



Department  
for Education

# **Evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies**

**Second report: 2019 to 2020**

**October 2020**

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



Government  
Social Research

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## Summary

The evaluation of regional adoption agencies (RAAs) runs from January 2018 to December 2021. This is the Second Report 2019-20 which reviews their progress and effectiveness, focusing on four areas (adopter recruitment, reducing unnecessary delay, adoption support and cost efficiencies), alongside other impacts achieved<sup>1</sup>.

This report includes new learning from the adopter research strand, longitudinal analysis of data from the Children Looked After SSSDA903<sup>2</sup> and Adoption and Special Guardian Leadership Board (ASGLB<sup>3</sup>), and an analysis of costs, as well as insights from a second round of RAA case study visits plus wider interviews.

There are signs of early improvement since the first report in 2018 in the qualitative and quantitative data:

- Based on available data to March 2019 when almost a third of RAAs (10) were live, the time taken to place a child in an adoptive family has improved. Live RAAs show statistically significant reductions of 14 days in the time to placement for all children and 35 days less for 'harder to place' children (5 or more years old, ethnic minority, sibling group) – reducing the average time it takes to place a child (from placement order to being placed with an adoptive family) from eight months in non-live RAAs to seven months in live RAAs.

At this stage in the lifetime of RAAs and the evaluation it is too early to demonstrate full impact across programme objectives and the recruitment of sufficient adopters who meet the needs of waiting children remains a challenge.

However, longer established RAAs (2 years +) have become less reliant on interagency placements and report placing more children (83%-100%) within their own area. The qualitative research has demonstrated that RAAs are achieving this through enhanced tracking of children's progress and greater consideration of routes to early permanence, especially Fostering for Adoption.

Increasingly, RAAs are taking a more strategic approach to marketing, incorporating targeted marketing activities, and developing inclusive websites to boost efforts to increase adopter diversity, which has been important for adopter engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Previous evaluation reports can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

<sup>2</sup> Provides information about looked after children in England. The figures are based on data from the SSSDA903 return collected from all 150 English local authorities.

<sup>3</sup> The ASGLB data return on adoption is completed by every local authority, voluntary adoption agency, and regional adoption agency in England on a quarterly basis.

Notably, there has been a drive to develop a more strategic approach to commissioning adoption support, resulting in improved early intervention and universal offers, which appear more widely embedded across the programme.

At this stage of the evaluation, analysis of Section 251 data (local authority accounts collected nationally) indicates that RAAs do not appear to be increasing (or decreasing) local authority expenditure on adoption irrespective of operating time. The majority of RAA spend is associated with staff costs. The reductions in time taken from placement order to a child being placed with an adoptive family estimated from the impact analysis translate to large savings in LA foster care costs.

Many of the practical difficulties in the transition to a RAA remain to some extent including information sharing and managing culture change but, RAAs have continued to explore ways to overcome arising issues.

The typology of models developed during the scoping phase generally still holds true, although there is increasing variation across all the RAAs. There are now more 'partnership' approaches in newer RAAs and RAA projects, which are using the original core features of RAAs more flexibly than longer-established RAAs.

It is too soon to say definitively but the emerging evidence suggests that the RAA model matters less for determining overall effectiveness than the presence of certain core functions, not least the pooling of resources. In the final wave of research, it will be essential to explore in more detail the most important elements of RAAs in meeting the four aims of regionalisation.

Each RAA is different and the final wave of research in winter 2020/21 will focus on distance travelled and continue to evaluate RAAs' achievements in context.



# Chapter 1: 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 and her team at the Rees Centre, Oxford University. This is the Second Report (2019-20) which reviews the advancement and achievements of RAAs over time, and up until early 2020, focusing on the four main objectives of the programme (adopter recruitment, reducing unnecessary delay, adoption support and cost efficiencies), alongside any other impacts achieved<sup>4</sup>. The report includes new learning, including the first findings from the adopter research strand, the longitudinal analysis of the SSDA903<sup>5</sup> and ASGLB<sup>6</sup> data and an analysis of costs. It should be read alongside the detailed report on adopters' views.

## Content and scope of the report

- Chapter one provides a brief outline of the RAA programme and the Theory of Change. It sets out the evaluation aims and objectives and provides an overview of the evaluation method. More details are provided in Annex three.
- Chapter two describes the characteristics of the RAA models that were being implemented in early 2020. Building on the inception and scoping phase of the evaluation<sup>7</sup>, this chapter provides an updated picture of the RAA models, the defining features, the reasons for any changes over time, and plans for future development.
- Chapter three focuses on the RAA impact on adopter sufficiency and diversity and the number of adoptions. Key facilitating factors and barriers/challenges/risks are highlighted.
- Chapter four examines whether average timeliness associated with forming an RAA has increased or decreased and assesses the extent to which the local authorities' baseline position (in terms of timeliness) has affected performance, how and why any changes have occurred.

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<sup>4</sup> Previous evaluation reports can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

<sup>5</sup> Provides information about looked after children in England. The figures are based on data from the SSDA903 return collected from all 150 English local authorities.

<sup>6</sup> The ASGLB data return on adoption is completed by every local authority, voluntary adoption agency, and regional adoption agency in England on a quarterly basis.

<sup>7</sup> Inception and scoping report can be found here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/818186/Evaluation\\_of\\_RAA\\_scoping\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818186/Evaluation_of_RAA_scoping_report.pdf)

- Chapter five assesses the impact of RAAs on the range and quality of adoption support. This section also considers the effect of RAAs on the use of the Adoption Support Fund.
- Chapter six provides an analysis of costs, examining the costs of running RAAs and any changes to income, expenditure, and net expenditure because of regionalising adoption services.
- Chapter seven explores factors affecting the progress of RAAs and perceptions on the effectiveness of implementing the change process. It is organised around key themes such as leadership and offers a more practical guide to share learning around what has worked, for whom and in what circumstances.
- Lastly, in chapter eight, there is a summary of the main findings in spring 2020. The conclusion highlights the implications for RAAs and the DfE policy team to consider, to inform the future development of the programme. Next steps for the evaluation 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 2020 just prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. RAAs continue to evolve. 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 live RAAs that are longitudinal case studies (see Evaluation scope and method)<sup>8</sup>.
- **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.
- **RAA projects:** RAAs which had not launched at the time of this wave of research.

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<sup>8</sup> A seventh case study was paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## RAA programme

The regionalisation reforms<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the course of the evaluation, the Theory of Change (ToC) will be tested (see Annex one), including the assumptions and identified risks.

As of August 2020, 22 RAAs were in operation (13 more than at the point of the First Report) and seven RAA projects continued to work towards launching as operational RAAs. Of the live RAAs, nine have been live for two or more years, six have been live one to two years, and six have been live for less than 1 year.

## 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.

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<sup>9</sup> Department for Education (June 2015) Regionalising Adoption. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/437128/Regionalising\\_adoption.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16\\_Thurs\\_A.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16_Thurs_A.pdf)

## Method overview

The method for this report builds on the existing approach (see the [First Report for more details](#)). The research questions are provided in Annex two. This report is based on:

- Longitudinal data analysis (SSDA903<sup>11</sup>, ASGLB).
- In-depth longitudinal case study research in six RAAs to capture quantitative and qualitative information to measure the outcomes achieved, assess the factors affecting progress and understand the local context. In the main, interviews were held face-to-face in groups or individually, and by telephone as needed. A total of 210 interviewees comprised Heads of Service (HOS), managers and practitioners from recruitment and assessment, family finding and adoption support teams in RAAs and LA children's social workers and Assistant Directors of Children's Services. Interviews also involved staff working in business support, independent reviewing officers (IROs), adoption panel members and other local services such as clinical psychologists, virtual school heads, and local family courts.
- Preparation group surveys of adopters in five case study RAAs and early adopter interview findings.
- Interviews with 22 other RAAs and RAA projects.
- Interviews with one LA that has not yet firmed up their plans.
- Interviews with five VAAs (four as part of case study research, and one other).
- Interviews with 13 national stakeholders.
- A deductive and inductive approach to qualitative analysis through the development of a coding framework linked to the ToC, evaluation framework and emergent themes using NVivo (software to support qualitative data analysis).
- Research into RAA costs (Section 251 returns, cost templates returned from 3 RAAs and interviews with finance leads in the case study areas).

## Strengths and limitations of the evaluation

### Qualitative research

This second wave of qualitative research captured the views and experiences of a wide range of individuals working for and with RAAs across England. RAAs engaged well. The findings present a more up to date picture of progress across the programme, and a

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<sup>11</sup> Provides information about looked after children in England. The figures are based on data from the SSDA903 return collected from all 150 English local authorities.

deeper understanding of what different RAA models look like, how they operate, and which aspects appear to be the most important in working towards achieving the desired outcomes. The topic guides were extensive. Effective tailoring ensured good topic coverage across case study interviews and interviews with other RAAs and stakeholders reflected different roles, responsibilities, and stages of RAA delivery. An added benefit of engaging with the evaluation for interviewees was the opportunity to take stock and share learning. Most of the research was conducted prior to lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic therefore, this had limited impact on the research. Some changes were made however: the second wave of research with the seventh case study could not take place, the adoption support survey was paused, and a small number of interviews could not go ahead.

### Quantitative research

Importantly, this report provides early indications of the impact of RAAs on adopter recruitment and timeliness from placement order to a child being placed with an adoptive family. However, analysis of data on the number of applications received from prospective adopters and numbers progressing to subsequent stages of the approval process for RAAs live in 2018/19 only covers one year. Therefore, some caution should be applied when interpreting the data and comparing with agencies (LA/VAA) that were not live in 2018/19 as the analysis is not longitudinal (e.g. it could be that LAs within live RAAs have historically had few adopters leave the process). Furthermore, whilst the analysis in Chapter four examines the *timeliness* of matching it is unable to examine the *quality* of the matching. The quality of matches will be explored further as part of the third and final wave of qualitative research in 2021. A further limitation is that only three case study areas were able to complete the cost collection template to gather granular data on the costs of adoption before and after the formation of RAAs (e.g. staff, different overheads) before the Covid-19 pandemic and the temporary suspension of fieldwork. The additional analysis of s251 data provides an assessment of the overall costs, but as explained further in Chapter five, where there is a lead/host LA within an RAA, it is possible there is an element of double counting.

## Chapter 2: The RAA models

### Summary

- The broad typology of RAA models outlined in the Inception Report holds true. RAAs vary on the extent to which services and responsibilities are centralised. At the far end sit the 'LA hosted – centralised' RAAs where the majority of services and responsibilities shift from LAs to the RAA; followed by those setting up joint ventures/local authority trading companies (LATCs) where each LA has a shared and equal responsibility for the RAA; then 'LA hosted – hub and spoke' models (by far the most common approach, a centralised team with local offices); at the other end of the spectrum sit decentralised RAAs where LAs retain the majority of responsibilities and there is a small pooling of resources.
- As the programme has developed, there are an increasing number of partnership models which maintain some of the constituent LAs' and VAAs' original structures and processes in a decentralised or locality-based manner.
- The 'LA hosted' legal form dominates but the extent of the responsibilities that the LA host has within this legal form varies (e.g. whether the host LA has TUPE'd staff or not).
- The models share common features which reflect the intended outputs of RAAs – including the pooling of resources and budgets between partners, shared back-office functions and joint delivery and commissioning of services.
- Refinements are ongoing and few RAAs make significant changes post launch.
- RAAs have further developed links with the wider system, tending to focus first on strengthening links with LA Children's Services and transforming adoption panel arrangements.
- The various models each have pros and cons. Generally different models affect the partnership working within RAAs and with the wider ecosystem; the ability to pool budgets and resources; staff working conditions; the ability to build a joint identity; and ease of implementation.
- There are some early signs that the RAA model matters less for determining overall effectiveness, than the presence of certain core functions including the pooling of resources. However, it is too soon to say definitively.

Notably, and in line with policy expectations, there has been a drive to develop a more strategic approach to improving adopter recruitment strategies and commissioning arrangements for support, the success of which is discussed in Chapter five.

The Department considers a RAA application to meet the definition of a RAA if it has the following functions:

1. A **single line of accountability** for functions that sit within the RAA, reporting into **robust governance arrangements**
2. A **Head of service (HoS)** with responsibility for line management, recruitment, budgets, contract management and strategic relationships, and who is accountable to the governance board for delivery of functions delegated to the RAA from local authorities
3. **Pooled funding** into a single RAA budget
4. Core functions of **recruitment, matching, and support** are transferred to the RAA
5. **Pan-regional approach**: embedding best practice across the RAA
6. A **system wide approach** to meeting the needs of children and families.

This chapter describes the characteristics of the RAA models being implemented and delivered in early 2020. Research conducted as part of the inception and scoping phase of this evaluation found that variations in how RAAs structured their services were usually a result of geographic considerations and the ease with which staff could work from out of different offices.

Building on the scoping phase of the evaluation, this chapter provides an updated picture of the RAA models. It covers the developing evidence base around the defining features of different models, views on the relative importance of these attributes, the reasons for any changes over time, and RAAs' plans for the future development of their model.

## Size and make-up of RAAs

The average size of an RAA is four LAs. Three RAAs are comprised of two LAs, and the largest RAA has nine LAs involved. There has been some flux in the size of both live RAAs and RAA projects over the past year. For example, one RAA increased by one LA, while LAs in other RAA projects decided to drop out of the arrangements, or decided to split off into multiple, smaller RAAs. VAAs are sometimes involved at the board level or deliver some elements of the service, however in eight cases, VAAs were not part of the RAA's make-up although several intended to involve VAAs in some way.

## Factors influencing size and make-up of RAAs

The factors influencing the size and make-up of all RAAs remain like those found in previous evaluation waves. Evidence from the past year of the evaluation confirms that a **history of partnership** working is a key determining factor for the timely development of RAAs through the project and 'go live' processes. For the more established RAAs, the LAs involved typically had a history of partnership working in adoption, so forming an RAA based on these historic relations was judicious.

RAAs that had formed more recently were less likely to have these partnerships. This was often because, prior to RAAs, there was **large variability in the performance of constituent LAs' adoption services**, in terms of adopter sufficiency, timeliness of adoptions, use of interagency fee (i.e. the frequency of local compared with non-local placement)<sup>12</sup> and previous Ofsted performance. Where there was this variability, partnership options were less obvious, and some of the higher-performing LAs felt that they may have had to compromise on the quality of their service if they had to form an RAA with lower-performing LAs. Therefore, more work was needed during the RAA project stage to negotiate the design of RAA models to ensure all parties were satisfied with the approach.

## Overarching RAA models

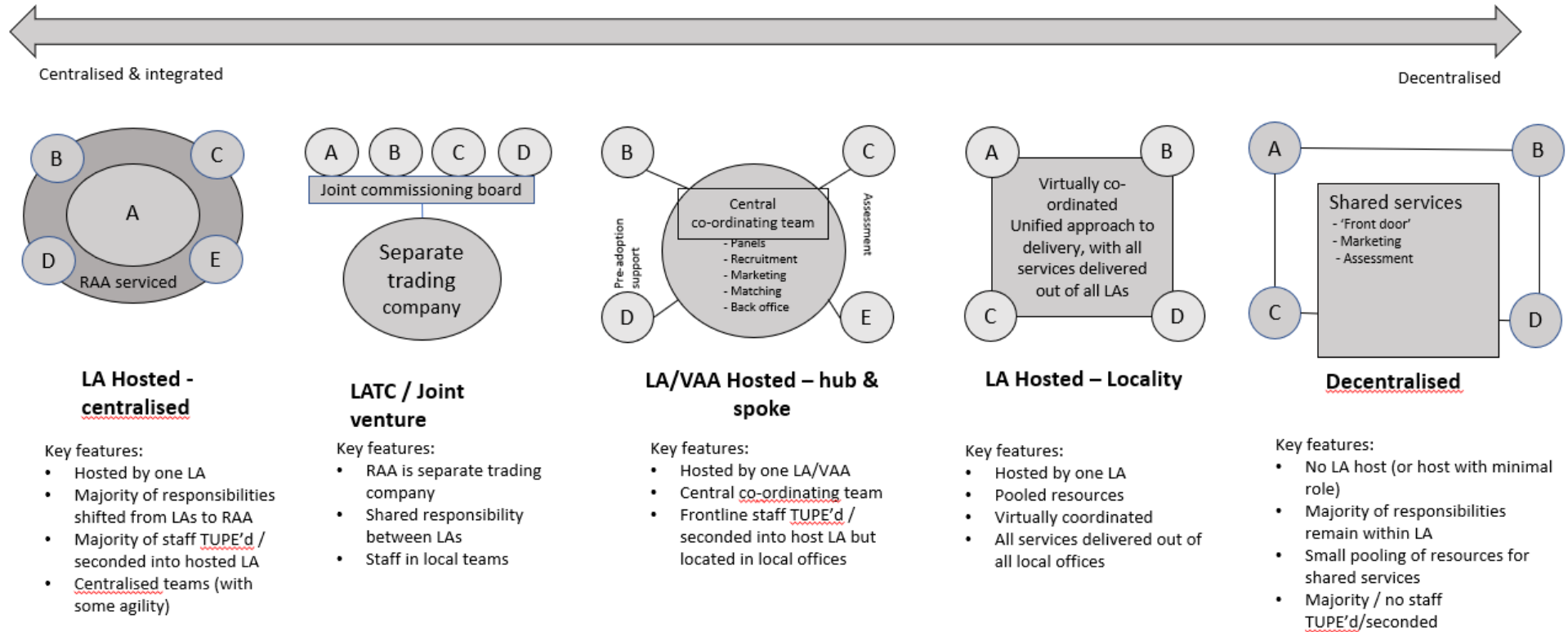
During the scoping phase of the RAA evaluation, we identified a typology of RAA models, and found in the 2018-2019 evaluation report that the case study RAAs that had gone live broadly fitted into the typology. The models within this typology fall along a continuum, which has been updated for 2019/20 (see Figure 2.1), the more recent RAAs have adopted a more decentralised approach. The main characteristics of the different RAA models and pros and cons drawn from the qualitative research are outlined in Table 2.1.

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<sup>12</sup> The interagency fee is a charge that is paid when a local authority places a child with an adopter approved by another adoption agency (this could be another local authority, a regional adoption agency, or a voluntary adoption agency). See: <https://www.cvaa.org.uk/interagency-fee#>



Figure 2.1: RAA Model Typology



A/B/C/D refer to LAs/VAs

**Table 2.1: An overview of RAA Models**

Model type	Description	Pros	Cons
LA Hosted - Centralised	Most services and responsibilities are shifted from the LAs to the RAA. Staff are TUPE'd <sup>13</sup> or seconded into the LA host. All staff are based in the same office (i.e. there are centralised teams), but practitioners are expected to work in a mobile way across the RAA and maintain links with LAs they originated from.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pooled budget and resources</li> <li>• Co-location of all RAA staff</li> <li>• Improved communications between RAA teams</li> <li>• More of a 'whole-RAA' identify</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased travel time for staff</li> <li>• Less direct interface with LA teams</li> </ul>
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pooled budget and resources</li> <li>• Shared responsibility between LAs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longer decision-making processes in setting up and deciding scope and where responsibilities lie between LAs and the LATC</li> <li>• Separate entity to LAs, so less direct working with LAs</li> </ul>

<sup>13</sup> TUPE is an acronym for the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) regulations 2006. These regulations aim to protect employees if the organisation they work for changes hands. See: [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/7697-a-guide-to-tupe-transfers-web\\_tcm18-44310.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/7697-a-guide-to-tupe-transfers-web_tcm18-44310.pdf)

Model type	Description	Pros	Cons
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More difficulties in early permanence as are not regulated as fostering agencies</li> </ul>
LA/VAA hosted – Hub and Spoke	Staff are TUPE'd or seconded into the LA host, where some work in the centralised team (the hub) and others work in multiple teams in different offices called 'spokes'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pooled budget and resources</li> <li>• Larger geographic coverage</li> <li>• Reduced staff travel</li> <li>• Interface with LA staff maintained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk of staff feeling isolated/disconnected</li> <li>• Harder to maintain RAA 'identity' if staff are working across offices</li> </ul>
LA hosted – Locality	Staff are TUPE'd or seconded into the LA host, but continue to work in their original LA offices. All services are offered across all offices, but there is a centralised team (often working virtually).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff able to continue working in their previous offices</li> <li>• Geographic coverage ensured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harder to maintain RAA 'identity' if staff are working across offices</li> <li>• Harder to ensure consistency in practice across all offices</li> </ul>

Model type	Description	Pros	Cons
Decentralised	Most responsibilities, services and staff remain within the LA with a small pooling of resources for shared services. <sup>14</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working arrangements for staff remain largely unchanged</li> <li>• Quicker to set up and implement</li> <li>• Geographic coverage ensured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budget and resources pooled at smaller scale or not at all</li> <li>• Less of a 'whole RAA' identity</li> <li>• More layers of accountability (decisions made within LAs and across the RAA)</li> <li>• Staff not TUPE'd or seconded, so varying contract terms and conditions</li> </ul>

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<sup>14</sup> 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](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/756164/Evaluation_of_RAA_scoping_report.pdf)

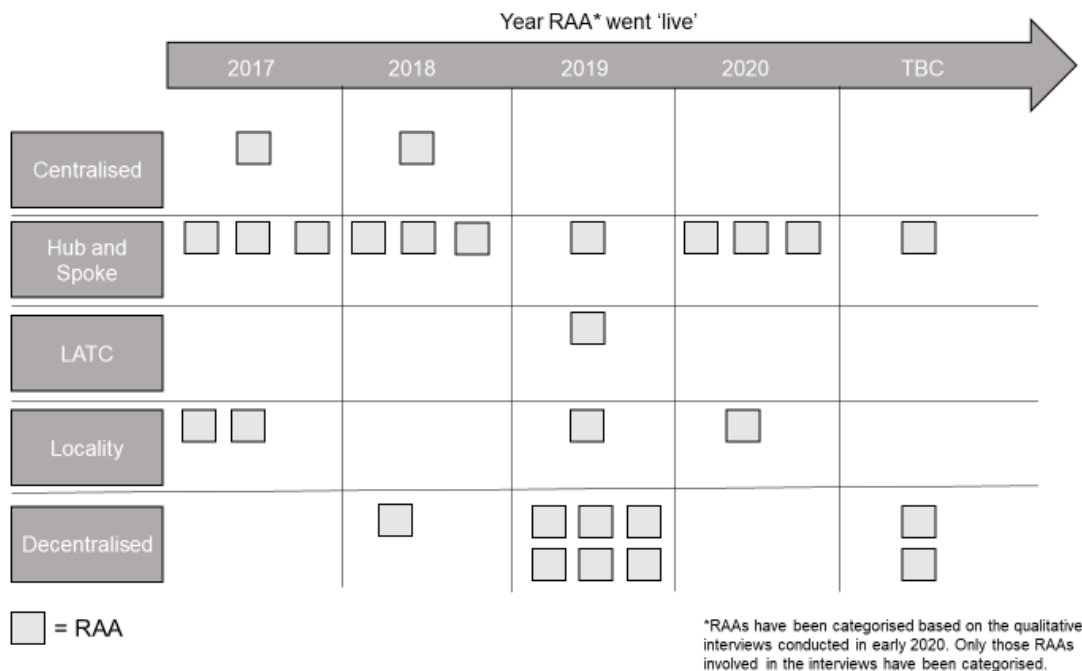
Evaluation activity to date continues to confirm that this model typology generally holds true, although increasingly there are variants within these different models, such as the locality model. Additionally, several of the newer RAAs/RAA projects were described by stakeholders as 'partnership models' which are like the 'decentralised' model above. These 'partnership models' do not all follow the same shape or structure (and therefore cut across the typology outlined above, rather than fit into any of the categories) but are named as such to describe a transition towards working more collaboratively (in the spirit of regionalisation), whilst also maintaining some of the constituent LAs' and VAAs' original structures and processes in a decentralised or locality-based manner.

While there is variation in the structure of RAAs (i.e. falling on a spectrum of centralised, hub and spoke and decentralised models), all but three of the live RAAs and RAA projects have opted for the LA hosted legal form (the three others are decentralised (no host LA), VAA hosted and LATC). One national stakeholder highlighted that the LA hosted model was likely the more popular option, as it was easier to set up than more complex legal forms like LATC, seen by some professionals as being akin to a new VAA. However, while the LA hosted legal form dominates, the extent of the role of the host LA is varied. In some RAAs, the host LAs have TUPE'd or seconded staff over, and are responsible for providing back-office functions such as finance or legal. In other RAAs, LAs have taken on a 'thin host' role, where the host does not take on the contracts of any RAA staff and instead is just responsible for the management of the RAA. The newer RAAs and RAA projects were more likely to have this 'thin host' role, compared with the more established RAAs. Speaking about the use of LA hosted models, one national stakeholder commented:

"I guess that [prevalence of LA hosted models] happened because councils were already working reasonably well together so it was quite easy to say, "You deal with most of it, we trust you, let's get on with it." As you get further down the line you've got councils that haven't traditionally worked together as much or as well, then there might be a need for a different [model] solution when you haven't already got that trust." – *National Stakeholder*

Figure 2.2 shows the take-up of different RAA models over time.

**Figure 2.2: RAA Model take-up over time**



Below, the evidence generated in the past year in relation to each of the models is described.

**LA hosted – centralised (2 RAAs)** – Overall the evidence suggested that the LA hosted centralised model has continued to function as anticipated for the RAAs using it. As reported in the 2019 evaluation report, there was some level of flexibility in how centralised models were used; with some RAAs using a centralised hub and remote working to allow staff to work on the go, and others just having one office that all staff were expected to work from at all times.

**Local Authority Trading Company (1 RAA)** – Only one RAA has the LATC model. Originally, another RAA project was considering the LATC model, but stakeholders decided to move to a decentralised model where responsibility would stay with the individual LAs, rather than having joint accountability. Over the past year, the LATC RAA has not seen its model change much, with delivery continuing to be spread across hubs in three areas, with all functions delivered across each hub.

**LA or VAA hosted – hub and spoke (11 RAAs)** – As stated in the 2019 evaluation report, the majority of RAAs to date have opted for the hub and spoke model. Choice of this model continued to be dictated by the geographic reach of RAAs, with ‘hubs’ based relatively centrally, and ‘spokes’ in other locations to ensure geographic coverage. Within this model, the hub typically incorporates the management team and the central functions (e.g. marketing, recruitment, finance, business support, HR) and the spokes usually

deliver the outward-facing services (e.g. family finders, adoption preparation and approval and adoption support services).

The 2019 evaluation highlighted one RAA that had used a 'locality' model. The evaluation activity in the past year found that more RAAs have opted to use the locality model (4 RAAs in total), having 'bases' or 'touchdowns' in some areas, and satellite offices in other areas. Locality models were typically used where there was large geographic reach, but also where individual LAs wanted to retain some of their previous working arrangements. The main difference between locality models and hub and spoke models is that all adoption services are offered across all offices in locality models, but processes are still shared, and resources pooled.

**Decentralised (9 RAAs)** – A key theme emerging in this year's evaluation is that some newer RAAs have opted for a 'decentralised' LA hosted model, where the LA host has a minimal role. These models were described by National and RAA stakeholders in terms such as 'partnership agreements', 'regional alliances' or 'virtual hubs', reflecting minimal change from the previous adoption services structure in the constituent LAs. However, these RAAs do appear to align with some of the core features of RAAs (e.g. pooling of resources) despite looking quite different to other RAA models.

For example, one RAA project is looking towards using a decentralised model where staff remain in their LAs, but there is centralised management and an RAA executive board. In another RAA, the four LAs' agencies are still running independently of each other and are accountable to their individual boards. However, some resources are pooled, including joint marketing and communications, and strategies to reach different groups of potential adopters.

Only one RAA has opted for a decentralised model with no host LA or VAA. In this RAA, each of the participating local authorities are responsible for leading different aspects of the RAA (i.e. there are different lead authorities for information governance, communications, legal and finance, commissioning, performance management and Adopter and Children's voice). The HoS of the RAA is accountable to the RAAs governance board but does not have authority over the HoSs in the respective LAs, and instead provides more of a leadership and advisory role.

The evaluation is exploring the impact over time of these different models on the effectiveness of the RAA in meeting the four key aims of regionalisation and the extent to which the degree of service centralisation is a contributing factor. One RAA stakeholder commented that the partnership approach (usually with decentralised or locality-based model) would be less impacted by the transformation into an RAA, because most of the processes and ways-of-working would be the same. We discuss throughout this report and will continue to monitor in the final year of evaluation the extent to which this is true.

“The benefit of this [decentralised] model is because it is a journey and a transformational journey. The storming process you experience when you make a transformational change is better managed. That doesn’t mean to say that you won’t have challenges and you won’t discover differences, that is healthy actually, because you can work with them and you can do something about them. But what you don’t see is a mass loss of staff for example. What you have seen is some of the weaker local authorities embrace some very significant changes. Because it happens over a longer period of time, people are feeling more secure than they would if the change had happened overnight.” – *case study RAA Panel Chair*

## Core elements of RAAs

The early indications are that the RAA model matters less for determining overall effectiveness, than the presence of certain core elements (the nuances of which vary depending on the model). However, the effects of the decentralised models emerging in more newer RAAs is still unknown, It may be helpful to conceptualise the variance of RAA models in terms of their convergence with or divergence from the core features of RAAs as outlined in the ToC (see Annex one). Below we outline these core features and describe the extent to which RAAs are characteristic of them, and which of these features RAA stakeholders interviewed across the programme feel are most important. We explore later in the report the impact of these different features:

**Pooling of resources and budgets between partners, shared back-office functions and joint delivery and commissioning of services** – The RAA model appears to dictate how resources and functions are shared, and how joined up the delivery of adoption services are. Joint delivery of services, shared resources and functions is clearest in the centralised model, as all services have been combined to be delivered from one location. Within the LATC, hub and spoke, and locality models, by the nature of their geography, services are delivered across each of the hubs/bases and spokes/satellite offices, although the RAA is now establishing what the core offer of adoption support looks like and beginning to work from the same case-management systems for family finding. In decentralised models, there is usually a focus on bringing together best practice from each of the partners, agreed through various operational board/task and finish groups but the extent of joined-up delivery depends on the partnership or service level agreements in place. There is also variation in decentralised models in terms of the extent to which resources and budgets are pooled. In some of the decentralised RAAs, individual LAs retain control of the resources used and their own budgets. In most other models, budgets are pooled across local authorities, based initially on historic spend, and latterly on other approaches such as contribution-based



models. Throughout the report we discuss the importance of these shared functions and resources on the success of RAAs.

**Sharing of adopters** – In all RAAs that took part in this wave of research, the LAs shared adopters and did not pay an interagency fee, most RAA stakeholders identifying the pooling of adopters as a central aim of regionalisation. Across most RAAs, marketing and recruitment activities have been pooled, with the rationale being that efficiencies can be made when sharing communications strategies to try and focus the reach on target potential adopters and reducing interagency fees. It is too early to comment on which models were more effective in this regard.

**Movement of staff into new teams** – RAAs with different models have taken varied approaches to the movement of staff, ranging from TUPE, secondment and keeping staff employed by their original LAs. Usually, those with more decentralised models are more likely to keep staff employed by their LA, reflecting the fact that staff are working in the same locations as prior to RAAs. Where RAA LA hosts have taken a ‘thin host’ approach (i.e. perhaps by only taking on a management approach), staff are usually not seconded or TUPE’d into the host LA or VAA. Most other RAAs have either TUPE’d or seconded their staff into the host LA, with the rationale being that it ensures all contracts are the same, budgets are easier to manage, and helps to develop the whole-RAA identity. We will explore later in the report the impact of staff contracting arrangements on RAAs.

**Management or operations board** – At the point of interview, almost all RAAs, regardless of their legal form or model, had an RAA management (or strategic) board, to whom the HoS was usually accountable. RAA management boards were usually comprised of LA representatives (Directors or Associate Directors). In some of the well-established RAAs, there was board representation from VAAs, health, panel chairs, and adopters, whereas newer RAAs (especially those with ‘partnership models’) tended to have representation from local authorities only. Some stakeholders felt that the lack of diversity on the boards, signalled a lack of interest in working collaboratively with other agencies (particularly VAAs). One stakeholder commented that this was due to earlier RAAs, having emerged from previous working partnerships, being in a better position to work collaboratively with other agencies/partners from the outset. Where finding an appropriate way forward took longer than expected, newer RAAs were perhaps less outward-looking with their governance arrangements. In one RAA, the individual LA agencies had their own governance boards and arrangements and were responsible for managing their own budgets. However, an executive board comprised of representatives from each of the agencies meets quarterly to discuss how the agencies can work together to add strategic value (e.g. pooling communications and marketing approaches).

Linking into the management of RAAs, some national stakeholders viewed the HoS’s level of control as an important feature, commenting that the level of power that HoSs have to make decisions may impact the extent to which RAAs can be an effective model.

For example, some stakeholders commented that if a HoS has control of the budget then it signifies that with the RAA has full control of adoption services, which is important. The extent to which HoSs' level of influence determines success is discussed later.

## Links with the wider system

**Working with LA Children's Services** – A key consideration for all RAA HoS interviewed and staff in the case study RAAs was ensuring that they continue to work closely with LA Children's Services, to keep the journey of the child at the forefront and improve awareness of the children who may be placed for adoption. How RAAs work with LA Children's Services depends on the model. Most of the models, except for the fully centralised models (and specifically where all RAA staff are based in one building without any satellite offices), have some sort of regular interface with LA Children's Services. The hub and spoke models typically have the outward-facing services (i.e. Family Finding, adopter assessment and preparation and adoption support) in the spokes, and locality models retain the interface with the LA by having staff operating in their existing areas. Working relationships generally remain unchanged in the decentralised model, due to the nature of staff continuing to work in their LAs.

Usually, the responsibility for the child remains within the LA's remit until the Adoption Order is made, so most RAAs need to work closely with LAs throughout the adoption journey. As identified in the 2018-2019 evaluation report, this partnership is best facilitated by RAA staff having access to children's case files in LAs, and the more established RAAs learned the importance of having all IT systems embedded at the point of going live. However as discussed in chapter seven, this is not always the case, and data access remains an ongoing challenge. Evidence from the 2020 evaluation activity indicates that newer RAAs, and RAA projects, have learned from the established RAAs, that IT needs to be sorted out early on. It is particularly important for centralised or hub and spoke models, where most RAA staff are not co-located with LA teams.

To improve the timeliness of placements, increasingly RAAs are working with LAs to implement case tracking systems. These systems provide an overview of cases coming through LAs' systems (often before a Placement Order is made), so that Family Finders can be alerted to children who may be placed for adoption and can start looking into finding suitable adoptive families. These systems are also important for facilitating early permanence decisions, so that the RAAs can place children through Fostering for Adoption (FfA) or concurrent planning arrangements. We discuss in Chapter four how effectively these systems are working.

**Adoption Panels** – Interviews with all RAA HoS signalled that adoption panel arrangements generally have changed in the move to RAAs. In RAAs spread across a wide geography, with many LAs involved, the number of panels has been under review. For example, one RAA has seven panels per month across the LAs but is reviewing the

necessity of this number of panels. Several RAAs reported putting in place a panel advisor, who has the role of quality assuring all panels with the aim of achieving consistency across panel processes and prospective adopter reports (PAR). RAAs also reported having a central list of panel members which is typically maintained by the panel adviser, and in some RAAs the panels rotate their chairs. In RAAs that have opted for more a decentralised model, panels are usually still held within LAs, but there are efforts in place to ensure a consistent experience in panel for everybody.

**Special Guardianship Orders** – Overall, the picture on SGOs has not changed much over the past year. Incorporation of SG arrangements within and across RAAs varied and SGs was often a future consideration for newer RAAs. In one of the RAAs, inclusion of post-SG placement support varied depending on the LAs. Some of the participating authorities had decided to retain SG placement support in their remit, while others decided it should be the remit of the RAA. Most SGO assessments, however, are done by the LAs. One RAA already incorporates SGO assessments in their remit. Several RAAs were considering incorporating SGO assessments or post-SGO support in the future, whereas others had agreed at the strategic level that SGOs would remain within the remit of LAs. One national stakeholder commented that RAAs should focus on getting the adoption journey right before moving onto SGOs. We will continue to explore the extent of RAAs' incorporation of SGO assessments and post-SGO support, and the impact of this as regional leadership boards also have SGOs in their remit.

**Working with VAAs** – The First Report 2018-19 highlighted RAAs' varying level of engagement with VAAs which has continued. Currently, some VAAs are only involved in an RAA at board level, providing advisory support to inform strategic decision-making, but are not involved in the day-to-day delivery of services. In other RAAs, VAAs have been contracted by RAAs to deliver a service, such as training for RAA staff, delivering preparation group training or adopter voice. Some RAAs have more ad-hoc arrangements with VAAs, perhaps using them to provide a bespoke family finding service. In such examples, VAA providers may be on a commissioned framework, where RAAs commission work from VAAs as and when needed. Nationally, RAA and VAA stakeholders have all highlighted that this variance has continued over time, and there is still some uncertainty about the role of VAAs in the new landscape of adoption services. We discuss this more, in relation to commissioning arrangements, in Chapter five.

To date, only one RAA is VAA-led and there are no clear differences by RAA model. The newer RAAs that have typically opted for a LA hosted partnership approach (i.e. decentralised or locality-based), have had less input from VAAs.

**Judiciary** – The First Report 2018-19 highlighted that a challenge for RAAs was that they were not co-terminus with the courts system, so often they had to engage with and navigate multiple court systems as was previously the case. In this research wave we found that several of the newer RAAs or RAA projects were yet to do any specific work

with the courts, as other elements of set up and implementation took priority initially. The more established RAAs appear to have done some more work to better engage the courts. For example, one RAAs' HoS is now a member of the local Family Justice Board (that meets three times a year), which allows them to share good practice and continue to build relationships with the judiciary. This RAA also holds regular free talks on various adoption-related topics at the court for anyone who wants to attend. For the more decentralised models, where individual LAs retain similar working processes as before, the impact of regionalisation on the interactions with the judiciary may be less apparent. This is something we will continue to explore throughout the evaluation.

**Health** – As with working with the judiciary, RAAs are not always co-terminus with health partners. RAAs often have to work with multiple Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) both in terms of the adopter assessment process (i.e. for getting health assessments for adopters), as well as in relation to adoption support (e.g. accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)). Again, we will examine this throughout the evaluation. It may be expected that in RAAs where working arrangements have not changed significantly from pre-RAAs (i.e. in decentralised models), working with health partners may not be as impacted compared with other models such as centralised or hub and spoke, that have required greater transformational change to day-to-day working.

**Additional funding** – There was variation across RAAs in terms of access to other funding, in the run-up to going live as well as once they went live. Use of these additional pots of money is important to consider, when assessing the extent to which regionalisation led to certain impacts being achieved (compared with other programmes or funding streams). The additional funding pots that some RAAs and LAs reported having, which may have had an impact on their adoption services, are as follows:

1. Centre for Excellence grant (DfE) – Two RAAs have benefitted from the DfE's grant for adoption support, which helps them bring together social care, health, and education experts to provide assessments and support for families.<sup>15</sup>
2. Practice and Improvement Funding – multiple RAAs benefitted from this funding to support with innovation in matching children with families, particularly where children have had complex needs.<sup>16</sup>
3. DfE Innovation Funding (Mockingbird and Partners in Practice programme) – Some LAs have received Innovation funding for their Children's Services from the DfE to improve outcomes for children in need of their help.<sup>17</sup>
4. Adoption Support Fund – This fund from the DfE allows LAs and RAAs to apply for

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/multi-million-fund-reaches-record-number-of-adoptive-families>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-services-practice-and-improvement-fund>

<sup>17</sup> <https://innovationcsc.co.uk/>

therapeutic funding for eligible adoptive and SGO families.<sup>18</sup>

5. Additional funding from LAs – in one RAA, a LA self-funded additional posts for the RAA. After 2019, the RAA board agreed to make the posts permanent, and fund the posts jointly across the RAAs constituent LA.

## Ongoing development of models

Overall, the interviews with RAA HoS across the programme and with staff in the case study RAAs indicated limited changes to RAA models. Some of the more established RAAs (over 2 years) had seen changes to the services that were considered under their remit (for example, a year into going live, an RAA brought a birth relative service in-house, having previously commissioned it out).

With increased understanding about the future of the Adoption Support Fund, HoS in several RAAs highlighted that they had established Adoption Support provider frameworks, to ensure efficiency in commissioning and consistency in the quality of support provided to all families. The impact of RAAs on commissioning adoption support services are discussed further in Chapter five.

Interviews with RAA HoS suggested that some of the main changes to the models have related to the make-up of RAAs. For example, one of the RAA projects had nearly finalised their approach and then a LA dropped out of the arrangement because they felt they did not have enough of a governance role. Elsewhere, a live RAA was in discussions with a LA about joining the RAA, but the application to join was later rejected by the RAA.

Other changes have been outside the control of the RAA but have impacted on their work. For example, in one of the case study RAAs, one LA's Children's Services was restructured, which meant that new LA staff, with limited experience in adoption, had to engage with the RAA. The RAA had to do a lot of work with these members of staff to help them understand the RAAs role and processes and the restructure increased the number of locality teams the RAA had to work with, putting additional pressure on existing capacity.

As RAAs emerge from the 'forming and storming' and into the 'norming'<sup>19</sup> phases, they can start looking at how they can continue to develop their models. Over the past year of the evaluation, RAAs have considered reviewing what elements of services are included

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adoption-support-fund-asf>

<sup>19</sup> 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.

in their remit or considered changing the entire RAA model, although at the point of the interviews, these reviews had not yet been concluded.

Several RAA stakeholders spoke about how they aspired to include more aspects of adoption services into the RAA in the future but stressed the importance of getting the structure in place and ways of working established first. This was the case particularly for the RAAs that had a long design and development phase because they felt it was important to get all parties to agree on a basic model before adding in too many elements at once. Key aspects of services that RAAs are looking to bring in-house in the future include taking over the case holding of children at the point of the placement order, assessment of non-agency adoptions (e.g. stepparent adoption) assessments, adoption support services (for those that currently commission them out) and assessments and support to Special Guardianship carers.

One of the more established RAAs highlighted ultimate ambitions to change their model, from hub and spoke model to more of a centralised model. The rationale for this was to help further engender the sense of team-working and support staff morale, by bringing the whole team together. We discuss the impact of different models on staff morale in Chapter seven.

## Conclusion

In the past year of the evaluation, more RAAs have gone 'live' or are about to go live, providing a greater understanding of the overall landscape of RAAs and the RAA models used. The typology developed during the Inception and Scoping Report generally still holds true, although there has been increasing variation in some of the model types, indicating that models do sit on a spectrum from being more centralised to less centralised. In the last year, there has been an increase of 'partnership approaches', that – having taken the form of decentralised or locality-based models – are still seeking greater collaboration in the spirit of the regionalisation reforms, but are also using the original core features of RAAs more flexibly than older RAAs. Despite broadly aligning with our typology, it is also clear that every RAA varies. Going ahead, therefore, it will be important to continue to assess the impact of RAAs in relation to their models, but also to consider the impact in relation to these core features, and unpick in more detail the most important elements of RAAs in meeting the four aims of regionalisation.

## Chapter 3: The sufficiency of local and national adopter recruitment

### Summary

- Nationally, the number of children with a placement order has been decreasing since 2015. Similarly, the proportion of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with a family (indicator for sufficiency) has decreased.
- There is not yet quantitative evidence of the impact of RAAs on the proportion of children with a placement order who were placed with a family. This is likely due to the small number of RAAs that were live, and the short period within which they were live, up to the point the data are currently available – March 2019.
- Commonly, RAAs have broadly been able to maintain adopter recruitment levels through the transition period, substantiated by quantitative data, which is positive as this was a concern in the earlier stages of the evaluation.
- The qualitative research found that stakeholders involved in the RAA felt that, in joining LAs together, RAAs have successfully broadened their pool of adopters, in number, and to a lesser extent diversity.
- Challenges remain in recruiting adopters for ‘harder to place’ children.
- Increasingly, RAAs are taking a more strategic approach to marketing. This includes incorporating targeted marketing activities and developing websites that promote inclusion to boost efforts to increase adopter diversity, which has been important for adopter engagement.
- Pooling resources as an RAA was confirmed as one of the main facilitating factors across the programme that helped to improve marketing activities and delivering preparation group training, alongside the investment and adopter recruitment activities at a national level.
- Tracking the success of marketing activities needs further research to support learning and help inform adopter recruitment strategies so RAAs can recruit adopters that meet the needs of all waiting children.

This chapter describes the sufficiency of local and national adopter recruitment. It considers the qualitative and quantitative evidence for the impact of RAAs on adopter sufficiency, covering the impact of increased targeted marketing and recruitment activities, the effect of pooled resources and increased coordination, the picture of

diversity within the adopter pool and the improvements being made to preparation groups. Finally, the chapter considers the RAAs' plans for improving adopter sufficiency.

## Adopter recruitment

A key outcome for RAAs is adopter sufficiency, approving enough adopters to satisfy the number and characteristics of the children waiting. The 2018-19 evaluation report highlighted concerns about the **negative effect of a “hiatus” in recruitment activity** during the transition period to live RAA. Post-launch, there were challenges recruiting adopters nationally (both in terms of number and diversity) but a main theme through the qualitative research with the live case study RAAs was that with the passing of time, RAAs were creating larger adopter pools (i.e. more matching opportunities within the available pool), helped by the number of children with an adoption plan reducing. There were indications that recruitment activities in the more established RAAs were leading to a favourable conversion rate because the pooled budgets helped to provide more opportunities for matches with the RAA area, and there was an increase in targeted marketing activity.

For this report, quantitative analysis of adoption data was undertaken to explore changes in adopter recruitment, before and after the implementation of RAAs. The analysis comprised two approaches:

1. Assessment of the number of children with a placement order and the number subsequently placed with an adoptive family.
2. Assessment of the number and characteristics of adopters recruited i.e. registering an interest to adopt.

Due to concerns around data quality, approach 2 examines data from the 2018/19 financial year and does not include changes over time. These issues will be explored with the respective data owners and covered in the final evaluation report (2021). We look at each in turn below.

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

Table 3.1 shows, at a national level, that between 2015 and 2018 the number of children with a placement order each financial year was decreasing. In 2019, there was a slight increase in the number of placement orders. Within a given financial year, the number of children with a placement order includes those who received a placement order in previous years but were yet to be placed with an adoptive family and those receiving a placement order in that year – this reflects the overall demand for each year. The number of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with an adoptive family (indicating sufficiency) over the same period was also decreasing. Combining these two



measures provides some indication of sufficiency – that is of the children who had a placement order, what proportion were placed with an adoptive family.

**Table 3.1: Number of children with placement orders and number/proportion of children placed with an adoptive family**

Year	Number with a placement order	Number placed with an adoptive family	Percentage placed with an adoptive family
2014/15	7,480	4,645	62%
2015/16	6,546	3,932	60%
2016/17	6,368	3,504	55%
2017/18	6,373	3,192	50%
2018/19	6,554	2,979	45%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2019

The key finding related to sufficiency in Table 3.1 is that the proportion of children with a placement order who were subsequently placed with a family, at the national level, reduced from 62% in 2015 to 45% in 2019.<sup>20</sup> For context, if the same level of sufficiency in 2015 was applied to the 2019 numbers, an additional 1,000 children would have been placed.

The majority of children not placed within a given year were awaiting a placement (i.e. they may have been placed in the next financial year and the ‘sufficiency’ captured there). For a small proportion of children, the decision was taken for them to be no longer placed for adoption because an adoptive family could not be found. Of those not yet placed in 2015, a family could not be found for 9%. This fell to around 3% in 2017-2018 and increased in 2019 to 6%.

Children that were no longer placed for adoption were, on average older (4.7 years), male (59%) and part of a sibling group (74%). One in four children that were no longer placed for adoption were BAME. Analysis is not provided at the RAA level due to small sample sizes, particularly when trying to assess changes over time.

To determine whether live RAAs differed to not yet live RAAs on the proportion of children placed for adoption who were placed with an adoptive family (i.e. sufficiency), regression analysis was undertaken. The analysis was set up as a fixed-effects

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note how proportions were calculated: Within each financial year, these percentages report on the proportion of all those requiring adoption (who may have been placed for adoption in previous years but not yet placed with an adoptive family) that were placed with an adoptive family. In other words, annual snapshots are calculated so that changes can be examined.

regression which allows us to **isolate the impact of “live” RAA status** from the impacts of time (in the case of RAAs, the national downward trend in sufficiency) and considers the changes “within” each RAA. The outcome variable was the proportion of children with a placement order that were placed with an adoptive family. The results are presented in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2: Proportion of children with a placement order who were placed with an adoptive family - fixed-effects regression output.<sup>21</sup>**

Factor	Estimate	Standard Error	p value
(Intercept)	0.431	0.161	0.009
RAA live status	-0.018	0.022	0.417
Year: 2017	-0.046	0.014	0.001
Year: 2018	-0.080	0.014	0.000
Year: 2019	-0.136	0.015	0.000

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2015-2019

The regression analysis (Table 3.2) found there was **no statistically significant difference between live and not yet live RAAs** (i.e. “RAA live status”) around sufficiency. Recognising the data covers up until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019, this finding might reflect the limited time most RAAs have had to improve sufficiency at a measurable population-level and, for some, the negative effect of a “hiatus” in recruitment activity during the transition period to live RAA.

*2. Assessment of the number and characteristics of adopters recruited i.e. registering an interest in RAAs.*

Analysis of data on the number of applications received from prospective adopters and numbers progressing to subsequent stages of the approval process, for RAAs live in 2018/19, is presented in Table 3.3. For comparison, analysis is also provided for agencies (LA/VAA) that were not live in 2018/19. In most cases, a large proportion (if not all) applications progressed from registration/ check to stage one, and preparation groups.<sup>22</sup> Fewer applications progressed to Stage 2<sup>23</sup> (and subsequently approval). The

<sup>21</sup> Output truncated. RAA was also included as a factor, which created a dummy variable for each RAA.

<sup>22</sup> Stage one involves the first round of registration and checks in which the agency collects information about prospective adopters and their households. They will also be invited to attend preparation groups to help explore the benefits and challenges of adoption. The agency will decide on whether they can continue to stage 2.

<sup>23</sup> Stage 2 involves more intensive assessment and preparation as well as further training so that prospective adopters are ready to be recommended for approval to adopt a child. At the end of stage 2 prospective adopters are presented to an adoption panel.

proportion of total applications that progressed to approved ranged from 10% to 34%. Whilst the proportions of adopters leaving the process<sup>24</sup> were generally low, four RAAs were above 10%. Relative to not yet live RAAs, a smaller proportion of adopters appeared to leave the process in most live RAAs. Some caution should be applied to this comparison though as the analysis is not longitudinal (e.g. it could be that LAs within live RAAs have historically had few adopters leave the process).

**Table 3.3: Adopter Approvals (1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019)**

RAA	Total applications	Pro-gressed to stage 1	Pro-gressed to stage 2	Ap-proved	Left the adop-tion process	Ongo-ing
RAA1	234	100%	46%	17%	13%	70%
RAA2	89	71%	54%	20%	11%	69%
RAA3	110	98%	54%	18%	11%	71%
RAA4	65	74%	54%	12%	3%	85%
RAA5	125	90%	55%	34%	0%	66%
RAA6	118	73%	61%	26%	7%	67%
RAA7	132	82%	58%	30%	5%	64%
RAA8	158	100%	51%	14%	0%	86%
RAA9	137	46%	15%	10%	24%	66%
RAA10	80	89%	83%	25%	0%	75%
Not live RAAs	4,740	81%	39%	19%	17%	64%

Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2019

## Number of adopters

The next section considers how RAAs have influenced adopter sufficiency. The evidence draws on the more recent qualitative data from interviews with a wide range of RAA, LA and local partners in the case study RAAs and HoS from other RAAs.

Interviews in 2019/20 found a common perception that live RAAs interviewed across the programme have successfully broadened the size of the adopter pool although no changes in adopter sufficiency have yet been captured in the quantitative data. The qualitative research indicates that the slowdown in recruitment activities during the transition to RAA did not last as long as they were concerned it might given the scale of

<sup>24</sup> An adopter may leave the process voluntary or be rejected from the process.

the changes in transitioning to an RAA. RAAs across the programme have reported that, based on their local management information, recruitment strategies have increased the number of enquiries and registrations and led to a positive impact on adopter sufficiency over time. However, there is a lack of available data on the impact of RAA recruitment strategies and there remain some gaps in sufficiency, particularly for 'harder to place' children, which remains a national issue for agencies.

“Considering it’s a first year where many saw a dip, by year end we will certainly have maintained our numbers and are on an upsurge, but that summer had a real dip in recruitment and approvals – sort of reflects both the lag from dip in recruitment pre-Christmas last year. But certainly, we have seen upsurge in recruitment and ROIs [Registrations of Interest] particularly since Christmas.” – *case study RAA Manager*

## Increase in targeted marketing and recruitment activities

Since the 2018-19 research wave, RAAs have refined and implemented their own marketing and recruitment strategies, taking a more strategic approach to the recruitment of adopters. They did this by allocating **dedicated marketing resources for adoption from pooled budgets**, linking in with national recruitment campaigns as an RAA (larger collective compared with previous LA links), and undertaking more **targeted marketing and recruitment** activities. Longer established RAAs have continued to develop engaging RAA websites, broadcast, and social media, and advertise on local transport systems and community infrastructure. The interviews with RAA HoS and the case study interviewees indicate that RAAs were getting better at using different marketing methods and were using them more than before. RAAs have built on existing activities and extended their marketing beyond traditional mediums using partnerships with businesses to broaden engagement opportunities. Through diversifying their marketing and taking a more considered approach to recruitment, the RAAs recognised that they could potentially reach more adopters who could meet the needs of waiting children.

### Example – Partnership with local Football Association (FA)

As part of their marketing strategy, one RAA has partnered with their local football association. They recognise the importance of being visible in a family atmosphere which can attract over 10,000 people to the games. The local FA has named a pitch, ball and cup after the RAA and their advertisements appear around the newly built pitch.

The RAA has also been able to utilise the FA’s other partners to secure further marketing opportunities. For example, the FA has a partnership with a large hotel chain. The RAA has been able to use the hotel to run large scale events at a discounted rate.

Compared to the 2018-19 research wave, there was a notable increase in interviewees' references to **targeted marketing** strategies amongst case study RAAs, particularly amongst those RAAs who have been operating for 2+ years. Targeted marketing has been used to extend the reach of recruitment to specific groups such as those within the ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ communities. For example, one RAA asked same-sex adoptive families to create a video documenting their journey; this was used on the website and as part of the wider campaign. The importance of targeted marketing was further supported through the adopter research strand, particularly about the RAA website; adopters placed emphasis on the quality and information provided on the website as well as the importance of feeling welcomed, and this included seeing examples of adopters from their own communities.

The website was one of the reasons for choosing an RAA because:

“Their website just looked quite good, they seemed quite forward-thinking. They had a lot about single adopters, or same-sex couple adopters, or older adopters and so they came across as being quite progressive.” – *Prospective Adopter*

## Pooled resources and increased coordination

A key facilitator to recruitment and marketing across the different RAA models was the RAAs' **ability to pool resources**, creating economies of scale through centralised marketing programmes. A main theme was the subsequent increase in budget and dedicated human resources for marketing following regionalisation, and others felt that the joined-up working enabled them to maximise existing resources. They were able to increase the geographical reach of billboards and social media campaigns, maximising the links of individual local authorities. A further facilitator for recruitment was the **national adoption recruitment campaigns**. The RAAs were able to 'piggyback' their localised marketing and recruitment on national campaigns, such as National Adoption Week. RAAs felt that the national campaign was shining a positive light on adoption, which they were able to draw on within their own marketing:

“It was just that whole new refresh of the branding, putting more information out there, and doing it a bit more from a national perspective, rather than just locally based. We're starting to see some improvements in recruitment.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

However, there were alternative views questioning the extent to which any successes could be attributed to the RAAs alone:

“I don’t think RAAs have increased their recruitment particularly but now have huge influx of money from DfE, think more will come forwards but don’t think it will be because of RAAs but because government has invested c £2m of input.” – *National Stakeholder*

The direct impact of the marketing strategies upon enquiries from potential adopters were unknown to RAAs interviewed, and there were only limited examples of RAAs tracking the success of marketing strategies. Even where enquiries were increasing, interviewees were unsure whether the increase was as a direct result of their marketing activities.

There were some exceptions to this, though; one RAA noted that the information evening following National Adoption Week was their most attended, seeing 50 potential adopters attend in comparison to their usual 10 to 15.

“[Enquiries] increasing exponentially, I think it has to be the marketing, it can’t be anything other than the marketing and our responsiveness. We have the good website now; we have some pretty good marketing and we have our responsiveness so with the two information evenings per month. So, we are picking up adopters a lot quicker.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

## Adopter diversity

Table 3.4 presents a breakdown of the characteristics of those applying to adopt in the 2018/19 financial year, by RAA<sup>25</sup>. The average age of adopters was 41 with limited variation between the RAAs. The proportion of ethnic minority adopters ranged considerable across RAAs from just 5% to 30%. In all but two RAAs, most adopters were married or in a civil partnership.

**Table 3.4: Characteristics of adopters 2018/19, by RAA**

RAA	Average age	% Ethnic minority	% Married/Civil partnership	% Single
RAA1	39	15%	79%	5%
RAA2	41	10%	85%	8%
RAA3	40	17%	84%	4%
RAA4	41	15%	71%	5%
RAA5	39	19%	77%	5%
RAA6	41	13%	81%	8%
RAA7	38	5%	80%	8%
RAA8	40	23%	78%	8%
RAA9	38	7%	65%	4%
RAA10	37	10%	55%	6%

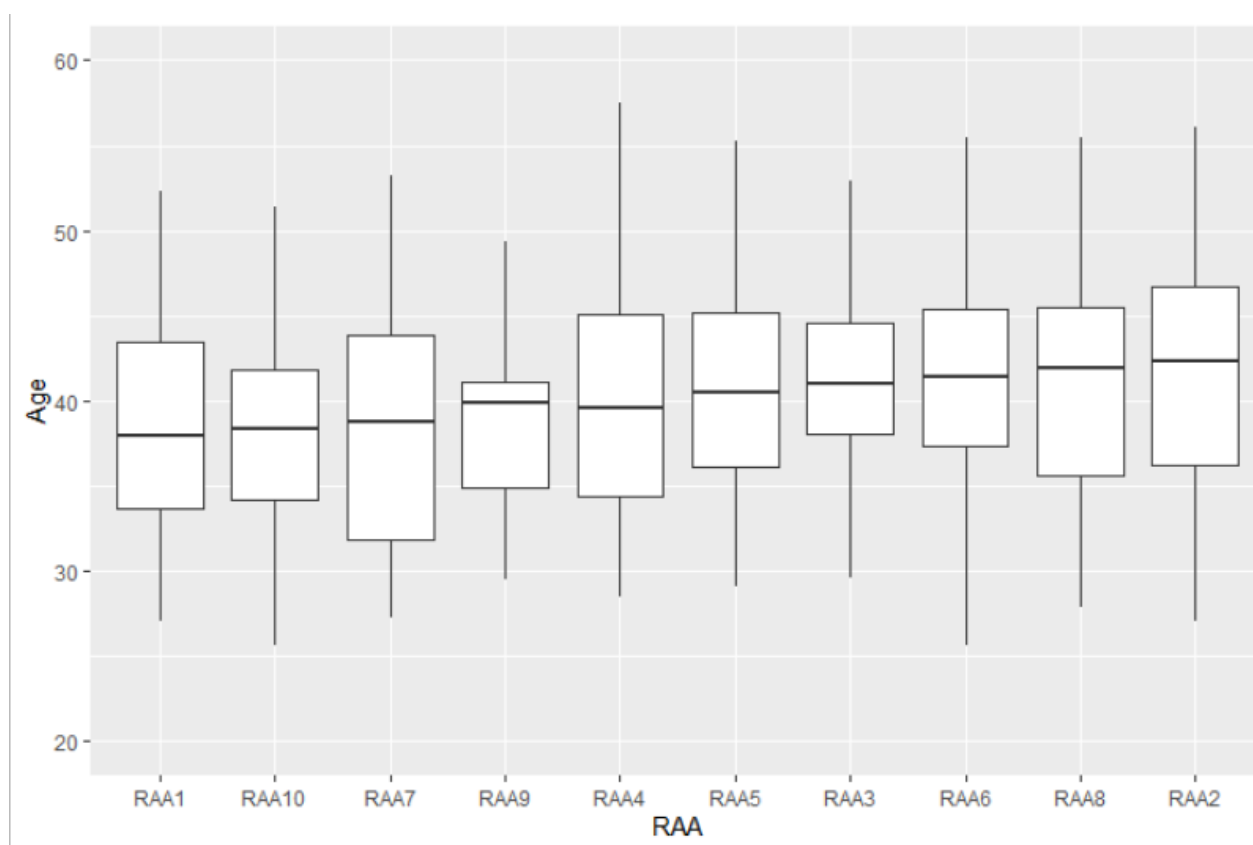
Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2019

Figure 3.1 below shows the distribution of age of adopters, by RAA. The figure centres around the median age for each RAA, which is the horizontal line in the middle of each box. The lower half of the box covers the age range of the 25% (i.e. quartile) of adopters below the median, and the upper half, the 25% above. The lines extending from the box represent the range.<sup>26</sup> RAAs are arranged by the lowest median (left) to highest (right). Focusing on the boxes (i.e. the interquartile range) adopters' ages generally range from mid 30s to early to mid-40s. RAA10 appears to have a more concentrated pool of younger adopters, whereas RAA6 is older.

<sup>25</sup> ASGLB data Adopter file 2018/19

<sup>26</sup> Outliers have been removed for reasons of non-disclosure

**Figure 3.1: Prospective Adopter' age range distribution 2018/19 by RAA**



Source: Ecorys analysis of ASGLB data, 2019

When asked about potential barriers to success, interviewees said it was important for RAAs to consider the changing rationales for prospective adopters enquiring as RAA and national collaborative drives for recruitment aim to reach new audiences, who perhaps would not have considered adoption previously. Commonly, RAAs were receiving more enquiries from potential adopters whose motivations for wanting to adopt a child related to things like climate change and philosophy. In addition to this, the interviews evidenced increased enquiries from families with birth children. Therefore, the interviews suggest that RAAs need to build in ways to better understand prospective adopters' motivations, for example by amending the questions that adoption panels ask of prospective adopters, for recruitment efforts to be successful.

The **national adoption campaign**<sup>27</sup> aims to shift the narrative that only a certain type of person or family unit can adopt. The range of stakeholders interviewed from RAAs share this vision and are focusing on considering adopters on an individual basis, having worked to **reduce the perceived barriers** faced by prospective adopters. Interviews with one of the case study RAAs found that prospective adopters had expected difficulties

<sup>27</sup> National Adoption Week <https://www.adoptionuk.org/pages/faqs/category/national-adoption-week>



gaining approval which related to the time since their last IVF cycle, being single and having birth children.

“For ourselves, the major changes have been recognising that blanket bans are unacceptable. So, we have focussed on the individual and if there are gaps [in the support we provide to prospective adopters], we look at how we can help them develop.” – *case study RAA Manager*

Like the 2018-19 findings, the interviews from the 2019-20 research wave provided a **mixed picture** regarding the **diversity** of the RAA adopter pools. Positively, interviewees across the RAAs spoke encouragingly about having approved adopters in same sex couples, single applicants, those from different ethnic minority communities and applicants from a broader age category; this implied (anecdotally) that their RAAs had a more diverse pool of adopters to explore matches within, although the data is not available to show whether these adopters proceed through the application process and go on to be matched with children.

“What has been really exciting is the demography of the population which we are targeting. Some of our [RAA] areas are really vibrant, and you get the feeling of the new communities, the new families. Same-sex couples, the churches, I get the sense of real buy-in. I think the flow of people are the richest diversity that I have ever seen probably in my 20 years of working.” – *case study RAA Panel member*

In other examples, the qualitative evidence from case study interviewees, other RAAs and a national stakeholder was less favourable. A number of RAAs, including those in operation for 2+ years, said that despite an increase in targeted marketing activity (e.g. engaging religious groups, leaflet drops and radio), there remained a lack of ethnic diversity, particularly amongst those of Black African/Caribbean heritage. Although in some regions, interviewees considered the lack of ethnic diversity to be reflective of the demography of the local community.

“We have a very wide strategy at the moment which is about getting the increasing numbers because ours are fairly low. In this, our primary aim is to increase the number of Black African, we have a recognised deficit within that community. We have some reach into the population, but we need to improve on that” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

## Improvements to preparation groups

Preparation groups aim to prepare prospective adopters for the process and the realities of adoptive parenting. The first Report in 2018-19 highlighted how case study RAAs had begun work around **improving the quality and consistency** of the preparation groups, which was an ongoing theme in the 2019-20 research.

The **frequency of preparation groups** has also increased in several RAAs as part of the regionalisation, this is particularly impactful for smaller local authorities.

“Adopters always want to know how soon they can get on the preparation groups, if you’re saying you have to wait two-three months until the next one, you’ll probably lose them, whereas now you can offer them something within a few weeks.” – *case study RAA manager*

The survey of preparation group attendees (n= 33) found that one RAA experimented with three venues across the region, allowing applicants to choose the nearest to their home. However, that resulted in delayed registrations for some applicants, as the preparation groups were only held in Stage 1. The RAA has recently begun trialling delivery more frequently in one area so that applicants could select by date rather than location and it will be interesting to see what benefits and challenges this brings.

There was a tension in the larger RAAs between delivering less frequent local preparation courses, which might result in delay or more frequent centralised services that reduced delay but might incur longer travelling times. Centralisation may also have a negative impact on the development and maintenance of peer support networks.

Those surveyed as part of the adopter research strand valued learning of the long-term availability of adoption support at the agencies. One interviewee noted the confidence this had provided in the knowledge that the network surrounding them would be available long-term as required. The preparation groups at one case study RAA are attended by their adoption support team to present the support offer.

“Prospective adopters these days are actively looking for an agency that does embed that [adoption support] in its full offer... they’re not just going to an agency that is going to get them through the process quick, it’s not that that people are looking for that. It’s more about, ‘How is the agency going to support me and my family to deal with the issues that will inevitably happen?’” – *case study RAA Social Worker*

This finding was reflected through the interviews with adopters. One of the reasons why individuals had chosen an RAA was because they thought the RAA support package

would be superior. They had based their decision on the information available on agency websites found through Google searches.

The survey of prospective adopters attending preparation groups at five of the case study RAAs found an overall positive outlook on the delivery of the preparation groups. Prospective adopters were asked to complete questionnaires at the end of training and to think back and rate themselves before and after training on their knowledge of adoption related issues and their matching preferences. Following attendance at the preparation group prospective adopters reported an increase in knowledge around maltreatment, trauma, adoption processes and adoptive family life cycle. The most statistically significant impact was seen in the increase in adopter's empathy towards birth parents and in willingness to consider a greater level openness in their adoption. 76% of survey respondents felt more positive about their choice of adoption after the training, with commitment to adopting from care rising from 77% to 92%. Although knowledge had increased those changes were not seen in changes to matching preferences. There was a slight rise in the proportion of respondents willing to adopt a sibling group following the preparation group. More detail on the experiences of adopters can be found in the adopters' views report.

## Addressing adopter recruitment challenges

The interviews with RAAs across the programme found it was still challenging to recruit adoptive families for sibling groups or children with complex needs.

"I think we're still struggling to recruit the adopters that we need for the children that we have." – *case study RAA Social Worker*

"What we need to develop here is what to do about those 'harder to place' children and real issues about adopting siblings and mismatch between adopters we need, and adopters recruited for siblings." – *case study RAA social worker*

There were however examples of **approaches** which interviewees considered to be innovative in response to the nationwide issue of finding families for 'harder to place' children, including **adoption picnics** (see Case study example). Whilst similar examples have been operating for the past decade, first by BAAF (now Coram BAAF), it was a new approach for this RAA comprised of several smaller LAs that found the picnics worked well as a 'meet and greet' for older children and sibling groups.

## Case study- Adoption Picnics

One RAA has set up **adoption picnics**, an activity day for prospective adopters and children. The purpose of the day is to allow prospective adoptive families and children to interact, in a fun and supported environment. The event is hosted by the social workers but also attended by the foster parents of the children. Through spending time with the children and getting the opportunity to speak with the current foster family of the child, the prospective adopters gain insight into the life of the child. The events are held every other month, the initiative has brought success in placing sibling groups, older children, and those with complex needs.

“That has worked really well... three of our older boys (over 5) who have been waiting nearly three years for a family, and they did get families through the Adoption Picnics.” – *case study RAA social worker*

“It allows prospective adopters to see the real child. Because they would normally be given a profile, or a child permanence report, or something written, and you would see in that, information about background, which might be a bit difficult, you might see things about the uncertainty of the child’s development, about potential for this to happen, for that to happen, and we always paint the worst case scenario to ensure families have realistic expectations, you get to the picnic and you are able to see the actual child. And we are still saying there is uncertainty with this child, this might be worst case scenario, what have you, but they’ve seen the child and they’ve been able to see what they can manage.” – *case study RAA social worker*

## Future plans

The main theme in RAAs’ plans for adopter recruitment was to continue finding prospective adopters who could meet the needs of waiting children. Prevalent within this was the desire to address the gaps within their adopter pool including ethnic minority adopters and those willing to adopt ‘harder to place’ children, such as sibling groups. Actions for RAAs included continuing their marketing media push and developing their presence within local communities they receive few enquiries from. Other plans include redistributing staff to ensure they have sufficient capacity to support increases in the number of statutory checks and references in stage 1, offering more training on evenings and weekends, and exploring additional opportunities for collaboration. For example, one RAA is working with a neighbouring RAA to host joint family finding events with the aim of reaching more potential adopters who meet the needs of waiting children.

## Conclusion

At a national level, between 2015 and 2018 the number of children with a placement order each year was decreasing. In 2019, there was a slight increase in the number of placement orders. RAA live status was associated with a small reduction (1%) in sufficiency, but this **was not statistically significant**. Recognising the data covers up until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019, this finding likely reflects the limited time most RAAs have had to improve sufficiency at a measurable population-level and, for some, the negative effect of a “hiatus” in recruitment activity during the transition period to live RAA.

The qualitative data would suggest that the introduction of RAAs, alongside the impetus provided by the Department and the ASGLB, has in the longer term led to a more concerted effort on changing behaviour and thinking around adopter recruitment (after an initial hiatus caused by the disruption of regionalising). Specifically, regionalisation has enabled RAAs to pool resources, creating economies of scale to enable more sophisticated and targeting marketing and recruitment activities, supported by national funding and recruitment campaigns.

The qualitative research found that stakeholders involved in the RAA felt that, in joining LAs together, RAAs have successfully broadened their pool of adopters, in number, and to a lesser extent diversity. However, there is little quantitative data at this stage of the evaluation to demonstrate that the adopter pools are greater than the sum of the individual LA adopter pools. Whilst enthused by the new marketing approaches, there were mixed accounts from RAAs of how this had impacted on the recruitment of adopters, and RAAs were overall unable to comment on how this has impacted on adopter sufficiency.

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

### Summary

- The time taken to place a child in an adoptive family has improved within RAAs. Analysis of children in live RAAs against similar children in non-live RAAs revealed that the average time from placement order to being placed with an adoptive family was 14 days less in live RAAs (180 days compared to 194 days). For 'harder to place' children, there was a reduction of 35 days (202 days compared to 237) from eight months in non-live RAAs to seven months in live RAAs.
- Based on the interviews with RAAs across the programme, there has been increased focus in RAAs on tracking children's progress and on early permanence especially Fostering for Adoption, which is helping to reduce unnecessary delays alongside an improved ability to place within the RAAs.
- The experience of adopters interviewed of matching and placing as part of the adopter research strand was mixed, with some experiencing speedier movements through the system and others who experienced unwanted delays.
- Any changes to timeliness are within the wider context of the national adopter sufficiency challenge, and restrictions upon how much quicker the process can become.
- Across the interviews, main themes included the difficulties in demonstrating the impact of the RAA on timeliness due to local and wider contextual issues, the wide variation between the performance of LAs on forming some RAAs, and concerns that quicker is not always better for children or adopters.

When examining the impact of RAAs, reducing the time it takes to place a child is one of the main intended outcomes. The 2018-2019 evaluation report found that in the case study RAAs that had been established the longest, interviewees commonly reported speedier and better matching with adopters, whilst others felt it was too early to say. Factors that contributed to perceived improvements in timeliness included RAAs having access to a larger pool of adopters and additional staff knowledge and skills, collaborating more, and establishing joint panels and joint training.

The 2019 longitudinal data analysis for this report indicates that, relative to non-live RAAs, there are possible signs of modest impact on timeliness, which the qualitative research in 2019/20 also reflected. Notably, the more established RAAs have reported positive impacts on the proportion of within region placements they are now able to make in a timely fashion (with efficiencies confirmed or expected) and their improved ability to

place 'harder to place' children in some cases. It is too early to say if the impact differs by the type of RAA model.

A limitation is that this analysis examines the *timeliness* of matching but is unable to examine the *quality* of the matching. The quality of matches will be explored further as part of the third and final wave of qualitative research in 2021.

## Adopter sufficiency and timeliness

A main theme was that RAAs and RAA projects found it difficult to discuss the impact of RAAs because the national shortage of adopters limited their ability to match all children waiting with adopters in the expected timescales.

Quantitative analysis of timeliness was undertaken using national administrative data (SSDA903). Analysis focussed on the period where the RAA has most interaction (and can affect timeliness), which is from receiving the placement order to placing a child with an adoptive family. The period before this, when approval is being sought from the court / other options are being explored, and after, where the legal process to adoption begins, are not in the direct control of the RAA.

The analysis is presented as follows:

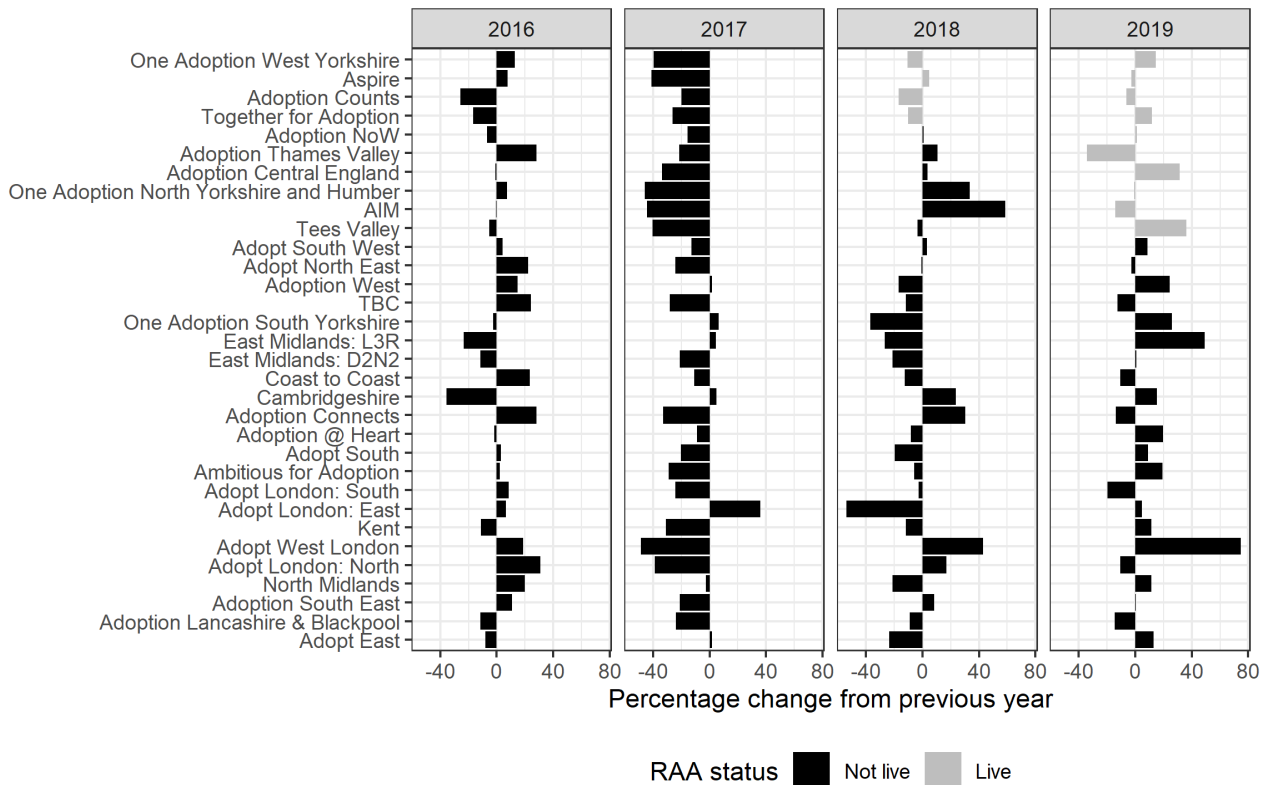
1. Figure 4.1 shows the year-on-year changes on timeliness for each RAA looking at the average time between the LA/RAA receiving the court order enabling the LA to place the child for adoption (i.e. placement order) and being placed with an adoptive family.
2. Recognising the characteristics of children within each RAA may differ (and as such may explain year-on-year changes between RAAs, a counterfactual impact evaluation, which matches children in live-RAAs based on their characteristic to children in non-live RAAs, to determine the impact of RAAs on timeliness.

## Year-on-year changes on timeliness

Figure 4.1 shows year on year percentage changes in the average time between the LA/RAA receiving the court order enabling the LA to place the child for adoption (i.e. placement order) with the RAA and being placed with an adoptive family, for children who were adopted. A shift to the left should be interpreted as positive. Visually, there is a mixed picture between live and not yet live RAAs. Focusing on 2019, the average change from the previous year for RAAs which had gone live was a 2% increase in the time between placement order and the child being placed with a family and, for not live RAAs, an increase of 6%. It is important to consider the trajectory of RAAs over time (especially 2017). Furthermore, this analysis does not account for the characteristics of the children

who were adopted – which affect timeliness. Analysis where child characteristics, and other factors, are controlled for is presented in the next section.

**Figure 4.1: Percentage change in adoption timeliness – Placement order to placed, by year**



Source: Ecorys analysis of SSDA903 data, 2015 to 2019

Analysis was also undertaken on the time from placement order to matched with an adoptive family. The results were very similar to those in Figure 4.2. Recognising placement order to being placed (following being matched) represents a more complete picture for timeliness, we do not present the time to matched analysis.

### Counterfactual impact analysis on timeliness for all children

To understand whether RAAs are having an impact on timeliness, analysis using propensity score matching (PSM) was undertaken to provide a population level overview.<sup>28</sup> PSM seeks to create a comparator group comprising children who are as similar as possible to those in the treatment group based on key characteristics – this is commonly referred to as creating “balance” between the treatment and comparator

<sup>28</sup> The specific technique was propensity score weighting. This is similar to PSM but rather than discard data where there isn't a suitable “match”, weights, similar to those used in surveys, are applied to all the data. Children from not live RAAs (comparator group) who have similar characteristics to children in live RAAs (treatment group) are assigned a higher weight.



groups.<sup>29</sup> Here, the treatment group comprises all children who were being placed for adoption in a year where the RAA had been live for at least 6 months – as such, the analysis focuses on the financial years ending 2018 and 2019 only. The comparator group comprises children in RAAs/LAs that had not gone live.

The PSM was conducted successfully on a range of factors relating to child characteristics, their (pre-adoption) journey through care, and local authority characteristics. Further detail, including balance statistics, are provided in Annex three.

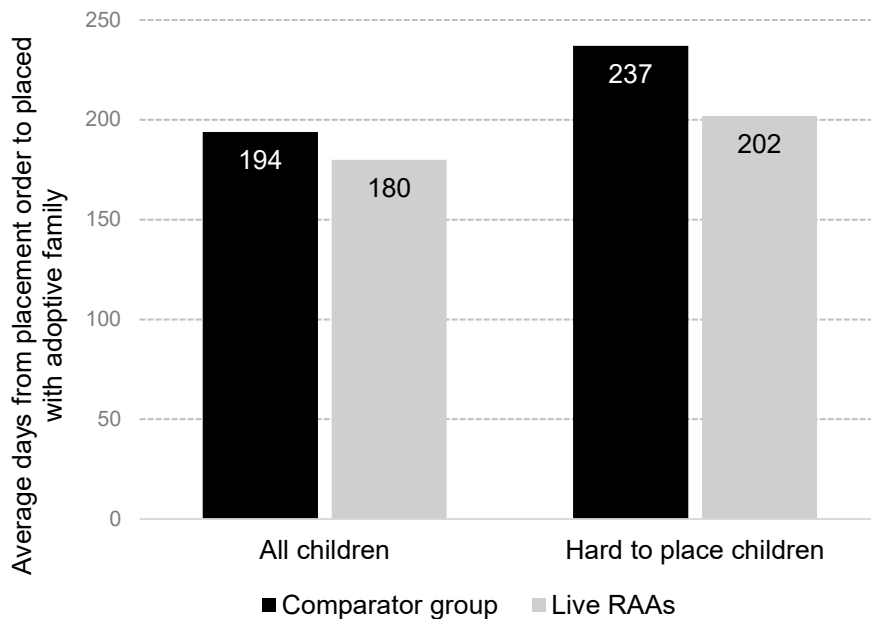
Following the matching, regression analysis was conducted to estimate the impact of RAA live status on average time from placement order to being placed with an adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (see Figure 4.2).<sup>30</sup> **The estimated impact was a reduction of 14 days.** This result was statistically significant. The average time from placement order to placed with an adoptive family in non-live RAAs was 194 and, in live RAAs, 180 days. The results are presented graphically in Figure 4.2.

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<sup>29</sup> Further detail provided in Annex three.

<sup>30</sup> Regression model included the weights created through the propensity score weightings.

**Figure 4.2: RAA impact on average time from placement order to being placed with an adoptive family**



Source: Ecorys analysis of SSDA903 data, 2015 to 2019

### Impact analysis on timeliness for ‘harder to place’ children

There has been an improvement in time from placement order to being placed with a family for ‘harder to place’ children. Following the same approach set out above but restricted to ‘harder to place’ children (5 or more years old and/or ethnic minority) there was **35 day reduction associated with the 10 live RAAs**.<sup>31</sup> This result was statistically significant. The average time for non-live RAAs was 237 days and, in live RAAs, 202 days; in other words, the time has reduced from, on average, eight to seven months. This is presented in Figure 4.2.

The above findings were reiterated within the qualitative data where there was a perception within some RAAs (the majority of which have been established longer than 1-2 years) that timeliness for ‘harder to place’ children (sibling groups, children with additional needs and older children) has improved. These RAAs have seen more matches for older children and sibling groups. Developing shared systems has given RAAs the opportunity to identify gaps in adopter type and recruit adopters who specifically want sibling groups. In addition, having a larger pool of adopters within the region has helped RAAs to find matches for ‘harder to place’ children.

<sup>31</sup> Intercept was 237 days.

However, whilst placements in some instances have become speedier, the timeframe has not necessarily been as quick as placements for other children. When 'harder to place' children are placed, they often have a longer than average period from entering care to moving in with their adoptive family (A1) and between placement order and matching with an adoptive family (A2). Due to this, overall timeliness scores in the scorecards may be skewed by the timescales of these 'harder to place' children in the dataset. Therefore, RAA staff at all levels ensure that they are aware of the context behind the scorecards:

"I think that we have to look above timeliness, and look at, well, what is the individual story of the children, that I know that we can say for the majority there is no drift, we are placing them really quickly. But we have more complex children, where there hasn't been drift, but it's taken a long time. And I think that's the timeliness message we need"  
– *case study RAA HoS*

### **Example – Regionalisation and matching ‘harder to place’ children**

One RAA referred to their ‘harder to place’ children as ‘children with no potential links’. (the RAA does not have adopters that meet their needs and have searched externally for adopters with no success). Prior to regionalisation the RAA had 39 children of this kind listed on Link Maker<sup>32</sup> with no prospective adopters who had registered interest in adopting these children. These children were then inherited into the RAA and a year later the number of children with no potential links has reduced to 9.

Of the 30 ‘harder to place’ children placed within a year since go-live, one child had been given a placement order 2 years ago. This was because of the location of the LA the child resided in, its small pool of adopters and despite a wide search for external adopters, no match had been identified. Upon regionalisation they were able to find a match within their wider pool of adopters and creativity with family finding.

Social workers recognised the importance of ‘thinking creatively’ about potential routes to matching, such as introducing adoption picnics (see Case study p43), enhancing contacts with birth parents and foster carers to better understand the needs of waiting children, innovative advertising and exploring FfA, reporting that for “some ‘harder to place’ children [it is] not as quick but certainly more efficient”.

*“We have the family finding meeting each week. So, we have lots of experience around that table, people who can look at creative ways of matching if we are struggling. I would say we have managed to family find for a higher number of children with additional needs. So, there has been an improvement there. I think each individual local authority would have struggled with that.” – case study RAA social worker and manager*

Interviewees attributed their ability to match so many children who previously had no potential links to the pooling of adopters (which increased the number of potential matches within region) and the bringing together of staff with skills in recruitment and assessment, family finding and adoption support.

The next sections highlight the key issues that the qualitative evidence shows help support an improvement in timeliness. These include being able to place children within region, strategic tracking, focus on early permanence, and realistic timescales.

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<sup>32</sup> Link Maker joins-up children's social care across the UK to increase placement choice for children, and to improve use of data and collaboration between local authorities and providers.

## **An increase in placements within region**

The qualitative research with RAAs across the programme found that, despite the shortage of adopters, the pooling of resources has frequently led to an increase in placements within area in longer-established RAAs. RAAs that been in operation for more than 2 years noted that they were becoming less reliant on making inter-agency placements outside of area and this has in some cases led to speedier matching. When asked about the impact of regionalisation, three RAAs provided figures for the proportion of placements they could make in area as evidence of an increasing proportion of placements within region (83%, 80% (with 100% in one of the LAs) and 90%), however did not provide before and after comparison data. The RAA with 83% of placements within region initially attributed this to a 'first year wonder'; however, the interviews suggest that this and other LA hosted models operating via spoke/locality model structures have since been able to maintain the high proportion of placements within region.

When reflecting on changing trends in placements being made within RAAs vs interagency, national stakeholders said that whilst the proportions of interagency placements continued to vary across the country, the overall proportion of placements made by VAAs has remained the same (c. 24%). There was a perception that some RAAs have had a clear policy to place children within the RAA region (in line with policy intentions) and to save on the interagency fee, which has affected VAA's matching practices. Increasingly some VAAs are placing adopters with children outside of local areas whereas previously they were able to match 60-70% of their families with local children. There was a view that any perceived savings made by RAAs paying fewer interagency fees will be short-term because even in cases where VAAs find families for children, the RAA/LAs will be responsible for the long-term costs of adoption support. Further research into the impact of RAAs on interagency placements will be carried out in the final year of the evaluation.

## **Improvements in strategic tracking**

The growth in placements within region in some RAAs has been supported by RAAs adopting more strategic approaches to tracking children. In the 2019/20 case study interviews and wider research with RAAs, practitioners frequently highlighted the importance of having dedicated family finding teams specifically for adoptions and holding more regular matching meetings to help progress cases. Previously, social workers did not specialise in family finding or another stage of the adoption process and tended to work more independently. Having a family finding team as part of the RAAs structure was believed to be an early advantage of working together at scale. These teams specialise in liaising with Looked After Children (LAC) services to identify children with care orders, understand their needs, and discuss children who could potentially be given an adoption order in the future. One RAA in the first year of operation saw a

particular benefit in having one family finding social worker per LA because this has improved communication and relations between LAC and RAA teams. Those interviewed felt that joint working had become more efficient and effective and provided team managers with more oversight of the pipeline than pre-RAA. Further information on effective communication, as well as any challenges encountered, is discussed in relation to the effectiveness of the local plan in chapter 7.

### **Example – strategic matching meetings for early identification and oversight**

“The thing with RAAs is that we regionalise our adopters, we don’t regionalise our children. So obviously each local authority wants the very best for their children, and if you’re a family finder working in [one LA] then you wouldn’t necessarily have the knowledge of the children waiting in [another LA]. So that’s been one of the aims in terms of strategic matching, to increase that visibility so we are aware of all of the needs of all of our children, and that we’ve all got a responsibility to ensure that each child has the best outcome.” – *case study RAA Matching Team Manager*

The strategic matching meetings in this RAA allow practitioners to identify cases early on and track children prior to placement or care orders being granted, which did not happen previously. This enabled the RAA to find a potential match and conduct the necessary checks and assessments with the adopter family earlier, to reduce any unnecessary delay in placing a child.

“Once a decision is made through court to place for adoption, then I think they’ve already done a bit of work, and they know the child very well, and they have some potential adopters lined up, so they can move quite quickly to the next stage of the process.” – *case study RAA Adoption Panel Chair*

Tracking has also given RAA teams the opportunity to identify priority children, children who have experienced any unnecessary delay and those who have been waiting for a large amount of time to make it a ‘fairer process’. The strategic matching meetings work because they give everyone an oversight of all children in the system. Previously a practitioner’s awareness of a potential match for a child tended to be ‘relationship based’. The strategic meetings happen once a month, with all family finders and recruitment assessment workers.

“Strategic matching is a priority meeting and needs to be in everyone’s diaries.” – *case study RAA Recruitment Practitioner*

“It’s difficult being based across different offices, and it was the people based in this larger office who would tend to make early links based on staff relationships with each other and their knowledge of the their families coming through. We had children not yet with SHOBPA (Should be Placed for Adoption) decisions being provisionally linked with adopters while children waiting on placement orders were still waiting. Strategic matching makes sure children with more complex needs (those who have waited the longest) are not overlooked and we maximise the

adopter resource. Strategic matching meetings has definitely helped with that.” – *case study RAA HoS*

Everyone is committed to these meetings and which act as a place to share data more regularly amongst their wider, regionalised team.

## Increased focus on early permanency

In the 2019/20 case study research, there was evidence that all the case study RAAs (and others outside the case studies) had increased their work around routes to early permanence<sup>33</sup> as part of efforts to improve timeliness. It was less clear whether those changes have arisen because of regionalisation or would have been an increasing trend regardless. We will explore early permanence further with RAAs, including those projects not yet live in the final research wave.

An important element of developing early permanence is maintaining strong relationships with children’s teams in LAs and ensuring that there are routes open for tracking children in the early stages of their journey. Communication around children in need and their circumstances is vital to ensure that appropriate plans can be made, and to flag potential risks that could lead to the breakdown of placements.

“We can have those discussions early on to understand whether early permanence is the appropriate pathway at that point.” – *case study RAA Team Manager*

One RAA, covering a relatively small geographical area, found that they have been able to maintain co-working with the LAs more easily than they believed some of the larger RAAs might due to the proximity of all the LAs. Indeed, one of the largest case study RAAs had found that early permanence was much more successful in some of the partner LAs than it was in others, and that developing a consistent approach had been challenging to date due to the broader range of views.

For the case study RAAs, attendance at the Adoption Decision Maker (ADM) and legal gateway meetings has been important for considering early permanence routes. The research indicated that in some local authorities, this had not been the case pre-RAAs, and they previously did not have the resource to have a dedicated family finder to support early permanence processes. With newly centralised ADM panels and meetings,

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<sup>33</sup> Early permanence is the umbrella term given to placement types intended to speed up a child’s journey through care and minimise the disruption of repeated moves to different families. This aims to enable children to experience a loving and secure home in which they feel safe and settled as quickly as possible. Early permanence placement types include Fostering for Adoption and Concurrency.



attended by both LAC teams and adoption social workers now, interviewees said the process for discussing and approving adoption cases had become more seamless.

Interviewees at one case study referenced the development of early notification systems with the LA, and the fact that as an RAA they have worked hard to get the message on early permanence through to LA social workers to mobilise those channels. However, where there is high turnover of staff at an LA, it can be challenging to achieve a common understanding.

## **Increase in Foster for Adoption**

Linked with the increased focus on early permanency and improvements to strategic matching, a main theme from the qualitative research across RAAs is that staff are now using a broader range of matching practices which include earlier consideration of Fostering for Adoption (FfA) and concurrent planning and are helping to improve timeliness. Interviewees often referenced an increased 'drive' for FfA to create a wider pool of potential matches. This was especially the case for younger children to help encourage early permanency, working closely with LAC Teams to ensure this. In addition, the introduction of FfA in earlier discussions about adoption alongside other permanency pathways has encouraged joint trainings between LAs, providing further opportunities for practitioners to liaise with LAC Teams and identify any needs. The qualitative research indicates that FfA is becoming more widely accepted across all roles within the adoption teams:

“...instead of asking why there is a fostering to adopt placement, we are asking why not. So, I think we have made real progress there.” – *case study RAA Panel Chair*

Furthermore, there were examples where RAAs introduced joint training with LA children's social care teams to encourage early permanence and ensure every practitioner is suitably aware of the processes and aims:

“...they [who] have been asked to do some joint training with them [courts] on early permanence, for example.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

Interviewees from some RAAs felt that because of the increased training, staff helped prospective adopters to understand and consider FfA as one possible option; this meant more adopters were open to the idea of FfA and concurrent planning. From an RAA staff perspective, any reticence around the practice stems more from social workers. They felt that social workers could be wary due to their experiences of past court cases. This included notable delays or disagreements about which placement type would be most suitable for the child. They also highlighted the risk to adopters taking on FfA placements where placement orders may not be granted and/or a decision to return the child/ren to

their birth parents, or a breakdown of the FfA placement. However, in another RAA, interviewees believed that challenges remain around recruiting enough adopters who would consider different early permanency placements, partly stemming from the complexities around birth family contact arrangements with concurrency placements. This is particularly challenging in an RAA set up as contact could potentially mean prospective adopters face extensive travel to another area within the region, particularly if tied to a contact centre, which would need to be addressed.

“Anecdotally, I would say we still get more referrals than we can match. We get a lot of referrals for early permanence, which is good because it means people are thinking of it, but we can’t always offer what they need in terms of managing contact arrangements.” – *case study RAA HoS*

Interviewees from three RAA case studies were clear that the increase in FfA was due to regionalisation; partly this was due to developments in practice as an RAA. For all three, this included a much heavier focus on FfA at the preparation group training; in one RAA FfA training has been made mandatory for all potential adopters, and in another, the training is offered on an opt-out basis. In one case, some of the partner LAs did not offer any FfA training before joining the RAA. In these examples, interviewees expressed an intention to consider FfA as part of standard practice.

However, this apparent increase in FfA placements is not attributable to RAAs alone and it is not yet clear from the qualitative research whether this increase in FfA placements varies based on RAA model or time live. From the nine RAAs or RAA projects who referenced FfA, all of them completed placements of this kind, with various models and the time live ranged from RAA project up to 2+ years. Interestingly, none of the partnership model variations referenced FfA. With most of these RAAs still in the project phase or being relatively early on in delivery, it will be interesting to explore any developments they make in progressing with FfA over the next year.

### **Example – Foster for Adoption as new practice upon forming an RAA**

One social worker noted that they did not complete any FfA placements pre-RAA, but through the work of the RAA, they now consider more families for this type of placement. It increases the options available for placing a child, resulting in the RAA often being able to place children quicker than through the traditional pre-RAA matching practices that social workers are familiar with.

“We have fostering for adoption embedded now. So, we have had over 40 placements, I think 44” – *case study RAA HoS*

However, as with anything new there is an adjustment and learning period, which this RAA has encountered, including the breakdown of one FfA case and the decision to return the child to birth parents. “Analysis has been done, as if it was an adoption breakdown and we can learn from that, as it doesn’t happen often” (*RAA Strategic Group*). They are also aware that some LAs are making slower progress with FfA, but despite the breakdown case, they are pushing forward with promoting FfA across the RAA.

In this and other cases, the interviews suggest that RAAs have been able to identify matches earlier and improve timeliness to placement order.

“Speed of matching and in-house adopting has been impressive. In terms of FfA, the early permanence is working and identifying that early on so people aren’t disappointed or that placements don’t break down.” – *case study RAA social worker*

This is one way in which LAs have brought their best practices into the RAAs, are thinking more strategically, and tracking children as soon as a care order is granted. Increasingly, RAAs are working with LAs to identify children for whom adoption may be a future option and considering the early permanence route of FfA.

## **Realistic timescales**

There are restrictions on timeliness, which are out of an RAA or social workers’ control. For instance, some RAAs have found there is a delay in court processing and panel matching approval. Other factors outside of control were delays in the family support offered by LAC Teams and in receiving GP medical assessments, which extended timescales.

Adoption is a complicated process that cannot necessarily be rushed and there are procedures/ checks that need to be adhered to meet the needs and concerns of a number of different people, including the children and birth parents, as well as adopters.

Therefore, there are limits in how far the timescales can be reduced. Managers and social workers interviewed across RAAs recognised that processes could be more efficient. The guidance time for the two-stage adopter approval process is six months (and this is not always achieved, as the adopter research shows), and there are multiple checks that need to be conducted thoroughly to ensure the right match.

Social workers expressed the importance of making sure they make the best matches, which may be outside of minimum timescales. The timing has to be right for the child and the adopter, with social workers noting that the process can at times be too quick – though it is also important to note that for every year of delay, the chances of a child being adopted reduce by 20%<sup>34</sup>. Some adopters have asked for a ‘breather’ from the assessment/approval process, making practitioners aware of the increasing speed of the process and its impact on the people going through it, which may then have an impact on the timescale of the process for a child. There is:

“...the caveat that it needs to be the right speed for the family, not speed for the sake of it.” – *non-case study RAA project HoS*

With the increasing joint working between LAC Teams and the RAAs, communication is key in not progressing cases faster than is best for the child and adopter family.

“Although we have said, ‘You know we need to make the process and the matching quicker’, on those occasions where I have said, ‘We really need to make this introduction stage slower for this child’, I have been listened to.” – *case study LAC Team Social Worker*

In terms of the timescales for preparing adopters, the research with adopters found a mixed response, with some saying they had moved through the process swiftly, others who were keen to progress quickly, some who experienced unwanted delays and a few who wanted more time to prepare, mentally and emotionally. More detail on these findings can be found in the views and experiences of prospective adopter research report<sup>35</sup>. It is important for the RAA to consider the impact of efforts to increase timeliness and what that means for children, but also to understand at what speed adopters would like to progress. The timeline needs to be realistic to ensure a suitable match with adopter families who are prepared.

## Future plans

When asked about their plans to improve the timeliness of matching, RAAs’ responses were quite broad. They hoped to create consistency and best practice across the region.

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<sup>34</sup> Selwyn, J.; Sturgess, W.; Quinton, D. and Baxter, C. (2006) Costs and outcomes of non-infant adoptions, British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

From the viewpoint of a national stakeholder, RAAs have been a 'proof of concept' in regionalising permanence options with successful outcomes. In their view, plans to continue regionalising other permanency routes such as SGOs and long-term fostering should be made to speed up the matching process. Most notably, RAAs planned to continue using the larger pool of adopters to ensure that children are not left waiting for placements for long periods of time and to encourage early consideration of all routes to early permanence.

## Conclusion

The overall picture of timeliness illustrates a reduction in the time children are waiting to be placed in RAAs, in part due to the reduction in the number of children with placement orders, alongside some improvements in the time it is taking to recruit, check and approve adopters. Due to the length of the adoption process, we would expect to see the impact of RAAs on timeliness more when more data is available. Overall, it appears as if LA adoption services have largely benefitted from regionalisation and the expanded pool of adopters. In the RAAs that have been established, the longest, this has allowed them to place children quicker, and the majority have been placements within area.

Encouragingly, the largest impact has been on reducing the time it takes to place 'harder to place' children, although this still takes longer and remains a challenge for RAAs overall. These improvements are not present in the RAAs that launched more recently, though stakeholders are optimistic that processes are being improved, which have the potential to improve matching times.

With regionalisation, introducing new methods of placements and practices not used as frequently before by some LAs, such as FfA, has become a more 'creative' way to encourage early permanence and place children quicker.

Importantly, a key finding across the RAAs was the renewed focus on timescales and the need to consider the 'right speed' on a case-by-case basis. There is a restriction in how far timescales can be reduced and it needs to be beneficial, realistic, and safe for the adopter families, staff and children going through the process. Concerns and praise over timescales were also echoed in the adopter research.

Moving forward, the general theme across RAAs is the hope that regionalising of the adopter pool continues to aid in their speed of matching children. Moreover, they are looking to embed best practice and increase openness across the region.

## Chapter 5: The effects of RAAs on the provision of adoption support, as defined in regulation

### Summary

- A more strategic approach to delivering adoption support is becoming evident.
- Early intervention and improved universal offers are now becoming widely embedded involving new drop in meet the team clinics, more opportunities for peer support, and information evenings.
- Where targeted support is needed, training has upskilled staff to provide this in-house.
- The benefits of economies of scale are becoming evident and allowing for innovative practice to develop.
- Approaches to addressing and managing high demand are emerging.

This chapter of the report explores the impact of regionalisation on the provision of post-adoption support across both the case study RAAs and those involved in the wider research.

In the First report: 2018-19, RAAs were experiencing a high level of demand for adoption support and many RAAs were dealing with a historic backlog of cases. Many were taking steps to train and upskill adoption support staff - often in therapeutic interventions such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) - in order to provide more adoption support in-house, and were also reviewing their approaches to commissioning (although a large proportion of support was still provided externally).

### The national context for adoption support

The provision of adoption support is a statutory requirement for RAAs and other adoption agencies. Instruments such as the Adoption Support Regulations 2005<sup>36</sup> and the 2013 Statutory Guidance for Adoption<sup>37</sup> set out which services should be made available for different groups, including the child; adopters, potential adopters and their families; and birth families. The guidance stipulates that the LA/RAA is obliged to undertake an assessment of need, a LA is not obliged to provide any specific support but to advise and ensure that the services can be made available if they are needed.

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2005/691/made>

<sup>37</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/270100/adoption\\_statutory\\_guidance\\_2013.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270100/adoption_statutory_guidance_2013.pdf)

The guidance and regulations provide a framework for at least a minimum standard of provision. However, the ASGLB has commissioned work to develop a blueprint for high quality adoption support; the review of existing exemplar services aims to inform the development of an outline service specification for RAAs and LA adoption services, and also to provide a benchmark for service improvements and system change. The Blueprint calls for services which support adopted adults and birth families, as well as adoptive families. It sets out 14 requirements of an adoption support system which cover four primary themes: strategic, communication and engagement, systems and process, and service delivery.

The First report: 2018-19 highlighted the funding streams available for adoption support, the most significant of which is the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), which has provided an important resource for adoption agencies since its launch in 2015. The ASF had an overall budget of £40m in the financial year 2019/20, and this will increase to £45m in 2020/21. As the outcome of the Spending Review process for funding beyond 2020/21 is not yet known, the fund is only secured until March 2021, leaving some uncertainty for adoption agencies about resourcing future support needs. The Fund provides up to £5,000 for therapeutic interventions per child per year, with an additional £2,500 available for specialist assessment. Agencies can also match-fund ASF should more costly support be required. A report from the Evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund, published in March 2020<sup>38</sup>, explored views of local authorities, RAAs and providers. The research found that providers believed that the Fund is leading to better access to therapeutic support and better outcomes for children and families. We explore the impact of the ASF on adoption support in the RAAs later in this chapter.

Some RAAs were awarded a grant by the Department for Education to develop a Centre for Excellence for adoption support. Similarly, the Practice and Improvement Fund, which provided funding through two rounds (in 2016 and 2017), had specific strands of work focused on expanding and improving support provision for adoptive families.

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<sup>38</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/869762/Eval\\_of\\_ASF\\_draft\\_LA\\_provider\\_report\\_March-2020.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/869762/Eval_of_ASF_draft_LA_provider_report_March-2020.pdf)

## Developing an improved adoption support offer in the RAAs

A more strategic approach to delivering adoption support across the programme is becoming evident. Examples were provided that purportedly demonstrated improved **early intervention and universal offers** and these are now **becoming more widely embedded** across the programme. RAAs had generally developed a tiered approach to support, with their offers including universal, targeted and specialist interventions.

### Universal support provision

At a universal level, interviewees across the board saw adoption support as pertinent for the whole adoption journey. Adoption support teams are now widely included in adopter preparation from stage one onwards. Interviewees reported that this is new practice, as historically, teams were not involved before stage two. This approach was welcomed for a number of reasons, namely, to ensure that prospective adopters are aware of the RAAs' support offer as early as possible. Indeed, the research with adopters highlighted that one of the biggest increases in adopters' knowledge after preparation groups was in relation to adoption support.

Furthermore, providing support for families at an earlier stage before cases escalate to crisis-point was a shift in practice across RAAs, regardless of model, size or time established. **Early intervention approaches** were at the crux of this; one Adoption Support Manager described the strategy as “invest to save” in the long run.

“What we are working on is how can we stop things being so crisis-led.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

There were numerous examples of new early intervention practice across the research which were either new to all LAs in the RAA or new to some LAs. These included the development of entirely new **drop-in 'clinics'** for adoptive families in two RAAs, held at regular intervals such as monthly or weekly. These sessions allow parents to “pop in and pop out as and when needed” (*HoS*) to meet social workers and other stakeholders such as virtual school heads. This gives easier access to advice and information, and one newer RAA which has implemented this approach noted that feedback on the drop-in sessions has been positive.

In other examples of early intervention, there was a marked increase in the offer of **peer support**; this wider offer being one of the key differences at universal level. Some RAAs have developed **peer mentoring programmes and buddy schemes**, and most had focused on developing programmes of events, coffee mornings and groups for families to come together. As an interviewee in one of the smaller case study RAAs noted, some of the LAs did not have a strong offer of groups and networks previously; regionalising has levelled the playing field for adopters in the area in this respect as RAAs have rolled out



provision in one area across the wider RAA area. There was also some innovative practice in peer support: one of the longer-established case study RAAs had developed a “hub” for peer to peer support which includes an online chat facility and a podcast. This offer recognises that not all adopters will feel comfortable making a phone call in the first instance.

“[Our adoption support offer] was piecemeal before, based on individual workers working their socks off with open referrals, whereas we don’t need every family open as an open referral - we can offer lot at universal level.” – *case study RAA Adoption Support Manager*

With larger, more collaborative staff teams and a wider pool of adopters being supported, there was a general trend across the RAA interviews of RAAs becoming more **reflective** and drawing on learning and experience to improve the delivery of adoption support going forward. At one larger RAA, interviewees saw the peer support offer as a good mechanism for learning:

“Using adopters to support adopters is really important for us in understanding what they want most.” – *non-case study RAA Head of Service*

In terms of access to support, RAAs widely acknowledged that they have increased the **flexibility** of their offer to adoptive families, namely because they now operate with a larger staff pool and across more locations. Commonly, interviewees across the range of RAAs referenced ‘out of hours’ working, with various **support groups and information evenings** now being offered on evenings and weekends. One offered their psychology service until 7pm on weekdays. Interviewees were keen to ensure support services reflected adopter needs (see adoptive families experiences of support later in this section).

“I think they have had a big push in the region to try to involve adoptive families in activities which could help to promote the wellbeing of the families.” – *case study RAA Adoption Support Agency worker*

## Targeted and specialist interventions

At **targeted and specialist level**, the trend seen in our 2018-19 evaluation report for **training staff** to provide **therapeutic interventions** in-house continued. In-house **psychology services** were cited as being a particularly useful element of provision, both for families and for staff for several reasons, not least the ability to offer more tailored support in-house. For families, RAAs have used psychologists’ advice to shape the adoption support process to an individual child’s needs. Staff valued being able to have reflection sessions to review cases more now that more provision was delivered in house, though in one of the smaller case study RAAs it was noted that the psychologist is

in high demand and as staff sessions are group-based rather than one to one, it can be harder to discuss cases in detail in the time available. Limited one-to-one support for staff is available.

As noted in the 2018-19 evaluation report, several RAAs have trained their staff in **DDP** - all but one to Level One - and this was still seen to be beneficial by those who have it in place. Indeed, one RAA reported that they find it difficult to commission DDP provision externally as the course is a lengthy intervention, and so availability of practitioners is limited. Being able to offer provision in-house avoids some of the complexities around commissioning the work and opens up access to more families.

“We have some good providers out there but often not enough... because that [DDP] is such a long piece of work their availability is gone. Families who get DDP aren't ones who need it most, it's who happens to need it at the time that a provider becomes available.” – *case study RAA Adoption Support Worker*

Other RAAs have trained their staff to provide courses including **Theraplay, Nurturing Parenting and Non-Violent Resistance**. In one RAA, interviewees flagged that their therapeutic course has been developed drawing on best practice from each of the LAs, and this has drawn great feedback from adopters. It was also noted that Theraplay is being used during the introductions process at one RAA, and DDP in assessments of support needs at another, highlighting how improved support is starting to impact on the whole adoption journey.

“We are really getting our heads around how to embed this [DDP] into adoption support, but also into our assessments as well.” – *case study RAA Social Worker*

Generally, specialist provision was commissioned through the ASF for families with a greater complexity of need, and this process is considered later in this chapter.

### Practice example: Virtual Reality headsets <sup>39</sup>

A number of RAAs involved in our research have invested in virtual reality headsets, which allow users to see the world through the eyes of a toddler in a neglectful household; the immersive experience was described by interviewees as “powerful”. The headsets have been introduced over the last year, in some cases using savings generated by economies of scale resulting from regionalisation (more information about this is given on this later in this chapter). They are being used throughout the adopter journey; at preparation group stage, the headsets have allowed potential adopters to participate in what was described as “immersive attachment training” by one interviewee.

In post-adoption support, the headsets were considered particularly useful for reconnecting the family to the child’s experience. The headsets remind parents about the child’s background, support them to reconsider their child’s trauma, and help them to understand why that history may be leading to certain behaviours.

“The adopters in adoption support are finding that helpful in reconnecting when asking, ‘Why is my child like this?’ It is about just remembering where your child may come from, the fear, the lack of trust in their early life.” – *case study RAA Head of Service*

The headsets have also shaped how professionals approach their work with adopters and children. An interviewee from one case study RAA flagged how the headsets are motivating and encouraging social workers to embed DDP in their work due to the “absorbing experience, which is only a glimpse of what that child may have experienced” (*RAA Manager*). Examples were also provided of RAA staff taking the headsets into schools for use with education professionals to encourage a better understanding of the needs of adoptive children.

## Tailoring adoption support

Interviewees highlighted the importance of support which reflects the needs of a diverse range of adopters, including single people, same-sex adopters, and those from ethnic minority groups. The need to target support at different life-stages was also emerging. One of the smaller and more recently established case study RAAs is currently working with an external provider to deliver a project focussed on adopted young people. This service has added value to the RAA offer by means of having another quality service available, to the extent that the project has been extended for a year. However, they are also considering recruiting a youth worker to conduct group work and mentoring for young adopted people. Meanwhile, another of the newer RAAs is developing provision

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.thecornerstonepartnership.com/virtualreality>

for adopted children focused on the Year 6 school transition period and adopted teens. Pre-teen focused workstreams were also common.

Work with **birth families** was becoming more prevalent in the RAAs, both in terms of provision of support and in facilitating contact in more creative ways. Interviewees noted that this area of provision had historically been variable, with some LAs offering little or nothing in this area. One RAA was exploring an offer of birth-parent counselling, while there were multiple offers of one to one support for birth families from Family Support Workers (FSW). As well as the FSW support, one large RAA also has a birth family group working in one area of the region which has been so successful they intend to roll it out to another area. Indeed, this RAA highlighted how their letterbox service had been commended as an exemplar by a university researcher.

“If we look after our birth mums we are looking after our adopted children, with contact and identity [work]. [We were told that] we have a holistic approach that aims for inclusivity of birth families whilst recognising adopted children’s needs... [it was said to be] a transparent process that seeks to maintain openness and transparency between birth and adoptive families.” – *non-case study RAA Head of Service*

Interviewees reported that demand for birth family services had been high (with one of the larger, longer-established RAAs having 42 referrals in the first three months) and feedback has been positive.

## The impact of regionalisation on adoption support

A few in-house changes to adoption support teams, examined in this section of the report, run concurrent with commissioned ASF services to offer a more holistic approach to supporting adopters. Much as with the 2018-19 research wave, interviewees in this 2019-20 wave across the RAAs saw the key impacts of regionalisation on adoption support as a **more consistent, better quality** adoption support offer. This is primarily because staff have been upskilled and in-house packages of support draw on the best provision from the partner LAs. At one of the smaller case study RAAs, it was noted that previously perhaps one staff member in each LA would have had therapeutic training; now the whole team has. A similar message was echoed by another, larger RAA:

“Our offer is becoming more sophisticated and broader. We are offering more for our adopters in-house too, through our own staff because of the investment in training. So, things we would have previously referred families out for, they are in-house.” – *case study RAA Social Worker*

## Economies of scale widening support offers

Evidence of **economies of scale** were becoming more apparent in examples provided by some RAAs; a number of RAAs believed that the more innovative aspects of their support offer, such as the **VR headsets and peer mentoring**, would not have been feasible prior to regionalisation. Firstly, this was because the LAs individually were not big enough to support a peer mentoring service for example, neither the staff resource nor the number of adopters would have been adequate. Secondly, budget savings were important and had facilitated the purchase of the VR headsets at one of the longer-established RAAs. These savings had in-part arisen from delivering courses in-house, which had also widened access for adopters. The HoS explained how previously, it would have cost thousands of pounds to send a family on a particular course, but having those resources available internally has meant that they have been able to run the programme three times in a year for twelve families at a time. In this case, all adoption staff have been trained in DDP, therapeutic life-story work, and non-violent resistance. Regionalising enabled them to buy the trainer in to work with all 30 staff for the same cost as training just two staff on an external course. This means that there is continuity of provision in case of staff turnover, but also consistency of approach across the RAA.

The importance of economies of scale were emphasised in a smaller RAA where regionalisation has not yet provided them with the scope to achieve what they would like to; there are only five adoption support staff within the RAA and this means “it’s much more difficult to have that interface [with adopters].” In this case the RAA is linking with other LAs outside their partnership to maximise their offer, for example by sharing places on therapeutic parenting courses.

Working across several local authorities within an RAA (and in the case referenced above, outside the RAA) meant a **levelling out of the field** in terms of what is available to adopters in each area. RAAs commonly stated that they have been able to give adopters more flexibility in location of and type of intervention than they would have had previously. This was particularly the case for more rural areas.

“Wherever you live in the region, you will get the same response, which wouldn’t have happened [without the RAA].” – *case study RAA HoS*

## Commissioning arrangements with external providers

Where services are provided externally to the RAA, improvements were also noted by interviewees. Most were centralising their **commissioning**, and interviewees involved in delivery of support appreciated having one combined list of approved providers where assessment has been done in advance. This aligns with findings from adoption support

providers involved in the ASF evaluation<sup>40</sup>, who agreed that RAAs had led to a more streamlined commissioning process by reducing the number of applications they need to make to approved provider lists, for example from five to one. In our research, an interviewee from a VAA believed that RAAs are not necessarily commissioning external services in a considered and strategic way, but rather to fill gaps in in-house provision through spot-purchasing. However, the interviewee noted that some RAAs are more willing to undertake a joint strategic planning approach and work with VAAs to support provision.

“I’d say it is very much a gap-filling approach to it... There’s very much an unrealistic or lack of business approach to it. The expectation that a service might be available as and when they want it.” -  
VAA

Across the interviews, there was some discussion about the role and remit of VAAs and work was ongoing to establish working arrangements between RAAs and VAAs. There was mention of an unintended outcome of regionalisation being challenges to partnership working between VAAs, RAAs and LAs, for example because VAAs feel partnership working with RAAs may dilute their visions and values. Other concerns highlighted include RAAs having a negative effect on VAAs because some are bringing more provision in-house. Several interviewees felt that regionalisation had affected the sustainability of VAAs, and interviewees fear for a dip in the quality of provision with less competition in the market. A national stakeholder interview highlighted concerns from the VAA sector that the formation of RAAs has disrupted the adoption system and adopters are reaching out to VAAs for support in cases where they are unable to reach an RAA during the transition period. However, in other cases, the message was more positive. In one case study RAA for example, an interviewee reflecting on the VAA’s active presence said it gave a valuable different perspective that informed board decision making, especially with new LA partners. Issues regarding VAAs and regionalisation will be explored again in more detail in the final wave of research in 2021 when all RAAs will be live.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluations-of-the-adoption-support-fund-asf>

## Adoptive families' experiences of receiving support

Some interviewees including national stakeholders and panel chairs argued that it was still too early to see the impact of regionalised adoption support offers on outcomes for children and families because changes were still in progress and they have not yet seen data or evidence. Within the case study RAAs, little difference was observed regarding the number of adoption breakdowns or disruptions since going live – some had none, whereas others felt they had more since going live, but mainly because they were placing more children. However, it should be noted that RAAs do not always have clear data on breakdowns as many families (particularly those with older children) present to social care rather than adoption agencies and there is not a requirement to state explicitly whether adoption breakdown was a reason for a child coming into care. That said, interviewees across the RAAs believed that the changes implemented to their adoption support practice since regionalising would lead to positive outcomes for families, and in some cases had already. There were reports of improved partnership working between social workers, adoptive parents, and schools, as well as other stakeholders including health services.

RAAs continue to hold families through an additional layer of change as the RAAs progress through new and sometimes unpredicted organisational challenges. The First Report (2018-19) found minor themes of complaints – primarily relating to communication and relationship building between RAAs and LAs, VAAs and adopters – because of set-up. For RAAs within their first year of operation, staff were still feeling the effects of the complaints they were balancing against a changing system:

“For the first 6 months we had a high level of complaints who felt lost in the system... mainly from adopters who were in process of receiving service in LA before go-live. After go live [adopters] weren't visible enough to us or visible at all! In some cases, we only found out about adopters because they rang us... not because the LA told us. There was a system for transferring open cases, but it didn't work effectively. It came down to, if we had a social worker come across on TUPE – and they knew about them, we had them [their adopters]. But if we didn't it was very difficult. Another factor was that there were lots of agency social workers in the LAs who didn't come across. So those cases didn't come across either. We had a Share-Point tracker that they were meant to download info into, but the system failed... or it wasn't used effectively.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

The interviews found it was important for RAAs to help families through the transition from LA to RAA and to explain the role of the new RAA, its responsibilities and adoption support offer.

At one RAA, an interviewee expressed concern that adopters might now receive a less personal service from a bigger staff team; for example, when adopters call the RAA, they could reach staff in any LA rather than the individual/team they were used to dealing with prior to regionalisation. For those new to adoption, this will be a less visible issue, indeed, those adopters who were interviewed in 2020 were usually unaware that services had been delivered in any other way than through an RAA. However, for some second-time adopters who had previously worked with a single LA have given feedback that they no longer get to know a small group of staff well. However, the adopters providing that feedback have also been positive about the improved opportunities for training and support.

There was some caution noted as part of the adopter research strand when asked about their opinion on the regionalisation of adoption services.

“On the positive side, more availability of children. On the other side, I always know that the bigger teams get, the less efficient they are and the less personal they become.” – *Adopter*

A common theme however was that adopters were supportive of regionalisation, stating that “Makes perfect sense, a pooling of resources and sharing information”, and that it “seems more professional than managed by the local council.”

The importance of the **adopter voice** was discussed by RAAs involved in the research. A small number of RAAs were working with adopters directly through the Adopter Voice programme and establishing Adopter Champion roles. One RAA reported having adopter representation on their board, and another was sending out questionnaires to take on adopter views on a range of topics. Interviewees in these RAAs perceived this increased communication as a genuine benefit of regionalisation. The final report will draw on the findings of the adoption support survey of adopters and provide detailed insights into their views and experiences.

## Challenges in delivering adoption support

The 2018-19 report highlighted that RAAs were experiencing challenges related to high demand and a backlog of cases waiting for support. In this round of research, a national stakeholder flagged that the introduction of RAAs has highlighted that adoption support has been underfunded historically. Some interviewees believed that funding for adoption support is still not at the level it needs to be.

As RAAs have become embedded and waiting lists addressed, many have now put measures in place to **manage demand** and the flow of cases. Commonly, this manifested in a duty, front door or triage system for families requiring adoption support. Two RAAs reported that they have no waiting list for adoption support; one attributed this



to their duty system which meant cases could be signposted or allocated quickly, and the other to the fact that they are stringent about reviewing and closing cases. This in turn frees up capacity to support other families.

“We are trying to be focused about the pieces of work we do [on adoption support] even if it means families come back and come back. We are clear about what we want to achieve with them and when we’ve achieved it, we close the case; if it comes back in the future then it comes back and we’ll meet that need, rather than keeping cases open for a long time and then we’ve got no capacity for anything. I know we are quite unusual on that.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

The process of reviewing adoption support cases regularly was being implemented at a case study RAA where a panel conducts a “stock-take” at the point where a fourth application is requested to the ASF. This allows for a focused consideration of what impact the interventions are having. One national stakeholder expressed concern that parents may be “fobbed off” with courses when they need more specific interventions, so these reviews play a vital part in ensuring support meets need.

Most RAAs do not currently hold responsibility for SGOs and **other forms of permanency**, with these remaining in the LA. A concern was raised around ensuring those carers receive an appropriate level of support rather than a disjointed offer. One of the more established RAAs who has taken SGOs in-house flagged the benefit of this:

“It is great that there is now a dedicated assessment team for special guardians - they sit very close with the adoption support teams and they will talk to each other. The assessment team has said that is really beneficial in terms of support plans. Having that interface... on an informal level has been really useful.” – *case study RAA other local service*

As a number of RAAs aspire to bring SGOs in house at a future date, this is potentially useful learning and an argument to support that process.

Adoption support teams within the RAAs flagged several emerging issues for adoption support to address. These include child-on parent violence, and the potential impact of direct contact with birth families. RAAs are beginning to develop strategies for managing some of these issues such as the development of non-violent resistance training followed up with one-to-one support. In the final wave of research, we will explore RAA’s progress in these areas in more detail, if and how, RAAs know whether they work or not.

## Other funding for adoption support

The **Adoption Support Fund** remains a significant resource for RAAs and adoptive families<sup>41</sup>. Across the board, high levels of ASF applications were being generated; one RAA noted that they had submitted applications to a value of £895,000 for more than 320 therapeutic interventions last year, and one of the largest case study RAAs had processed more than £1.5m in applications in 2019. However, there was a wariness about reliance on the Fund, with its future uncertain. One RAA has focussed on upskilling staff to fill the gap should the Fund be cut, and another felt that attendance at support groups offered by the RAA had declined due to the number of adopters receiving ASF interventions instead. Indeed, several stakeholders were concerned about the impact of the ASF on the wider development of adoption support services. Staff felt that the high demand for ASF amongst adopters who may think this is the only available option means adoption support staff become too heavily focused on processing ASF applications, leading to crisis-point responses, rather than allowing early intervention to be more fully developed.

“My concern is that adoption support has become very ASF dominated... and focussed...adoption support is very much managing the ASF process for adopters doing an assessment of need, looking for private providers, - all the management of that process, as opposed to developing early interventions that are preventative for adopters – having a really core offer from the point of approval and order.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

However, one interviewee at a case study RAA noted that the development of their in-house psychology team and the therapeutic social workers had meant that the adoption support team had better guidance on what support could be put in place for a family; this was resulting in applications being made to ASF earlier in the process. In the interviewee’s view, putting support in place proactively rather than reactively was reassuring for families.

Another RAA described how they had taken a more strategic approach to the use of ASF:

“We are in a good position now have a graduated assessment of need process. Whereby we effectively identify adopters with greatest need and target that. We do have unallocated places but do not have those on there who are in the greatest need. We are using the ASF effectively.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

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<sup>41</sup> Reports from the DfE evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund can be found here - <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluations-of-the-adoption-support-fund-asf>

There was some evidence to suggest that support provided by the ASF was meeting adopters' needs.

“Think that adopters have been satisfied with having the duty system, and that the RAA is able to commission things through the ASF.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

Voluntary agencies and adoption support agencies saw the ASF as a “double edged-sword”, not least because cashflow issues related to ASF work can be hugely problematic for smaller organisations.

Two case study RAAs reported a decline in the use of ASF over the last year. For one, assessments of need had dropped by 50% from the previous year. In part, they attributed this to uncertainty around the fund's future and a reluctance on the part of social workers to apply for something that might not exist in the long term. However, another felt the decline might be because they are providing more support in-house themselves.

The **Centre for Excellence grant** had played a vital role in the development of services in one case study RAA – almost all interviewees there referenced the difference it had made to their provision and the role it had played in attracting adopters to their agency. This was primarily because the grant has paid for the introduction of new and more innovative roles such as adoption psychologists; feedback from adopters to the RAA demonstrates that this is a draw. Staff also explained how that service has been used to good effect even before introductions in some cases, allowing interactions to be tailored to a child's individual needs. They also noted that having that individualised approach has meant that the team have been able to put ASF applications and assessments in place earlier than they might have done otherwise. This has been beneficial for adopters as they feel reassured that they have a plan in place. However, as with ASF, there was concern raised about the longevity of the services after the grant ends.

## Conclusion

This wave of research saw RAAs focusing on improving and broadening their adoption support offers now that some of the challenges faced in year one of go-live – particularly related to high demand and managing a backlog of cases - have been addressed. Interviews highlighted that RAAs are starting to think more strategically about how to support adoptive families and it was clear that early intervention-style approaches (e.g. building in more peer support) are a key aspect of this, preventing cases escalating to crisis point. This has the potential to reduce the current high level of demand for ASF and ensure that applications which are made are supported by thorough assessment and review.

Evidence of the benefits of RAAs relating to economies of scale was starting to emerge in this second wave of research. RAAs have been able to create a broader offer to

adopters across multiple LAs, supported by the extensive training in therapeutic and psychological approaches. RAAs have also been able to develop innovative approaches to sit alongside these interventions, such as enhanced peer support offers as part of universal support and virtual reality headsets, which have been made possible through cost savings and delivery at scale.

While some challenges relating to demand and conducting quality assessment of needs remain, RAAs are developing methods to address these, such as triage and duty systems, and some early successes have been seen in this respect.

## Chapter 6: Analysis of costs

### Summary

- Analysis of Section 251 data (local authority accounts collected nationally) indicates that RAAs do not appear to be increasing (or decreasing) local authority expenditure on adoption at this stage of the evaluation.
- The majority of RAA spend is associated with staff costs.
- The impact analysis shows an improvement in timeliness, particularly for 'harder to place' children, which can be translated to savings for local authorities in foster care costs.
- Qualitative insights revealed it continues to be difficult to accommodate the needs/expectations of all LAs.

This chapter presents findings on the costs associated with adoption prior to and during the formation of RAAs, the approaches adopted to finance RAAs, and consideration for efficiencies and challenges experienced to date. Evidence informing this section draws predominately on administrative costs data (Section 251 returns) and qualitative interviews with RAA staff.

The analysis utilises Section 251 data<sup>42</sup> (s251), which is publicly available information to local authorities (LA), schools and the public regarding education and children's social care funding. The focus is on costs associated with adoption, combining data from multiple years available (2016-2019) to calculate yearly changes in expenditures and incomes, to understand any impact RAAs might have had.

Key assumptions and limitations are:

- It is likely LAs attribute costs of adoption differently. This is accounted for in our study design by assessing how the costs within each LA change over time – if each LA is (broadly) consistent in their recording of costs, the analysis can be considered valid.
- Where there is a lead/host LA within an RAA, it is possible there is an element of double counting - for example, the lead LA including the total cost of the RAA as their expenditure and non-lead LAs reporting their financial contribution to the RAA as expenditure. There was evidence of this in the review of RAA accounts (see section on RAA costs of adoption). Additionally, DfE funding to start the RAA could

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-local-authority-school-finance-data>

be counted as income (although S251 guidance explicitly says not to include grant income, it is still possible). Both could cause an upward bias in our analysis - especially in the case of expenditure- as figures might be inflated among live RAAs, and annual changes would be difficult to interpret and attribute effects accurately. Steps were taken in the analysis to guard against this: analysis which excludes lead LAs is presented – this is useful for the longitudinal assessment of costs where changes during the transition to RAAs are clear.

At the start of the evaluation, a cost collection template was developed to gather granular data from the RAA case study areas on the costs of adoption before and after the formation of RAAs (e.g. staff, different overheads). Whilst three case study areas were able to complete this in 2019, data collection for 2020 was incomplete due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The templates were due to be completed with support from the research team and depth-interviews with finance leads. However, this could not be delivered due to the Department temporarily suspending all research fieldwork during the emergency.<sup>43</sup> However, the addition of s251 data to the analysis is intended to provide an assessment of the (overall) changes in adoption costs.

## The impact of RAAs on adoption expenditure and income

To determine whether LA annual adoption expenditure and income (sourced from s251 data) in live RAAs differed to not yet live RAAs, regression analysis was undertaken. The analysis was set up as a fixed-effects regression which allows us to **isolate the impact of “live” RAA status** from the impacts of time and considers the changes “within” each LA. The latter is important recognising potential differences in how LAs attribute costs of adoption in their s251 returns. As noted in the previous section, lead/host LAs are excluded from the analysis.

The outcome variables in the analysis **were total expenditure, income, and net expenditure**. The emphasis was on net expenditure as this represents the costs borne by LAs (i.e. total expenditure minus income). The key explanatory variable of interest was “**RAA live**”, which indicates the effect on the outcome variables for LAs that, within a given financial year, were part of an RAA that had been live for at least 6 months<sup>44</sup>, relative to LAs in not yet live RAAs. To control for changes in demand for adoption services, the number of children placed for adoption (i.e. placement orders) from in each financial year was included in the regression model (“Model 1” in Table 6.1). Recognising annual budgets are set at the start of each financial year, and as such influenced by historical demand, a second set of regression models including the number of placement orders from the previous (i.e. lagged) financial year were run (“Model 2” in Table 6.1).

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<sup>43</sup> This work is still planned for the final report

<sup>44</sup> Models were also run for RAAs which had been live for at least 1 year. This did not change the statistical significance or direction of the estimates so is not reported.

Key findings from the analysis were:

- There was **no statistically significant impact of RAA live on net expenditure or total expenditure.**
- There was a **statistically significant impact of RAA live on income** (-£80,209 and -£87,848 for Model 1 and 2, respectively).
- There was a **statistically significant impact of annual placements on net expenditure** (£3,891 and £4,049 for Model 1 and 2, respectively).

The regression output is presented in Table 6.1.

The impact of RAA live status on income is likely explained by interagency fees now being captured by the lead/host LA. The key finding remains that there was no statistically significant impact on net expenditure, which reflects the cost borne by the LA.

**Table 4.1: Estimated differences in costs among RAAs that have been live for at least six months**

Estimated difference in costs	Total Expenditure (Model 1)	Total Expenditure (Model 2)		Income (Model 1)	Income (Model 2)		Net Expenditure (Model 1)	Net Expenditure (Model 2)
RAA live	-£35,927	-£65,208		-£80,209*	-£87,848*		£44,282	£22,640
Year = 2017	£63,063	NA		£58,007*	NA		£5,055	NA
Year = 2018	-£9,031	-£68,836		-£288	-£58,901*		-£8,743	-£9,935
Year = 2019	£27,523	-£21558		£4,066	-£56,403*		£23,457	£34,845
Annual placements	£2,688	NA		-£1,203	NA		£3,891*	NA
“Lagged” annual placements	NA	2444		NA	-£1,605		NA	£4,049*

Source: Ecorys analysis of Section 251 data and SSDA903  
 “\*” indicates statistical significance at the 5% level or less



## RAA costs of adoption

This section focuses on the types of costs of Regional Adoption Agencies, based on *detailed financial accounts* of three case study RAAs. Important to bear in mind when considering the findings below as this may not be fully representative of all RAAs.

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

The annual costs of RAAs seem to be heavily dependent on staff, as **more than 60%** of their yearly budgets is made up of staffing costs. These costs refer to all the staff employed through the local authorities which make up each RAA and include the salaries of directors, managers, advisors, social workers and practitioners, business and marketing managers, administrators, and others. In all three RAA case studies these expenses reach more than **£2 million**.

RAAs must cover a range of different types of expenses to function efficiently and effectively. RAA expenditure includes the running costs of the premises, office-related costs such as supplies, phones, storage, and furniture, as well as transport/travelling costs, training of staff and employees. Budgets also consider costs related to information services, IT equipment, as well as overheads in ICT costs, finance, HR/payroll, audits, and others. RAAs also spend on advertising, marketing and recruitment which can be a significant expense - in one of the cases up to **£160,000** annually<sup>45</sup>. Lastly, RAAs engage in many types of adoption activities which translate into costs in their budgets - for example 'preparation programmes' (adopter training), organising adoption panels and panels regarding medical or legal advice, as well as post-adoption support.

Another significant part of the RAAs' annual budgets is reserved for **interagency fees (IAF)** and its generated income. RAAs seem to reserve between **10-20%** for IAF, which usually translates to amounts between **£300,000 – £700,000** in costs. RAAs calculate these fees based on historic expenditure among partners and on past placements. It is also worth noting that the actual expenses might be significantly varied compared to the budgets, as demand for placements affects them. IAF net expenditure might be more indicative of the true inter-agency costs, as for example the one with the highest IAF (£700,000) also predicts inter-agency income of more than **£1 million** annually - this is varied across RAAs.

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<sup>45</sup> The budget for adoption allowances and grants was not included in the analysis.

## RAA approaches to financing

The qualitative research conducted in 2018/19 identified 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.

The research conducted in 2019/20 reveals some RAAs, as originally planned, have moved from a historical spend model over to an activity-based model. Those RAAs that switched perceived that starting the RAAs based on historical spend was an effective way to launch the RAA (with LAs knowing that financial contributions would be in line with previous years) and enabled time for activity-based funding formulas to be developed and negotiated. The rationale provided for activity-based models was to support financial contributions that reflect demand from each LA, and potential increased responsiveness to changes in demand. Interviewees highlighted challenges around developing an activity-based formula that worked for all LAs – “inevitably, there will be some winners and losers”.

Regardless of the model, the move to RAAs has helped the RAAs understand the ‘true’ costs of adoption – LA adoption service offers varied before RAAs and costs (for adoption and wider CSC services) were attributed differently. Part of the RAAs role has been to align the service offer and ensure financial contributions are equitable.

## Cost efficiencies and economies of scale

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

The impact analysis undertaken on timeliness (see Chapter four) demonstrated a reduction of 14 days in the time from placement order to being placed with an adoptive family which can be attributed to RAAs. Almost all of the children placed by a live-RAA (1074 of 1079) had spent some time in foster care prior to being adopted. Assuming the

14 days would have otherwise been spent in foster care, it is possible to estimate the cost savings associated with this.

Curtis et al (2019) estimate the weekly cost of foster care to the state/LAs is £621.<sup>46</sup> Applying this figure to the, on average, two-weeks (14 days) reduction in timelines and the number of children supported by an RAA, **the total national cost saving is £1,333,908** (1,074 children x 2 weeks (14 days) at £621 per week). However, this saving would fall to the *local authority* (in the foster care budget), not the RAA. At this point in time, this is the most reliable cost saving that can be calculated.

Economies of scale are defined as cost savings resulting from pooling of resources. The research conducted in 2018/19 revealed that RAAs felt that it was too early for economies of scale to materialise. Whilst RAAs were still cautious about cost savings, a number of potential savings were starting to be realised for some in 2019/20:

- Savings on external contracts as suppliers now only had to deal with one organisation (rather than several LAs). RAAs can contract for larger volumes, which in some cases may incur a discounted rate.
- Reduced travel and associated costs for staff as more children placed within region, rather than further away in other regions.

It should be noted that not all these economies of scale (or cost-efficiencies) are necessarily cashable. It is more a case of these savings enable improvements elsewhere in the system (e.g. improving the adoption offer across the region), help manage unexpected/hidden costs, including (for LAs who were net exporters prior) reductions in income from the interagency fee. One interviewee provided an example of spending some savings on virtual headsets.

## Challenges

The research conducted in 2018/19 highlighted the following challenges associated with costs, which were being experienced or were anticipated:

- Additional/unanticipated costs.
- LA variation and expectations (i.e. internal factors).
- Changes to the adoption landscape (i.e. external factors).

As detailed below, these challenges were still present in the 2019/20 research.

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.pssru.ac.uk/project-pages/unit-costs/unit-costs-2019/>

Whilst the analysis of quantitative data (only covering up until 2018/19 financial year) showed limited effects on RAA spending (aggregated LA expenditure), most RAAs reported challenges around budgets. The challenges related to a combination of agreeing LA contributions and balancing this against the differing expectations of LAs in terms of service offer - LAs want the best support the RAA has to offer for their children but, when there is already pressure on budgets, it can be difficult to agree additional funding contributions.

Changes to the adoption landscape included changing use of the interagency fee (see previous section) and RAA restructuring (e.g. when a new LA joins an existing LA) where new budgets are required.

## Conclusion

Analysis of local authority expenditure on adoption reveals limited impacts associated with the transition to RAAs - There was no statistically significant decrease or increase in costs. This reflects agreements LAs made when RAAs formed that financial contributions should not exceed business as usual.

Analysis of more detailed financial accounts, where these were provided, revealed the majority of RAA costs are spent on staff. Drawing on results from the impact evaluation on timeliness of adoptions, it is estimated that, nationally, £1,333,908 was saved in fostering costs.

Qualitative insights reveal some challenges experienced by RAAs. It can be difficult for RAAs to meet the varying expectations of LAs, both in terms of financial contributions and, linked to this, the support offer.

# Chapter 7: The effectiveness of the local plan in implementing each RAA and making progress: cross-cutting challenges and facilitators

## Summary

- All RAAs experience teething problems which affect their capacity to maintain and develop regional adoption services. These are exacerbated in instances where a history of partnership working is lacking; the model necessitates extensive changes to local policies and practices; and leadership is unstable or unclear.
- A common theme is that, over time, RAAs have been able to overcome a lot of challenges by establishing clear and consistent management structures and ways of working and engaging all staff and partners in the process of change.
- Strong, experienced, and respected leadership was highlighted again in 2019/20 as critical for the progress of the RAA's implementation plan. The DfE leadership programme was widely praised for effectively supporting the development of this new tier of leaders.
- IT and data sharing continue to be difficult to accommodate the needs/expectations of all LAs, particularly where RAAs, like LAs, are being asked to make cost savings.
- The research found that more practical guidance to support the operational aspects of RAAs would be beneficial.
- RAAs require continued investment and focus on managing culture change to build service improvements and resilience. This is likely to be even more important now with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and response required.

This chapter explores factors affecting the progress of RAAs and interviewees' perceptions on how effectively RAAs have managed the change process. Specifically, the chapter examines challenges and facilitating factors, such as the local context; leadership; and culture change. It offers practical examples to share thematic learning around what has worked, for whom and in what circumstances.

There was a general perception that RAAs were overcoming initial implementation challenges and were now into new operational challenges, as well as building on practice. Operational tasks and challenges were still consuming a lot of time for RAA leaders, at the expense of being able to focus on more strategic matters. This was particularly the case for RAAs with 'flatter' management structures - for example, large RAAs with only two strategic level managers.

## Local context

This section explores the contexts of RAAs in implementing the local plan and how issues relating to local context have affected the ability of RAAs to drive forward progress.

**Historic partnership working** remains a glue that holds the RAA together, especially for those who already worked in consortiums or shared elements of marketing or recruitment regionally because they can build on existing joint working foundations. Where relationships existed prior to the transition to RAA, LA partners have more easily overcome any challenges associated with variations in previous performance and caseloads. Historic performance (and variation in performance and practice) remains a challenge for other RAAs to drive-up standards, alongside mitigating feelings of ‘diluting’ high-performing and established services, as the new structures develop. Although these challenges persist, indications from the 2019-20 case study research suggest that with the passing of time, these things can be overcome by pooling resources, taking a more strategic approach to planning and delivery and enhancing processes for reflective practice to support a levelling of [improved] practice across RAAs (see earlier chapters).

**Local objectives** of RAAs in some cases were shifting with the changing landscape of wider local government priorities. The most notable changes were around the restructuring of LAs, either as a whole through merging or by LAC teams. These changes have a direct impact on the RAA, including new legal implications or new geographies for the RAAs to consider.

As found in the First Report 2018-19, local **court practices** can influence on the progress of RAA adoption cases. Interviewees reflected on the perceived ‘trends’ of courts; that legal systems, and even individual judges in constituent authority areas, have had an influence on the volume and progress of cases. This knowledge was being shared across teams and, to some degree, teams were able to plan for this.

**Geographies** influence the effectiveness of organisational relationships, partnership working, travel time and knowledge of existing services for workers. RAAs with **large geographies** have experienced additional challenges in terms of **contact arrangements** between children and birth parents which need to be considered early on by both LA and RAA staff. A minor theme finds a ‘saturation’ of adopters coming from areas within an RAA region, perceived as being ‘adopter rich’. This has administration implications for contact arrangements where plans for direct contact with birth families require the use of designated LA contact centres and may necessitate longer journeys within the larger geography of RAAs. Also, it has implications for placing children at a safe and reasonable distance from birth families (where there are concerns around security and stability for the child), or closeness where that is appropriate for the case. At the same time, RAAs are seeking to be inclusive of a larger geographical proportion of the region,

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by hosting information sessions, and in some cases adopter training, in different places across the RAA geography.

### **Practice example: Co-working cases across RAA and LA teams**

Co-working across LA and RAA teams was continually improving in this RAA. Despite the core RAA team being located separately to LA teams, they were sustaining positive working practices through regular meetings and strong messages around roles. This was affirmed by workers external to the RAA:

“I think the linking with our social workers and their social workers works really well. We have a transfer meeting at the point we have placement order. The RAA are usually co-allocated as we have had ADM [at the LA] and they have agreed care plan is adoption. It doesn't always work, sometimes [it's] a little slow but 9/10 [it works].”  
– *case study RAA LA team manager*

An independent reviewing officer (IRO) reflected on the positive relationships and how this facilitated open communications around cases, particularly for concerns around drift and delay:

“They [RAA teams] are removed in terms of location but there are people coming across and doing that linking work with the team, so it is still here and still exists. We have good relationships with the RAA so when the need arises, we can go and have face to face discussions and meetings to.” – *case study RAA LA IRO*

**Information technology and data sharing remains to be a distinct challenge** for RAAs, from inception phases to the present day which is often linked to the strength of previous working relationships. Negotiations of access to case information with local authorities is time consuming and can remain unresolved into going live. Where RAAs have been able to establish access to systems, RAAs covering multiple LAs require training to access the different systems and not all LAs that RAAs serve operate with the same case-management systems. Workers feel that there is variability in sharing of children's case information, and direct access to this (or lack of). Practitioners are therefore reliant on children's social workers for information. The accuracy of this information is questioned as RAA workers do not always see the original documents or have the time for scrutiny of casefiles. On the reverse, if the RAA can access LA systems, LAs could have access to RAA case-management systems.

### **Practice example: Facilitating communication and relationship building both internal and external to the RAA**

Providing opportunities for larger cohorts of the RAA staff to come together, discuss and input had been “really important for building identity, culture and buy-in” (HoS).

This was done through staff training, all-service events and holding a conference on identity and culture of the RAA. Absorbing feedback through these larger meetings into year one of being live, the RAA commissioned both Dyadic Developmental Practice training for practitioners and Supervision training for managers.

To supplement this, the leadership team had developed a workforce development plan, and looked at each staff group to determine what they needed to progress.

“We are trying to be really responsive to what people want. Increasingly looking at how they can do more about partnership working with the LAs. So, we are offering training to LA staff too.” – *case study RAA HoS*

Relationships between the RAA and one LA in the partnership became strained, as the RAA was a perceived risk to performance. The RAA overcame this risk by “reporting back, in all sorts of ways, formally and informally” (HoS). Sitting underneath the management board, the RAA HoS and service manager linked in with a group of service managers from the LAs to keep those links connected.

To bolster the strategic level communications, RAA team managers and practitioners met with LA staff on a regular basis to work cases and be visible in shared offices. Supplementing this, the RAA held informal reviews with the LAs throughout the working year and provided formal reports every six months.

## **Leadership**

**Strong, experienced, and respected leadership is a key enabler for RAA functionality** (as found in First Report 2018 - 2019). The second wave of annual research with case studies and wider stakeholders shows that effective leadership remains a key enabler for RAAs’ continued functionality once live. This section explores aspects of leadership, including influence, leadership skills, management of the change process (including for children and families), respect, stability, strength, visibility, and availability.



## Leadership development

The introduction of the RAAs has also brought in **opportunities for the development of leadership in adoption**. Heads of Service in RAAs are part of a leaders' group, which allows members to come together to share learning and experiences, and the RAA Leaders Programme, which provides coaching and personal development opportunities for Heads of Service. The Leaders Programme recognises that the role requires certain skills to establish and develop new organisations, but also supports participants towards becoming system leaders both regionally and nationally to raise the profile of adoption and improve outcomes for children.

“Has given a focus to adoption which for a lot of LAs because the number of adopted children are relatively low compared with rest of children's services, the formation of RAAs and whole discussion and to some degree setting up on regional adoption boards, has raised profile and helped them to come together. [It has] not always been a very positive experience but nevertheless has given a whole new set of places where adoption could be considered and talked about and people could try and overcome difficulties. Hopeful that in the fullness of time, we will see some improvement in the number of children being adopted and the speed of adoptions but its relatively early days.” – *National Stakeholder*

With that comes greater accountability as there has been a shift from having 152 adoption team managers who may oversee only 10 adoptions a year to 25 RAA leaders, with sufficient profile to bring in Assistant Directors & Directors to the table for quarterly management board meetings.

“The traction is being able to say to one DCS, you have more delay in your process than this LA in our RAA.” so bringing them to account, bringing them up to a higher standard -forcing them to justify behind the numbers, just to say, ‘look at this, there's a difference’. Then DCS has to ask, ‘what's that about – there's an element of transparency, good use of data, and forum to ask those questions.” – *National Stakeholder*

In practical terms, one HoS highlighted that the leadership group has been an important source of support in what can be a potentially lonely role with few peers to bounce ideas off on an operational level. As another noted, good leadership has been vital for pulling teams through a difficult change process; developing leaders' skills in these circumstances is important:

“Sharing of knowledge and experience across the RAAs has been great and so useful...it has been so important to have those

formalised networks for the service leads.” – *non-case study RAA HoS*

The **national RAA leadership group** offered much-valued peer support to fellow RAA Heads of Service and an opportunity to work together:

“The RAAs leaders’ group is a really influential group, really got the ear of the DfE and the minister, which they wouldn’t have had before.” – *case study RAA HoS*

“Having a really strong management team and the RAA leaders programme has been really important. These things have done a lot of work around creating conditions for ongoing success.” – *case study RAA HoS*

“Two things have brought them together: the leaders’ group, which some [HoS] have been part of a long time. With regular meetings and support wrapped around. The group have massively benefitted from leadership programme, it’s developed their leadership as individuals and sense of collective leadership of adoption and the system. It’s made a massive difference in understanding how to approach these really difficult challenges and develop real deep sense of trust and commitment to each other and improvement.” – *National Stakeholder*

In this wave of research, national stakeholders widely acknowledged the benefits of these offers and the impacts they have had; indeed, one interviewee felt that the biggest impact of the adoption policy is to create a set of leaders who can drive adoption forward and give it prominence on a national scale. Others noted (as above and below) that the group will have more influence on policy and practice going forward in a way that service managers never had before, and that what has emerged is **collective system leadership** that is: more adaptive, more consistent and, faster to cooperatively act than prior to RAAs. Consequently, the Department has been channelling money through HoSs for other (and previously segmented) tasks. A key example of this is the amalgamated funding to support a national approach to the Adoption Week campaign.

“For the first time [in adoption] you’re seeing collective system leadership.” – *National stakeholder*.

“The RAA leaders’ group is emerging as an influential leaders’ group and I think they will have more influence on policy and practice going forward in ways that service managers will never have had.” – *National stakeholder*

Finally, at a programme level RAAs have helped to **generate an improved understanding of the national adoption landscape**. Messages drawn from discussions

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at leaders' groups have trickled down to middle-level managers and team members – about considerations of the system and the processes that may influence said system.

The risk is that the voice of RAA leaders are heard at the expense of others:

“The government’s set up a leadership group for emerging leaders for RAAs, but is ignoring, as a sounding board, the expertise in the rest of the sector, which is still, as I say, doing 26% of all the placements for adoption.” – VAA

## Important leadership qualities in implementing RAAs

**Across the interviews, respect, leading by example, being available and staying visible** are all found to be key tenets of constructive RAA leadership characteristics. Practitioners with both short- and long- term experience of RAAs commented:

“As a newbie I am kind of surprised about how on the ground she is [HoS], in my previous role all the leadership were ‘up in the Gods’. You wouldn’t email them unless you really needed to. It feels nice to have such a high up manager be on the ground.” – *case study RAA practitioner*

Another impact of a strong HoS is the ability to strive and drive forward that thinking:

“Our [HoS] very good at striving. Occasionally we do say can we just stop for a moment, but it is always where are we aiming, what are we doing next, where else do we want to do with this? The birth parent service was very much generated because of the lack of provision and driven by her.” – *case study RAA Team manager*

Some RAAs had experienced **changes to temporary leadership** and felt that longer-term contracts with RAA leaders offer stability and security for the organisation and teams. Interim posts for heads of service and senior management present insecurity for the person in the role itself, the RAA, the workers and potentially for the wider system.

“The person responsible was still doing their normal working post alongside RAA planning. This was a detriment to the service at go-live as strategic members thought that things had been done that weren’t. Like writing to panels to ask for EOIs for the new structure and format. Letterbox arrangements - but no capacity at the LA... this led to staff anxiety, as it all felt rushed.” – *case study RAA manager*

The research also highlighted the importance of **regular communications with other parts of the ecosystem**. This was in relation to both promoting the RAA and securing buy-in, but also at a more operational level regarding different organisations’ roles and

responsibilities. RAAs have created flow charts to demonstrate responsibilities and roles across organisations, but this requires clear and persistent messages.

“Buy-in still feels tricky in certain places, with individual authorities at times with the senior staff not really wanting to be in the RAA. It is harder then with the workers in the area to feel something cohesive as they understand they [seniors] don’t want it either. And they still sit with them and are employed by them. We need to do some more work on our identity [as an RAA]. LA teams’ relationship remains unchanged, always been good. As time goes on, [less engaged] LAs will establish that trust in our service.” – *Non-case study RAA HoS*

“We have tensions with smaller authorities reluctant to give up the adoption bit of the role. A lot of work has been needed with one that we serve in the hub. Things we have got up and running are better, a template and a proper linking meeting. Rather than just a discussion between the social worker and the family finder.” – *case study RAA manager*

### **Regionalised adoption panels**

By structuring panels from a centralised list across the RAA areas on a rotating basis, a panel chair commented on how this offers them a wealth of experiences and practices of working with a wide range of colleagues. They noted the risk that when remaining in an authority adoption panel, you consistently work with the same people and dynamics establish themselves. By rotating their areas, they have avoided this, and the panel chair commented on collective feelings from adoption panels:

“We see the benefit of having a wider, broader view.” – *case study RAA Panel Chair*

As well as this, participants perceived the need for wider sharing of RAA practice, beyond individual RAAs or consortia to **mitigate the unnecessary ‘reinvention of the wheel’**:

“There needs to be some work [nationally] around practice development, in terms of making an RAA tick. Having practice guidance and procedures in place. There is lots of work in agencies that are live that could be shared - so we aren’t all reinventing wheel in developing policies procedures and guidance for staff. Whereas I would say there needs to be national protocol – The DfE have funded this – so work around practice should be shared nationally. We are still in phases of doing that and haven’t really got project budget to do

that. So, we went live without policies and procedures in place – we had baseline procedures – but not enough to show social workers what precisely the processes were internally to the RAA and externally.” – *non-case study RAA Head of Service*

**The research found common principles of effective leadership that have secured success for RAAs:**

- Liaising with the board and wider stakeholders for the best business outcomes, as new challenges emerge
- Highly skilled negotiation, accountability-holding and brokering of relationships (with local authorities, external organisations, and practitioners)
- Bringing extant organisational knowledge of both the adoption service pre-RAA and the tacit understanding of the process to becoming an RAA
- Continually developing RAA workers’ understanding of complex authority structures and functions as well as reiterating roles with LAs, adoption panels and VAAs
- Generating a wider understanding of the national picture for adoption
- Continuing to hold families through the changes RAAs present for them and their children.

## Culture change

The first annual report (2018-19) gathered key learning from the leader’s group around the stages of transition: developing the vision, building ownership, managing staff morale. This sub-section explores themes relating to progress in these areas, highlighting both new and continuing learning.

RAAs were **continuing efforts to bring the organisation together**, through delivering all-service events and quarterly team meetings. Case study and non-case study RAAs were streamlining branding and messages as the organisations grew further in their journey, towards improving the quality and consistency of adoption services. In places, more established RAAs (2+ years of being live) were becoming cohesive new wholes with external workers feeling supported through changes:

“[there] is no sense of ‘them’ and ‘us’ from the RAA...they always listen to staff members and have aimed to bring them along on the journey with them.” – *case study RAA LA manager*

## Positive changes to working in adoption since regionalisation

Clarity of pathways and where to access support was viewed as an added benefit of working on adoption cases since regionalisation. This, coupled with the ability to place children within a wider region, was discussed by an LA social worker:

“For me the biggest difference is, I think there is a really clear pathway of where you can get your support from which I think is really helpful. You don’t sort of have to go through loads of different people...Also, I think the geographical area is much better, so we are not having to place children on their doorstep but at the same time it is still within their region which is really important to their identity.” – *case study RAA LA Social worker*

In places they were focussing on co-working through joined-up events, to focus on joint LA working. In 2019 the RAA held an event with the LAs to look at performance, practice, and stories. This allows them to know that if one LA is not reaching targets in an area then that now reflects on the RAA, so cohesiveness is needed between all the LAs. Following its success, the plans are to continue this as an annual event. An LA DCS reflected on these opportunities and how that had made efficiencies in their practices:

“To be able to share the learning is, for me, one of the most positive things about the RAA. We have better links with LAs that we would have had to probably work harder for if we didn’t meet at RAA meetings on a regular basis...” – *case study RAA LA DCS*

However, **divides in experience** were still felt within RAAs areas, especially for: hub and spoke RAA models with disparate spokes, or LA hosted models which also operated a split of co-location and ‘spoke’ offices. Staff who were co-located had similar experiences and were bonded through that shared (both positive and negative) experience. Workers from other offices commenting on lesser performing/challenged segments of the RAA felt negatively about their poor performance. This generated opinions on collective performance of certain spokes, despite the challenges relating to recruitment of enough practitioners or related to individual social workers.

Learning indicates that more **joined up working cross-region can enable staff to connect more as individuals**, avoiding generalised perceptions of others’ performance. Allocation of cases to workers in another area could be sophisticated, and systems for hot desking availability when working in another areas. Workers can engage fact to face with colleagues from other offices at more than all-service events or quarterly meetings.

Co-working cases is reportedly enjoyed by practitioners but would take more thought and sophisticated systems at the case-allocation stage.

The implementation of the RAAs has led to a loss in staffing of experienced workers, who chose to either retire or move to other posts in light of the challenges that would likely arise due to a major piece of change'. Although RAAs had felt a loss of key workers in the transition to the new structures, staff spoke highly of the **new opportunities for upskilling or specialising** in areas of adoption and permanence.

A challenge that is a direct result of system change, is **the need for RAA leaders and their staff to manage the process of change for families**, both newly enquiring and those in the system.

Regarding capacity and morale, local authority social workers external to the RAA felt a **sense of loss in relation to the family finding work** that was previously part of their role. Although experiencing this sense of loss is predicated on how teams were structured pre-RAAs. Where this arose from the data, workers commented on how that had developed over time and that RAA family finders were working more collaboratively with them to find the right family for the child. LA workers also sensed that relinquishing this responsibility has relieved pressure from their workloads. In teams where there has been a broader overview of adoption cases in teams, feelings of fragmentation occurred. Altogether, the above culminates in both feelings of loss towards expertise in elements of previous roles, as well as efficiencies in working practices.

#### **Key Learning:**

- RAAs are relational structures, needing enough capacity and flex in their specialist teams for practitioners to be able to pick up work in other areas of the adoption or special guardianship journey, in order to respond to the ebbs and flows of the adoption landscape as well as to manage the 'bottlenecks' occurring at certain times of a year by enabling staff to work outside of specialist areas to support team working at busy times.
- Taking learning from each other on the different parts of the RAA mechanism (and with external services) generates a collective system understanding and raises the awareness of the national picture for adoption (and special guardianship).
- Flexibility is increasingly important for services, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic. Different parts of the journey, to permanence for children, have been affected by lockdown and social distancing measures. RAAs will need resources, staffing and time, to be used flexibly across the organisation, to meet the demands of the affected areas of adoption (and special guardianship where within remit).

## Conclusion

There was a general perception that RAAs were overcoming initial implementation challenges and were now into new operational challenges, as well as building on practice. Operational tasks and challenges were still consuming a lot of time for RAA leaders, at the expense of being able to focus on more strategic matters.

The results of the leaders' group have been widely noticed both for leadership development and for the understanding of the national adoption landscape, with messages successfully trickling down to RAA staff.

Leadership and culture change continue to be critical missions for RAAs, so that workers feel stable in new or shifting structures and the permanency of leadership is tantamount to security. The tacit organisational knowledge that RAA leaders have gained through the programme, from inception to implementation, needs to be secured and retained, as pastures new become imminent for some HoS. The next step for the HoS role is to cascade and share the learning from the process, to coach those who may take RAAs forward in the future.

Events with the wider Looked After Children system encourage collaborative working relationships, despite the potential for divides where RAAs are perceived as 'external' structures to local authority services. This would better facilitate an inter- and cross- team understanding of what other parts of the process take, contributing to effective culture change. This is pertinent for teams where they have had an influx of new workers, whose backgrounds are not directly in adoption.



## Chapter 8: Conclusions

This report provides an update on the national picture of the RAA programme in winter 2019/2020. It is based on the first longitudinal analysis of impact, an analysis of costs, as well as further qualitative research with the majority of RAAs and RAA projects.

The typology of models developed during the scoping phase generally still holds true, although there is increasing variation in some model types and there has been an increase in 'partnership' approaches, which are using the original core features of RAAs more flexibly than longer-established RAAs. The models share common features which reflect the intended outputs – including the pooling of resources and budgets between partners, shared back-office functions and joint delivery and commissioning of services.

A broadening range of RAA operating models are delivering the identified results of the ToC. Collaborative efforts are ongoing, there is a single line of accountability via the HoS, greater data sharing (although this is still challenging) and access to a wider pool of adopters. The economies of scale through pooled budgets, sharing of best practice and access to more specialist and knowledgeable staff have supported RAAs to begin to innovate around marketing and providing adoption support. These effects were seen more strongly in the more established RAAs.

Stakeholders from more established RAAs report adopter sufficiency is improving but the quantitative data analysis shows no statistically significant impact on adopter sufficiency yet. Commonly, the interviews found that RAAs have been able to maintain adopter recruitment levels through the transition period. Increasingly, RAAs are taking a more strategic approach to marketing, incorporating targeted marketing activities, and developing inclusive websites to boost efforts to increase adopter diversity, which has been important for adopter engagement.

The 2019 longitudinal data analysis indicates that, relative to non-live RAAs, there are signs of impacts on timeliness. The matching regression analysis on average, from children becoming subject to a placement order to being placed with adoptive family shows the estimated impact on timeliness was a reduction of 14 days and there has been a 35-day reduction in timeliness for 'harder to place' children (on average from eight months in non-live RAAs to seven months in live RAAs). These results were statistically significant.

Based on the interviews with RAAs across the programme, key facilitating factors are an increased ability to place within region and continuing improvements to tracking systems alongside greater consideration of FfA in particular, and other early permanency options. Any changes to timeliness are within the wider context of placements becoming quicker prior to the launch of the RAA programme, the national adopter sufficiency challenge, and restrictions upon how much quicker the process can become.

Positively, whilst perceived improvements to adoption support often took longer to emerge in the more established RAAs than the initial widening of the adopter pool, a more strategic approach to delivering adoption support across the programme is becoming evident. Examples were provided that purportedly demonstrated improved early intervention and universal offers and these are now becoming more widely embedded across the programme. The surge in demand remains a concern for RAA projects, however, there is increasing evidence of RAAs developing approaches to addressing and managing high demand.

Analysis of Section 251 data (local authority accounts collected nationally) shows there is limited association at this stage of the evaluation between RAAs being live and a change in net expenditure. The majority of RAA spend is associated with staff costs. The reductions in timeliness estimated from the impact analysis, can be translated to large savings in LA foster care costs.

Many of the practical difficulties remain to some extent but, as time has passed, RAAs have continued to explore ways to overcome challenges. The shift towards more partnership models may mean that newer RAAs experience fewer teething problems because they are not making as many changes to the regional structure of adoption services. However, it remains too early to comment on the implications of using a 'thinner' hosted model for outcomes compared with other more centralised models.

Each RAA is different and because they come from different starting points (i.e. performance, previous history of partnership working etc.), measures of success are relative to the context. Therefore, whilst there is understandably interest in which model is more effective, that may not be the most pertinent question. Instead, the final wave of research in winter 2020/21 should focus on distance travelled as an RAA, with further reflections on the importance of the different core elements of RAAs, extent to which adopters' overall experience of the service meets their expectations and needs, and that of waiting children.

## Implications

Again, the research did not highlight any significant changes to the models over time, however there was further differentiation within the typology along a continuum of centralisation. Each model offers pros and cons but broadly they can all deliver the intended outputs of the RAA programme and have begun to demonstrate the potential benefits of pooling resources to improve the consistency and quality of adoption services.

The ongoing challenge of adopter sufficiency (and the postponement of the national adopter recruitment campaign) highlights a need to further explore the success of RAAs' recruitment strategies over time and the resilience of RAAs to respond to the additional challenges brought by Covid-19.

Whilst there is more evidence this time around to demonstrate the positive effect of regionalisation on the development of a more strategic approach to commissioning adoption support, and emerging commonalities around different offers, there is still limited evidence of what good (and improved) support looks like across the programme.

The research has confirmed the importance of the role of leaders this time and a main theme is that the RAA leadership programme has played a key role. It will be important for the evaluation, for DfE and RAAs to explore the ongoing success of this aspect and to consider what else is required to equip the sector to respond to policy requirements, and the additional pressures from the Covid-19, pandemic.

The role of VAAs in the recruitment of adopters for 'harder to place' children, early permanence programmes and providing adoption support is an important and ongoing question for the evaluation. The research still shows an inconsistent picture that is so far difficult for interviewees and the evaluation team to define and therefore to evaluate. The final wave of research with case studies and non-case study RAAs and VAAs will seek to explore VAA experiences and views further and comment on the implications for the adoption system over time.

## **Next steps**

The final report in 2021, will further build the evidence base for the RAAs' story of change, drawing on another wave of case study research with all seven RAAs, interviews with other RAAs, national stakeholders and VAAs, analysis of the admin data and adopter research.



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