leads and shapes as needs to." – *Team manager*

Spending time building up the confidence of team managers paid dividends later on, in terms of frontline staff members' satisfaction with management. Frontline team members commented on their confidence in their manager to do the best for their team.

> "We feel in really safe hands with the manager we have got. For us having complete faith in [the manager] has been amazing. I know it's been really hectic for everybody but we feel very supported and very

protected … that they have got your back and are capable… [I have] a lot of respect for them professionally." – *Social worker*

The box below covers the main learning points regarding leadership.

Learning points:

- Before going live, ensure the RAA HoS is in place.

- Establish strong **project management processes** (such as using Gantt charts, or itemising key activities) to ensure that tasks are delivered in a timely and effective manner.

- **Keep staff updated** on key changes to protocols and processes so they can mobilise quickly and work effectively.

- Leaders (at all levels) must be **visible** and approachable.

- HoSs need to instil **confidence** in their team managers, keep them involved through consultation and collaboration throughout the process.

- HoSs should **inspire** their team managers, so they feel excited and enthusiastic about delivering the RAA.

- By instilling these key ingredients at different layers of management, RAAs can become more **resilient** even if there is instability in one layer (for example, if the HoS leaves).

Culture change

The inception and scoping phase of the evaluation identified that building a positive staff culture and a new identity was essential to ensure the RAA was implemented and operated effectively. The evaluation found that engaging staff early had actively helped increase buy-in to a regional identity. The case study research explored this in more detail and found that building a positive staff culture took time, and it was important to continue to build a positive staff culture even after the RAA had launched. This section describes the challenges case study RAAs faced in creating a new 'culture' around the RAA, and highlights the positive approaches they took. This section explores what worked well or less well in different RAAs and why.

It should be acknowledged that the working culture is influenced by contextual factors (such as geography and history of partnership working), as well as the model of the RAA. This section covers: ensuring staff are clear of the vision of the RAA; securing buy-in from staff; engendering a sense of ownership in the RAA; and keeping up staff morale.

The RAA Vision

As highlighted previously, a key challenge for RAAs was that staff often questioned the reasons for the move to RAAs, especially those already working in higher-performing RAAs. As one frontline worker stated:

> "I think I was in denial at first, and then a sort of fear, you know, why do we have to do this? We're already doing things really well, why do we have to change?" – *Adoption panel staff*

Interviews with the case study RAAs found that a pre-requisite for engendering a positive culture was ensuring that all staff members **understood the vision** for the RAA, so that everyone knew what they were supposed to be doing and why, starting with strategic leaders having a good understanding of what they wanted to achieve from the RAA. This was important regardless of the size of the RAA (in terms of how many local authorities were involved), although for larger RAAs it may take a longer amount of time to settle.

Example – collaborative board-level decision-making

A strategic LA representative in one RAA board described that, while LAs ultimately had the same aim of ensuring permanence for children, inevitably there were different views about how to get there. To develop a shared vision, they suggested that having external parties (who were independent to LA or VAA partners) could help to provide a mediating voice when establishing the vision.

"I think what really helps is having external people involved in the RAA [on the board], who are able to challenge us as local authorities. I think there's been real value in having that cultural change, and being able to have a real grown up discussion about governmental issues, that when you're working in one local authority you perceive it in a certain way, but when it's [several] of you together it's very interesting to see what your differences are." – *LA strategic stakeholder*

Once RAAs had agreed and established the vision, the leaders played a key role in communicating the vision to staff. The case study RAAs had different approaches to doing this, although there were no clear patterns relating to the RAA model. In the run-up to going live, some RAAs brought their staff together to develop work streams to plan the practice and process relating to different aspects of the adoption journey.

An intrinsic part of building a positive culture was ensuring that staff **bought into the RAA vision** from an early point to reduce the risk of alienating or losing staff. Interestingly, previous partnership working did not mean that securing buy-in from staff was any easier. For example, in an RAA where staff from different LAs had previous experience of working collaboratively, staff struggled to buy in to the process because

regionalisation caused significant upheaval to their processes and practices, which were difficult to unify.

Case study RAA stakeholders commented that securing staff buy-in often was a "long and arduous" process; several stakeholders from different RAAs described it as a process of 'forming, storming, norming' group development (i.e. coming together to understand opportunities and challenges, building trust and developing common goals). Key to successfully securing buy-in was again **involving staff**. There was a risk in hub-and-spoke RAAs that buy-in was not secured from staff in the 'spokes', which could be overcome by consulting across all offices so that everyone felt that their voice had been heard. For example, in one RAA, the leadership team recognised that there was a need to secure buy-in from staff in different offices, so they spent time to hold meetings with managers attending team meetings, trailing and reviewing different ideas.

While staff consultation was important, a long lead-in time to an RAA was unlikely to keep staff enthusiastic about regionalisation. LAs in one of the RAAs had been in discussion about regionalisation for three years, and stakeholders felt that during this time there had been fluctuating buy-in from staff.

Engendering a sense of ownership

Staff engagement and consultation had been an essential ingredient of leadership as well as an important way to consolidate staff members' understanding of the RAA's vision and to gain their buy-in and a sense of ownership. Focussing with staff on specific practice areas and / or to process mapping was important, especially in LA-hosted models where the host authorities were conscious of not imposing their practice or processes on staff from other authorities. As one team manager highlighted, staff had experience and expertise to bring.

> "Carry people with you; share thinking – staff are your biggest resource" – *Team Leader*

For some staff this conceptual work could be quite challenging, although as one practitioner suggested, it had been beneficial for the team moving ahead.

> "I'm really grateful for my manager or managers that they were persistent saying – 'prioritise this'. Inviting us to all these events, looking back it really helped. It would have been easy not to go. But there was a lot of discussion, useful discussion and sharing of ideas… it's carried forward into team meetings. It's a culture that is being created and it's a hard thing that" – *Social worker*

Even as case study RAAs moved into the 'norming' phase, staff were still encouraged to share their views, feedback ideas and share good practice to avoid people feeling like they were being asked to "jump into the abyss" without being consulted.

Building a sense of identity

The case study research highlighted that the transition of moving from a local authority team to an RAA had impacted on staff members' sense of identity, which could in turn impact on the effectiveness of the change management process. Sense of identity was influenced by several different factors including the choice of RAA model, if and when case responsibility for children transferred to the RAA, and the type and size of the LA and existing caseloads. Overall, the research found that it often took about a year from 'going live' for staff to feel fully part of their RAA's identity.

The research highlighted that some staff did feel a loss of identity, after moving from a close-knit LA adoption team into a larger RAA.

> "People really grieved the loss of the team, their identity, and didn't buy into the new team. The people who've come now are just really positive, and are bought into something, rather than not having a choice about doing it." – *HoS*

Practical steps that RAAs took to build up their identity was to hold team events or 'away days', and for RAAs operating across multiple offices and/or a vast geography, to hold whole team 'away days'. The boxed example below provides an example of how one RAA did this effectively.

Example – building team identity in a hub-and-spoke model

For one RAA, which operated across a large geographic footprint, the HoS thought it was important to make the effort to bring staff together across teams and across spokes.

"As a management team, we've learnt about what people need to cope with in a different working environment…. At least once every month it's important to have [team days] in your specialisms, but also in your spokes, having days where you come together as a whole service." – *HoS*

Staff appreciated that they were able to come together; especially those in the spokes who often felt distanced from the rest of the team.

In order to support a positive change management process, the evidence indicates that it is important to acknowledge not only the potential loss of team identity, but also staff members' professional identity. In all of the case study RAAs, staff moved into specialist adoption roles, such as family finding, matching or adoption support. Although this aimed

to create **more specialised and knowledgeable staff**, this represented a substantial shift in the way of working for some members of staff, who had come from LA teams where they had been involved in every aspect of the adoption service. As chapter four discussed, RAAs have provided opportunities for staff to upskill, however, for some, the move created anxieties about being 'de-skilled'.

> "There's something about being deskilled or feeling deskilled. In our team we wear lots of different hats. We've learnt to work in a very different way. Actually, going into [the RAA] where you are a lot more streamlined in terms of your roles and responsibilities, you kind of lose a lot of skills." – *Team manager*

There did not seem to be a clear solution to this. As most of the case study RAAs were still in their implementation (or 'storming/norming' phase i.e. (i.e. building trust and developing common goals), it was likely too soon for solid plans around career development and succession planning to have been established. This issue will be explored in future waves of the case study research.

Although low morale from the loss of identity could take time to improve, the case study research highlighted that the role of RAA leaders and managers was pivotal. Several RAA leaders and managers highlighted that, ultimately, regionalisation aimed to improve the experience for families, and for most RAA staff (who were usually passionate about their job) this was the most important thing. Therefore, the evidence would suggest that leaders and managers should try to keep this ultimate aim within staff members' minds, through regular communications and team meetings.

Learning points to help manage culture change are included in the box below.

> **Learning points:**
>
> - Although **staff consultation** can be resource-intensive, it is important to do, because often staff from different LAs will have their own established ways of working, and RAAs need to find a way to create '**one' approach**.
>
> - Have regular '**away days**'/time to focus on the work as a whole team.
>
> - Use merchandise to promote the **visual identity** of the RAA. Regardless of the size or model of the RAA, paraphernalia such as lanyards, pens, posters, and mugs can serve to remind staff that they are working within an RAA (rather than their previous teams).
>
> - Help **build and maintain morale** by recognising difficult emotions at the same time as working together on the anticipated benefits of regionalisation, like bringing together staff with lots of experience and expertise and speeding the adoption journey for families.

Conclusion

This chapter has built on the findings of the inception and scoping report, to highlight the key influencing factors for supporting the change management process arising from the wave 1 case study visits. While many of the key points raised, such as the importance of a stable leadership and the importance of building a positive staff culture and new identity, were still prevalent, the latest research provided greater detail on the particular success factors as well as stakeholders lessoned learned. There were certain contextual factors that appeared to influence progress, which were somewhat out of RAAs' control (including a history of working together and geography). However, other factors that case study RAAs have identified and were trying to overcome relate to the national adopter shortage and the capacity of teams to respond.

The research also suggested that strong leadership, characterised by stability, good project management, and an ability to listen to and empower staff, and underpinned a successful change management process. However, leadership was supported by practical steps which supported a positive culture change, including holding regular staff consultations and engaging them in the development process (both within teams and across the geography, in the case of hub-and-spoke models), encouraging team meetings, and having merchandise to promote the visual identity of the RAA. These steps helped to engender a sense of ownership amongst staff and build up a staff identity, with the ultimate aim of increasing and sustaining staff morale to help manage any challenges they may experience through the transition to RAA.

Chapter six - Conclusions

To help understand the pre-RAA adoption landscape, analysis of Adoption Scorecard data was undertaken. Analysis revealed that when grouping LAs at the RAA level, there is substantial variation (280 to 568 days) on the average timeliness of adoptions (from a child entering care to moving in with adoptive family) between RAAs. On the same measure, there is considerable variation between LAs within RAA groupings. Furthermore, at a national level (and for most RAAs) the average timeliness of adoptions, as well as the number of adoptions, is decreasing.

Regarding the costs of RAAs, RAAs were aiming for LA contributions to be no more than what they had paid previously. RAAs reported that cost efficiencies and economies of scale had not yet materialised but are anticipated over the longer-term. The key risks around costs centre on external factors, particularly demand. For example, if the number of children being placed for adoption falls, cost-efficiencies (i.e. the cost per adoption) will be difficult to make.

The qualitative research found that in the more established case study RAAs (1 year + go live) many of the results identified in the programme ToC were observed. In particular, there was evidence of: collaboration; a single line of accountability via the HoS; greater data sharing; social workers being able to access a wider pool of adopters; and access to more specialist and knowledgeable staff. The findings appeared to show that these results had led to a higher profile for adoption locally and had created the conditions for stronger leadership. However, the effects on commissioning and the extent to which improvements are being shared with LAs in the case study RAAs, as well as VAAs and ASAs needs further exploration.

Encouragingly, there were examples where the pooling of resources (a key enabling factor) was believed to have led to speedier matching with a larger pool of adopters and case study RAAs had begun to offer (and plan for) an improved range of adoption support services, in line with the policy intention. It will be important to see whether the quantitative data and feedback from adopters supports these findings when the data becomes available.

At this early stage of the evaluation, what is less clear is whether RAAs can recruit and maintain a large and diverse enough pool of adopters for waiting children over time. It is to be determined, and to be examined in future stages of the evaluation, whether the larger adopter pools are more diverse than previously and to what extent RAAs have helped to improve the quality of adoption support services from the perspectives of adopters. Furthermore, it is too early to judge whether RAAs have made the delivery of adoption services more cost effective and efficient. Interviews with finance leads and RAA stakeholders highlighted potential savings to management services, but these were alongside risks relating to additional and unanticipated costs.

The inception and scoping report painted a picture of "frustration and challenge" and the research with case study RAAs found that many difficulties (e.g. HR, data sharing and IT) remained. However, strong leadership and the passing of time had helped to mitigate against some of the problems that had materialised from such large-scale structural change. The make-up and structure of RAAs had affected both RAAs starting points and the ease of their journeys to fully functioning RAAs. Some RAAs appeared to have experienced a more difficult start because of variations in performance (and caseloads), historical factors, the choice of model (e.g. whether adopting a hosted model working with known partner LAs or developing a new organisation as an LATC), and staffing and leadership-related challenges.

As several case study RAAs were very much in the 'storming/norming' phase of group development in autumn/winter 2018/19, it was still too early to judge the *extent* to which case study RAAs had changed the overall organisation and delivery of adoption services for the better. Similarly, it was not yet possible to comment on which RAA models appeared to be the most effective at achieving the intended outcomes as some models were very new but this will be assessed throughout future waves of research.

Implications

- At this stage, the research did not highlight any significant changes to the model typology, which continued to play out broadly as envisaged at inception stage. However, there were signs that case study RAAs were evolving in response to the practicalities of delivering regionalised services, and there were indications that the number of partner LAs within an RAA might increase over time. The data shows that larger RAAs generally had greater variation in performance at the pre-RAA stage, and this can make it more difficult to build a sense of identity, therefore it will be important to consider the impact of any future changes to the models on the success of RAAs. For instance, future waves of research will need to explore how the RAA size affects staff retention when moving from a small team to a large organisation, the recruitment of adopters and the sufficiency of the adopter pool.

- The ongoing challenge of adopter sufficiency even in more established case study RAAs highlights the risk posed and the importance of developing innovative and effective adopter recruitment strategies (alongside improvements to prep groups and other support) to facilitate the intended outcomes (alongside the passing of time as improvements bed in). There is also a need to further explore the success of RAA's recruitment strategies. This would appear to confirm that adopter sufficiency is the right choice for the topic of the next practice note and the evaluation team will need to work with RAAs and the DfE policy team to decide on the most helpful way of generating and sharing this knowledge.

- Future research will also need to consider the effects of the size and makeup of RAAs on the quality and consistency of the adoption support offer. Whilst the evaluation has found that interviewees in the more established case study RAAs often thought their adoption support offer had improved, evidence is not yet available to triangulate their views with those of adopters, and at the same time there was no common approach to the delivery of adoption support in the case study RAAs. This raises questions regarding what good (and improved) support looks like in the RAA context and how might RAAs (and the evaluation) best share learning from improvements to in-house and commissioned provision.

- The research has found that the role of leaders with good project management skills had been pivotal in the smooth running of RAAs and therefore it appears that the RAA leadership programme has a key role to play in facilitating the change process. It will be important for the evaluation, for DfE and RAAs to explore the success of this aspect, and to consider what else is required to help equip the sector to respond to the policy requirements and meet its intentions.

- The role of VAAs in the recruitment of adopters for hard to place children, early permanence programmes and providing adoption support is an important and ongoing question for the evaluation. The research has shown an inconsistent picture that is so far difficult to define and therefore to evaluate. As reported in the inception and scoping report, VAAs had supported innovation before RAAs, however, their role within the regionalised adoption landscape is still unclear. Future waves of research with case studies and non-case study RAAs and VAAs will seek to explore their experiences and views further to be able to comment on the implications for the adoption system over time. The ToC links strong partnerships with VAAs to the longer-term outcome of culture of excellence in adoption practice.

- In the absence of any national quantitative data, and without MI reports from all case study RAAs which compare RAA to previous performance, it is too early to be certain that RAAs are having a positive impact on the intended outcomes, and to comment on the extent to which they are. In the future, it will be important to try to tie in with RAA progress reporting timescales over time so that the next annual report is able to draw on the most recent performance data, both quantitative and qualitative. The timing of the next phase of research aims to support that.

Reflections on the evaluation method

Overall, the evaluation method has worked well, and case study RAAs have engaged positively with the research, on which the majority of this report is based.

However, some changes to the evaluation have had to be made. The delayed start dates have impacted upon the timing and coverage of the qualitative case study research,

delaying the selection of the seventh case study (to try and ensure broad model reach) and limiting discussions about the impact and outcomes of RAAs in two case study areas in particular. In addition, planned interviews with non-case study RAAs have been delayed to ensure that all RAAs can be interviewed twice over the course of the evaluation, later in 2019 and 2020. There is also a need to delay some of the adopter interviews to enable all RAAs to settle in. Furthermore, discussions regarding the availability of some of the wider quantitative data are ongoing and may impact upon the extent of the impact analysis that is possible to do.

Next steps

When the next evaluation report is published in summer 2020, all of the case study RAAs will be at least a year old and the report will be informed by additional findings. These will include: the adopter research strand; the first quantitative analysis of impact data; and further qualitative research with non-case study RAAs, those not yet involved in regionalised services and national stakeholders.

Annex one: Theory of Change

Theory of Change assumptions

- There is sufficient support (from the Department and LA) and resources (financial and staff-related) including health and legal services and the courts at a local level for the changes to be implemented.

- There is sufficient buy-in within the RAAs to ensure changes are implemented, and done so voluntarily.

- There are good levels of partnership working and collaboration at all levels in the RAA, and between RAAs and the wider adoption system.

- The correct issues were identified.

Theory of Change risks

- Regulations and other factors prevent VAAs and Adoption Support Agencies (ASAs) from partnering in RAAs, resulting in less sharing of best practice and reduced innovation.

- Financial constraints lead to RAAs placing more children and / or using services in-house, reducing choices in matching & support services.

- Adopters not having a central role in some RAAs may create more inconsistencies.

- Creation of RAAs interferes with adoption work too much, resulting in reduced quality of services, especially recruitment.

- The transition of RAAs leads to staff instability and turnover, affecting the quality of services.

- Creation of RAAs requires large amount of resource which risks negative effect on services delivered for children. Could also lead to cuts to adoption services.

- 'Ring-fencing' of adoption services via the RAA reduces ability to transfer money between adoption services and other parts of Children's Services system, leading to inefficiencies, higher costs and lack of ability to meet peaks in demand.

- Removal of adoption staff out of LAs weakens links between social workers in LAs and practitioners in RAAs, diminishing quality of communication and support.

- Movement of expertise from LA to RAA risks negative effect on activities that remain within LA e.g. making of adoption recommendations.

- RAA creates silo working between adoption services in the RAA and other services in the wider ecosystem, including other parts of adoption where for example, SGOs are not incorporated.

- Less accountability because Members in individual LAs have less oversight.

- Higher Ofsted rated LAs group together in RAAs, diminishing the extent of good practice sharing from higher to lower performing LAs.

Annex two: Methodology

Research questions (main questions in bold)

Objective 1: Understand what RAA models are being implemented

a) **What are the RAA characteristics? I.e. What changes are the RAAs making to: leadership and management; governance; accountability and corporate parenting; staff training and development; supervision; commissioning processes ; team structures; links to specialist services; range of support and interventions (in house and commissioned); adopter recruitment processes; decision making processes, including panels; IT; data sharing, monitoring and tracking? How innovative are these changes?**

b) **What are the overarching typologies of models and sub-categories (governance/organisational groupings and others), if and how do they change over time and what are the implications of any changes?**

c) **How are RAAs working with other parts of the adoption ecosystem (e.g. VAAs, LA, judiciary, family justice councils, health etc.)?**

d) Which RAA models (and legal structures) are being implemented?

e) What is the size and make-up of the RAAs?

f) What was involved in creating an RAA (e.g. pooling budgets, developing shared functions etc.) and how long did this take (plotting on a timeline to support both quantitative and qualitative assessment of pre, transition and post launch?

g) What is the local context (e.g. size and geography, historical nature of adoption ecosystem including historic partnership working) and to what degree has this influenced the RAA model/approach and in what ways?

h) What was the rationale for the choice of different RAA models/approaches?

i) Which other models were considered and discounted, and why?

j) How are different adoption responsibilities split between the RAA, LAs, VAAs and other organisations in the various models?

k) How does the choice of different RAA models/approaches vary between RAAs, and why?

l) How do RAAs/LA/VAAs work together (e.g. in relation to other parts Children's Services, such as support for birth parents and adopted adults)?

m) How are permanent placements managed by RAAs, e.g. SGO assessment, support etc.? How is early permanence embedded in practice? Are FtA or concurrency arrangements going up/down?

Objective 2: Explore the practice, governance and financial impacts of the RAAs on the speed of matching with adopters

a) What are the times between placement order and match before and after RAA?

b) What are the strengths/enablers/opportunities within the RAA in meeting the matching objectives?

c) What are the barriers/risks within the RAA in meeting the matching objectives?

d) What is the experience of adoptive families?

e) How can the impact of RAAs on better/speedier matching of children be sustained over time?

f) What lessons have been learnt, including innovative practice that other RAAs can learn from?

g) How many matches are reversed/adoption breakdown pre- and post-order?

h) Is there a move away from the sequential match?

i) Does the RAA have scrutiny and challenge over permanence decision making and at what point (e.g. ADM decision, court application)?

j) Is there a wider overview of the pipeline of children coming into the system, and their need for an adoption placement? What does this look like in different models?

k) What factors are affecting changes in matching rates (including specific characteristics of the RAA, such as e.g. website, joint front door, focus on SGOs, involvement of elected members and when they became involved; level of buy-in) as well as external factors?

l) How do changes in matching rates vary depending on: RAA typology; RAA characteristics; local characteristics; and when the RAA was launched?

m) How do the above change over the lifetime of the RAAs?

Objective 3: Explore the practice, governance and financial impacts of the RAAs on adopter recruitment

a) What is the impact of the RAA on the size of the pool of adopters?

b) **What is the impact of RAA on the characteristics of adopters being recruited?**

- Does the information on the characteristics of children waiting to be matched drive recruitment? How?

- How is information between recruitment/matching teams shared?

- How well does this compare with before?

c) **What is the impact of RAA adopter recruitment on the number and characteristics of the children waiting to be matched?**

d) **What is the experience of prospective adoptive families?**

e) **What is the impact of RAA adopter recruitment on matching times?**

f) **What are the strengths/opportunities of the RAA adopter recruitment model?**

g) **What are the barriers/risks within the RAA adopter recruitment model?**

h) **What is the relationship between the number of children who are waiting to be matched and the number of adopters compared to pre-RAA?**

i) **How can the impact of RAAs on adopter recruitment be sustained over time?**

j) **What factors are affecting changes in adopter recruitment?**

k) **What lessons have been learnt, including innovative practice that other RAAs can learn from?**

l) What are the adopter recruitment strategies?

m) How are resources shared within the RAA, and with the wider sector (e.g. assessment and training)?

n) What affect has the RAA had on innovation, in what sense and how captured, and what are the implications of +ve/-ve effects (e.g. have the concerns about upscaling limiting innovation materialised)?

o) Are there practices that have led to more recruitment?

p) How do changes in adopter recruitment vary depending on: RAA typology; RAA characteristics; local characteristics; and when the RAA was launched?

Objective 4: Explore the practice, governance and financial impacts of the RAAs on adoption support

a) **Has the RAA enabled access to wider choice of support services to adopters?**

b) **What is the experience of adopters? Has there been any change in the adopter and child's experience?**

c) **What are the strengths/opportunities of the RAA adoption support model?**

d) **What are the barriers/risks within the RAA adoption support model?**

e) **What factors are affecting changes in adopter support?**

f) **What lessons have been learnt, including innovative practice that other RAAs can learn from?**

g) How is support commissioned within the RAA?

h) How is the Adoption Support Fund utilised within the RAA?

i) How do adopters access support?

j) How does the RAA work with health and education to ensure appropriate help/services for children and adoptive families?

k) What is the experience of adopters? Has there been any change in the adopter and child's experience?

l) Do adopters get timely support?

m) Is improved adoption support having other positive effects, such as reducing adoption breakdowns?

n) How do changes in adoption support vary depending on: RAA typology; RAA characteristics; local characteristics; and when the RAA was launched?

Objective 5: Explore the practice, governance, and financial impacts of the RAAs on efficiencies and cost savings

a) **Have the impacts achieved by RAAs led to cost savings (e.g. shorter matching times reducing foster care costs, improved adoption support reducing adoption breakdowns and reducing foster care costs)?**

b) What are the costs of running the RAAs (excluding set up costs)? To what degree do these differ to the costs of running adoption services through LAs?

c) What are the cost implications of shared resources to the LAs/VAAs?

d) How are inter-agency payments used within the RAA models?

e) What are the cost implications for LAs/VAAs/ASAs?

f) What factors are affecting changes in costs?

g) How do costs vary depending on: RAA typology; RAA characteristics; local characteristics; children's characteristics; and when the RAA was launched?

Objective 6: Explore the lessons learnt and impact on wider elements of the adoption system

a) **What lessons have been learnt by the early implementers that others could learn from?**

b) **How have the RAA plans/structures/approaches changed over time and why (e.g. changes to member organisations, legal structures)? How resilient are the RAAs to changes? What happens when RAAs increase or decrease in size/no. partners?**

c) **To what extent and in what ways have RAAs changed the organisation and delivery of adoption services for the better (covering partnership working within and between teams in and outside of adoption LAC teams)?**

- **What are the internal impacts (e.g. development of expertise, leadership, commissioning and decision-making capabilities)?**

- **What are the optimum working relationships and processes necessary to achieve the optimum outcomes?**

d) **Has the approach to the development and implementation of the RAA led to any adverse effects…?**

e) To what extent are RAAs being implemented according to expected timescales and costs? If there is a difference, what is the scale of the difference and why?

f) How effectively has the change process been managed? Are roles and responsibilities and lines of accountability clear? What level of disruption has this caused and how has this been mitigated?

g) Which aspects of implementation are going particularly well, and why? How might these be replicated in other areas? How do successes and challenges identified at scoping stage change over time?

h) How are/can RAAs make the most of the 'spotlight' – both nationally and at regional level and what advantages is/can this bring?

i) What challenges are being faced, and why? How might these be overcome? To what extent were these foreseen or unanticipated?

j) What are the critical success factors to implement a RAA successfully?

k) What support are the RAAs accessing and how are they using this (including coaching and financial support from DfE)? Is enough support available, and how useful is this support?

l) To what extent have organisations had the capacity to implement the RAA?

m) How are VAAs involved in RAAs and how does their relationship with RAAs evolve over time?

n) What impact is the RAA having on staff morale, recruitment and retention?

o) How do the above factors vary depending on: RAA characteristics; local characteristics; time when the RAA launched

p) How are RAAs monitoring and keeping abreast of meeting the main objectives of regionalisation during the transition period? What is the overall sense of responsibility and accountability within the RAA structure in delivering these main objectives?

q) Why are some LAs not implementing RAAs? How do their perceptions of RAAs change over the lifetime of their implementation, and what are their intentions?

Methodology

Between 2018 and 2021, the evaluation will involve five key strands:

1. **Longitudinal research of RAAs**, including:

- *Annual case study visits with a sample of seven RAAs* to understand in depth how the RAAs are being implemented from a range of perspectives (see work completed to date). These case studies include interviews with a range of stakeholders, surveys and qualitative interviews with adopters. Topics cover key successes and challenges, local contextual factors, the impact of RAAs on systems change and partnership working and the extent to which related outcomes can be attributed to RAAs.

- *Two rounds of telephone interviews with the other RAAs not involved in the case studies* (both launched and in development) to understand delivery models and plans, assess outcomes and explore learning[28].

- *Two rounds of interviews with some LAs and VAAs not yet involved in the regionalisation of adoption services*, to understand the reasons for non-engagement and any concerns.

- *Two rounds of interviews with national strategic stakeholders* to understand the national context within which the RAAs are operating (including any changes to policy during the programme), background context to developing the RAAs, areas of importance for the evaluation and the impact and effectiveness of RAAs.

2. **Longitudinal analysis of national adoption data from 2014-2020** to understand the short- and medium-term impact of the RAAs on matching, adopter recruitment and

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[28] The initial plan was to interview non-case study RAAs annually but as the number of RAAs has increased, the decision was taken to do two rounds of interviews to be able to engage all RAAs throughout the evaluation.

provision of support to adoptive families, comparing the speed of matching[29] pre-RAAs to post-RAAs. This will include a counterfactual analysis and longitudinal analysis of MI data. The counterfactual analysis will aim to assess what would have happened to adoption outcomes without the introduction of a RAA using a quasi-experimental design focussing on the timeliness of matching. We will implement child-level propensity score matching (PSM), using historical cases as a comparison group, to assess the impact of RAAs. To strengthen any causal claims of RAAs we will also explore the use of interrupted time-series (ITS) and multiple-baseline (MB) designs at the LA/RAA-level. In addition to analysing administrative data, we will also analyse the MI gathered by the RAAs to assess the effectiveness of implementing the RAAs, including progress and impact on wider elements of the adoption system and progress against local aims and objectives.

3. **Analysis of cost data** as part of the case study research to explore efficiency and effectiveness. Cost efficiency measures the input or resources devoted to each standardised unit of output (or vice versa). In this context, cost efficiency will be judged as the average cost per adoption, and will investigate the most efficient way of securing adoptions through each of the models. In addition, cost-effectiveness analysis will also be undertaken based on the timeliness and quality of matching, which will be collected through children looked after datasets.

4. **Analysis:**

To analyse the qualitative data, we used a Framework approach to thematic analysis to compare and contrast the views of different interviewees within each RAA using a structured grid to manage and interpret the data. The framework of themes and sub-themes was organised around the key research questions with field notes summarised and synthesised under the headings and sub headings alongside illustrative quotes. This enabled us to establish the degree to which these different data sources supported or refuted each other and allowed us to present a consolidated view from each area.

The data interpretation phase involved synthesising the findings across the multiple sets of interviewees in each RAA and across case study areas, identifying codes and categorising the data using qualitative software (Nvivo). We searched for similarities, differences and any other patterns occurring in the data in relation to the key variables linked to the typology developed during the scoping phase and reviewed the typology as the fieldwork progressed.

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[29] The evaluation will look at the whole journey from a child's entry to care to the match. For example, the time from entry to care the ADM decision and from ADM decision to the match. The evaluation will also look at the number of plans that change away from adoption after the ADM decision. Indicators from the Adoption Scorecard will be used where possible to enable comparison across time. (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705307/Adoption_Scorecards_2014-17_-_Guidance_-_methodology_and_guidance.pdf)

The annual longitudinal analysis of national adoption data for this report involved descriptive analysis and will involve econometric techniques (e.g. multi-level regression analysis and latent growth trajectory modelling) to assess changes over time and causal impacts over time. As well as examining individual and overall RAA performance, we will also compare the different RAAs. The analysis will help our understanding of whether type, size and structure of an RAA is associated with performance. Our analysis will explore if different types of RAA are excelling in recruiting, matching and having stable placements. A particular focus of the analysis will be to understand if certain RAAs have more or less success with hard to place children.

Future findings will be triangulated and, using the qualitative research, we will apply Contribution Analysis, to help explain the result of longitudinal data analysis at a more granular level, and to assess the extent to which changes in the data can be attributed to the introduction of the RAA. Rather than setting out to isolate the effects of a single intervention, the approach aims to build a credible 'performance story', drawing upon the available evidence to consider whether the intervention, alongside other factors, contributed towards the observed outcomes (Mayne, 2008[30]). It is a useful approach when multiple factors, including the one under examination, are likely to impact upon the ultimate outcomes – as is the case with RAAs and matching rates, adopter recruitment, quality of adoption support and efficiencies. Findings from the case studies will be used to feed directly into the longitudinal data analysis by developing more accurate or useful models.

5. **Outputs, learning and dissemination**: During the course of the evaluation, we will produce:

- Two annual reports (this annual report in spring 2019 and a second report in spring 2020).

- Four interim practice notes (spring/summer 2019, autumn/winter 2019, spring/summer 2020, and autumn 2021).

- A final report (winter 2021).

To support learning and dissemination there will be three stakeholder presentations and three RAA workshops (in 2019, 2020 and 2021 – timing to be confirmed).

[30] Mayne, J. The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative, (2008). *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect.*

Case studies

Sample

- Model (see chapter two) – 3 hub and spoke, 1 centralised, 1 centralised/hub and spoke, 1 Local Authority Trading Company (LATC).

- Location – 2 North, 3 South, 1 Midlands.

- Stage of delivery – 4 RAAs had been live for more than one year at the time of the research, 1 RAA had just gone live and another RAA was yet to go live (delayed).

- Size – a range in number of participating LAs (including a smaller RAA (3-4 LAs), average size (5-6 LAs), and a larger RAA (7+)).

- History of partnership working - considered to be strong in 4 RAAs, mixed or poor in other RAAs based on self-reports during the baseline visits (e.g. how long LAs have been working together, the level of buy-in and consensus amongst partners).

- VAA involvement - in most but not all RAAs and to varying degrees.

- Progress – based on self-reports during baseline visits (e.g. whether RAAs were on track and pleased with progress, behind schedule and/or experiencing some issues or making little progress and/or meeting major hurdles).

- Performance – based on averages calculated from the adoption scorecards (number of approved adoptive families waiting, number of children for whom permanence decisions has changed away from adoption, Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, rank, Ofsted rating and new placement offers granted).

Interview topics

Topics covered included:

- The background/context to RAA development and historic adoption services.

- The RAA model, roles and responsibilities and changes made to adoption services.

- The impact of RAAs on the organisation, delivery and quality of adoption services in the area.

- Issues affecting progress, including successes and challenges.

- Costs involved in set up and costs per adoption pre and post the RAA launch.

- Next steps for the RAA.

Annex three: LAs involved in each RAA

AA	LA
Adopt Central East	Central Bedfordshire
	Milton Keynes
Adopt East London	Barking and Dagenham
	Havering
	Newham
	Tower Hamlets
Adopt North East	Gateshead
	Newcastle upon Tyne
	North Tyneside
	South Tyneside
	Northumberland
Adopt North London	Camden
	Hackney
	Islington
	Enfield
	Haringey
Adopt South	Hampshire
	Portsmouth
	Southampton
	Isle of Wight
Adopt South London	Lambeth

	Lewisham
	Southwark
	Wandsworth
	Croydon
	Kingston upon Thames
	Merton
	Richmond upon Thames
	Sutton
Adopt South West	Devon
	Plymouth
	Torbay
	Somerset
Adopt West London	Hammersmith and Fulham
	Kensington and Chelsea
	Westminster
	Barnet
	Brent
	Ealing
	Hillingdon
	Hounslow
Adoption @ Heart	Dudley
	Sandwell
	Walsall

	Wolverhampton
Adoption Central England	Coventry
	Solihull
	Worcestershire
	Warwickshire
Adoption Counts	Manchester
	Salford
	Stockport
	Trafford
	Cheshire East
Adoption NoW	Bolton
	Bury
	Oldham
	Rochdale
	Tameside
	Blackburn with Darwen
Adoption South East	East Sussex
	Brighton and Hove
	Surrey
	West Sussex
Adoption Thames Valley	Swindon
	Bracknell Forest
	Windsor and Maidenhead

	West Berkshire
	Reading
	Wokingham
	Oxfordshire
Adoption West	Bath and North East Somerset
	Bristol, City of
	North Somerset
	South Gloucestershire
	Wiltshire
	Gloucestershire
AIM	Knowsley
	Liverpool
	Sefton
	Wirral
Ambitious for Adoption	Bromley
	Harrow
	Redbridge
	Slough
	Waltham Forest
Aspire	Dorset
	Poole
	Bournemouth
Cambridgeshire	Cambridgeshire

	Peterborough
Coast to Coast	Sunderland
	Durham
	Cumbria
East Midlands: D2N2	Derbyshire
	Derby
	Nottinghamshire
	Nottingham
East Midlands: L3R	Leicestershire
	Leicester
	Rutland
	Lincolnshire
Kent	Bexley
	Kent
	Medway
Lancashire	Lancashire
	Blackpool
North Midlands	Staffordshire
	Stoke-on-Trent
	Shropshire
	Telford and Wrekin
One Adoption North Yorkshire and Humber	Kingston Upon Hull, City of
	East Riding of Yorkshire

	North East Lincolnshire
	North Yorkshire
	York
One Adoption South Yorkshire	Barnsley
	Doncaster
	Rotherham
	Sheffield
One Adoption West Yorkshire	Bradford
	Calderdale
	Kirklees
	Leeds
	Wakefield
Tees Valley	Hartlepool
	Middlesbrough
	Redcar and Cleveland
	Stockton-on-Tees
	Darlington
Together for Adoption	St. Helens
	Wigan
	Halton
	Warrington
	Cheshire West & Chester