Regionalising adoption

June 2015

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Introduction

This paper sets out our proposals to move to regional adoption agencies. We believe they will help: speed up matching and markedly improve the life chances of neglected and damaged children; improve adopter recruitment and adoption support; and reduce costs. We want to work closely with you to help make that happen.

In [Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes](), the previous Government outlined a vision of a new adoption system, particularly focusing on the adopter recruitment challenge. It set out that we needed a system where there were fewer organisations recruiting and assessing adopters – with most of them operating at a much greater scale.

Since then, we have seen the introduction of the Adoption Leadership Board and Regional Adoption Boards, the emergence of new delivery models for adoption, the growth of consortia and regional collaboration and a large increase in the number of adopters approved.

The new models we have seen are exciting and have real potential to help address some of the enduring challenges in the adoption system. However, the innovation we've seen is on a relatively small scale and won't alone create the change we need to see if we want all children with an adoption plan to find a loving, stable home as quickly as possible.

Challenges remain in the system that go beyond the original recruitment issue. The slowdown in children coming into the system over the past 18 months has exposed that things are still not working well enough for children waiting to be adopted, particularly for those children that are harder to place. We also know that we still need to see further development of the adoption support market so that the right services are available to adoptive families wherever they happen to live.

By the end of this Parliament, we want to see all local authorities being part of regional agencies. We want to accelerate the pace of change to ensure those children, for whom adoption is the right path, are given the best chance of finding a loving, forever family as quickly as possible. This year, we want to provide up to £4.5m of start-up funding to support early adopters to take forward their proposals. Decisions on funding beyond this will be taken in due course.

We know that many local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies have been discussing this for some time. We want to help those agencies now to move forward and we want others to start discussions. We are introducing legislation in the Education and Adoption Bill for those local authorities that are unwilling to rise to the challenge, but hope we can achieve this vision through working with you.

This document seeks to kick start the move to regional adoption agencies and sets out:

- the key challenges the adoption sector still faces;
- ideas for what regional adoption agencies might look like; and
- what we will offer to accelerate the development of regional adoption agencies and next steps for those interested in being involved.

We want to grasp this opportunity, to be bold and to think about improvements across the system to improve quality, save money; and give children the loving stable family home that we know adoption offers many thousands of children every year.

What challenges are we trying to address?

Below we have summarised the overarching challenges that we think regional adoption agencies could address.

Inefficiencies

The current system is highly fragmented with around 180 agencies recruiting and matching adopters for only 5000 children per year. We know that the majority of agencies are operating at a very small scale. In the first three quarters of 2014-15, 20 local authorities/groups of local authorities recruited fewer than ten adopters and 58 recruited fewer than 20. Similarly, six voluntary adoption agencies recruited fewer than ten adopters and ten recruited fewer than 20. This is not an effective and efficient scale to be operating at and is likely to mean that costs are higher because management overheads and fixed costs are shared over a smaller base.

Having a system that is fragmented in this way reduces the scope for broader, strategic planning, as well as specialisation, innovation and investment. Large numbers of small agencies renders the system unable to make the best use of the national supply of potential adopters, more vulnerable to peaks and troughs in the flow of children, and less cost effective. There's little doubt that the adoption system has improved despite current structures. But we don't think we will see the scale of improvements we need without some reform of the way adoption as a whole is managed in England.

Matching

We have seen some encouraging developments in matching recently. In particular, the introduction of Activity Days has been hugely successful; 26% of those children that have attended days since February 2014 have been matched and 141 local authorities are now involved with Activity Days. This is a real success story.

However, whilst we have seen improvements in child timeliness overall, it still takes an average of eight months between placement order and match. This is too long, and more worryingly has increased from seven months in 2013-14. The data also shows that, as at 30 September 2014, there were 3,470 children with a placement order waiting to be matched. 54% of these children had been waiting longer than 18 months. The system is therefore still not working well enough for these children.

Professor Elaine Farmer's research[1] found that some local authorities tend to seek to place their children with adopters approved 'in-house' before considering adopters approved by other local authorities and then voluntary adoption agencies. This results in sequential decision making, which means some children wait longer than they should to be adopted. We know that the levelling of the interagency fee has helped with this issue to some extent, but we continue to hear reports of this behaviour. Farmer's investigation identified that in 30% of cases delay was associated with unwillingness to seek a family outside of a local authority's own group of approved adopters.

This is not good enough. Delays in the system cause lasting harm to vulnerable children. Based on an in-depth study of the case histories of 130 older looked after children for whom adoption had been identified as the best option, Dr Julie Selwyn concluded that: 'delay in decision making and action has an unacceptable price in terms of the reduction in children's life chances and the financial costs to local authorities, the emotional and financial burden later placed on adoptive families and future costs to society.'[2]

Selwyn's research into adoption disruption[3] found that nearly three-quarters of the children who experienced an adoption disruption waited two or more years for an adoptive placement, whilst nearly three-quarters of the children in intact placements were placed within 2 years of entering care.

Sequential decision making and delays in matching are not only damaging to children, but also costly. Children are almost always in foster care whilst they wait for adoption. The cost of a week of local authority foster care has been estimated at around £700 per week[4]. Selwyn's research into the interagency fee[5] found that the cost to the local authority of looking after a child that is never found a placement is at least £400,000.

It is therefore vital that children are given the best and earliest possible chance of finding a family, irrespective of authority boundaries and lack of trust of other agencies' adopters. It is unacceptable that children are left waiting in the system when families can be found. We know that successful matching relies on being able to access a wide range of potential adopters from the beginning. Operating at a greater scale would allow social workers to do this, thus reducing delay in the system. It could also reduce the number of

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[1] Farmer, E.; Dance, C.; Beecham, J.; Bonin, E. and Ouwejan, D. (2010) *An investigation of family finding and matching in adoption – briefing paper.* DfE-RBX-10-05

[2] Selwyn, J.; Sturgess, W.; Quinton, D. and Baxter, C. (2006) *Costs and outcomes of non-infant adoptions,* British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

[3] Selwyn, J.; Wijedasa, D.; Meakings, S. (2004) *Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, interventions and adoption disruptions*
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/301889/Final_Report_-_3rd_April_2014v2.pdf

[4] Curtis, L. (2014), *Unit Costs of Health and Social Care 2014*, Personal Social Services Research Unit

[5] Selwyn, J.; Sempik, J.; Thurston, P.; Wijedasa, D. (2009) *Adoption and the inter-agency fee*

children who have their adoption decisions reversed. Last year, this happened to 1,450 children. Furthermore, the opportunity for practice innovation created by moving to a new delivery model also has real potential to improve matching.

Recruitment

We have seen a real success in the growth of adopter recruitment: 5,190 adopters were approved in 2013-14 – up 27% on 2012-13.

However, we still have too few adopters willing and able to adopt harder to place children. Local authorities continue to recruit and assess adopters for children in their local authority in line with their statutory duties. Yet despite the rigorous selection process we are left with adopters who, for whatever reason, cannot be matched with the children waiting. Recruitment from a wider geographical base than an individual local authority, that takes account of the needs of children across a number of those local authorities in a regional recruitment strategy and uses specialist techniques for recruiting adopters for hard to place children, would potentially lead to fewer children waiting.

Adoption support

In May the £19.3m Adoption Support Fund was introduced to make therapeutic support easily accessible, timely and of high quality for families when they need it the most. Case studies from both the prototype phase and since national rollout have shown the benefit of the fund for families that have been in crisis, but also families that have needed a bit of extra support.

Currently, adoption support services are provided by a mix of local authority provision, the NHS, and independent providers (voluntary adoption agencies, adoption support agencies, and small private providers). A report by the Colebrooke Centre on the Adoption Support Fund has identified a risk that, in its current form, both the public and independent sectors are unlikely to be able to grow sufficiently to meet increased demand for adoption support, let alone provide parental choice between a range of providers. There are regional gaps, gaps in the types of services on offer, and little evidence of spare capacity.

The sector is dominated by spot purchasing and sole providers. Spot purchasing does not encourage providers or enable them to expand, and diverts providers from delivering services as they spend time bidding for one-off contracts. Without further systemic change, any growth in the market is likely to be piecemeal. We have also identified that the majority of local authorities use spot purchasing for independent providers (often alongside other block contracts). This is particularly significant for therapeutic support.

We need to consider what services are available and how they are commissioned to enable more economies of scale, strategic quality assurance, and larger contracts that give providers confidence to grow. We also want to stimulate new service development.

We know, of course, that some local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies have overcome some of these challenges and are delivering very high quality services for children and families. However, this isn't yet widespread enough and high level issues still remain. Therefore, action needs to be taken.

What sort of change do we want to see?

We think that regional adoption agencies – where services are delivered on a greater scale, and with more innovative approaches to practice – have real potential to improve outcomes for children. Through this funding, we are interested in accelerating the move to regional adoption agencies by supporting project development and implementation for early adopters. However, we are clear that structural change will not provide all the answers. Form must follow function. That is why we are also asking you to think about how new delivery models will enable excellent practice to flourish, as well as increasing scale.

We want to ensure we have:

- a system where children are matched with the most suitable adopter as quickly as possible;

- recruitment taking place at an efficient scale to provide a pool of 'adoption ready' adopters large enough and well enough matched to the needs of children waiting; and

- enough high quality adoption support services available nationwide.

What do we mean by 'regional adoption agencies'?

We do not want to be overly prescriptive about the scale or geography at which regional adoption agencies operate. We are not expecting to have agencies that align with the nine old Government regions. Instead, we want the sector to develop proposals that work for those involved and respond to the characteristics and needs of the local area. Of course, we do want to see sizeable change – we would therefore not be interested in supporting two very small local authorities coming together to deliver their services, for example. We are interested in models that could deal with 200 children/year, but would like to hear any views from you about what an appropriate scale would be. We do appreciate, however, that where people are being particularly ambitious and innovative, they may want to start on a smaller scale initially that can then be scaled up.

We want regional adoption agencies to explore a range of new approaches to delivery models – be that local authorities joining together, voluntary adoption agencies joining local authorities or services operating outside of local authority control. We also want regional adoption agencies to be at the forefront of excellent and innovative practice, taking the opportunity of setting up a new system to redesign ways of working. We would expect regional adoption agencies to deliver all adopter recruitment, matching and support functions, unless there was an exceptional reason otherwise. We are also interested in whether any agencies could take on broader functions beyond adoption. This is not a requirement, but something that we are interested in exploring.

This section sets out what we would expect regional adoption agencies to consider and some ideas that might address the challenges identified. These are high level and aim to fuel debate and discussion, rather than prescribing everything we want to see. We are asking you to consider the below and start to develop expressions of interest for the support available.

Potential delivery models for regional adoption agencies

We believe that local authorities and/or voluntary adoption agencies coming together to operate at a larger scale would mean:

- services had a clear sense of responsibility and accountability for getting the right adopters in and recruitment would be driven by the needs of a larger number of children waiting;

- social workers would have immediate access to a larger pool of adopters when matching. This is likely to speed up the process, which would reduce delays for children;

- there would be opportunities to share and develop wider support services, including in partnership with health and independent providers;

- consortia would be able to develop regional supervision models to provide cross-agency external support and challenge to develop excellent practice skills and behaviours to help to provide scrutiny and external challenge over permanence decision making, timeliness, missed matches, and reversals, in real time;

- there would potentially be an opportunity to establish mechanisms to ensure a wider overview of the pipeline of children coming in to the system, which would provide an opportunity to develop clearer transparency and protocols for early planning; and

- there would be opportunities to share costs and to benefit from economies of scale, thereby reducing overall expenditure. As Selwyn identifies, speeding up matching not only markedly improves the life chances of neglected and damaged children, it relieves financial pressures on local authorities.

In recent years, we have seen a growing number of local authorities joining consortia to share activities such as adopter information evenings and training events, and in some cases to share the costs of recruitment posts. There are also some, although fewer, examples of two or more local authorities going beyond this loose form of collaboration to actually merging their services. This is what we would like to see more of now. Regional adoption agencies should consider how all adoption functions can be formally carried out together.

We would therefore like you to consider some of the following possibilities:

- Are you interested in merging services with other local authorities and/or voluntary adoption agencies?

- Are you a group of local authorities that are interested in coming together and delivering a single service led by a voluntary adoption agency?

- Are you an excellent local authority, who could delivery an excellent service on behalf of other local authorities too?

- As part of your regional adoption agency, could you have one adoption support service for a number of local authorities or a region which enable contract – based commissioning of services and stimulate new service development?

- As part of your regional adoption agency, could you form a multi-agency centre of excellence in therapeutic support that other local authorities and health providers buy in to?

- Would you be interested in delivery models which go wider than just adopter recruitment and matching, where the approach to case holding for children waiting for adoption is dealt with in a different way, building on the principles of the Social Work Practice model?

- Do you want to go further than just adoption, and create a regional permanence hub, delivering services for children leaving care for special guardianship or long term foster care too?

The example below sets out how four local authorities have recently come together to launch a combined adoption service.

Adopt Berkshire

Wokingham Borough Council, Bracknell Forest Council, West Berkshire Council and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead have recently launched a combined adoption service, Adopt Berkshire.

The service covers all aspects of adoption work up to the point of the child's legal adoption. Adopt Berkshire aims to increase the number of older children and siblings being adopted, and introduce innovation to improve training and support for prospective parents, whilst bringing together the best practice that previously existed separately.

By having a larger range of prospective adopters, Adopt Berkshire's goal is to maximise the amount of adopters available to cover the whole range of children who are in need of permanent adoptive families.

Many of the ideas listed on the previous page involve local authorities coming together to form a new service that operates independently of the authorities, or delivering services through a voluntary adoption agency operating on behalf of a number of local authorities. In trialling these models, we would need to think about maintaining links with other children's services, but we believe this could present an opportunity to work more effectively.

Such arrangements could bring the following benefits:

- fewer organisational barriers leading to greater efficiency, specialism and expertise;

- stronger purity of purpose for the organisation, because the leadership is not also playing a corporate role within a bigger organisation which has to balance competing draws for its attention and budget;

- greater organisational adaptability and flexibility because the organisation is not constrained by the rules of the bigger organisation it sits within;

- an increased scope to innovate, and to enable staff to make their ideas a reality, because of the freedom from organisational rules and restrictions;

- a sharper focus on the end user and a higher quality service, because the organisation can have a clearer purpose and be more nimble; and

- better democratic scrutiny because of clear service level agreements with providers.

The role of voluntary adoption agencies

We are particularly keen to consider models that have an element of cross-sector collaboration, bringing together the best of the voluntary and statutory sectors. We know that voluntary and statutory adoption agencies already work together in many parts of the country and we hope to see those arrangements strengthened and broadened over the coming months. We want local authorities to acknowledge and use the potential of the voluntary sector to provide services at a regional level and have the confidence to take forward these partnerships. The following suggestions are not intended to be comprehensive but voluntary adoption agencies and local authorities should consider the following:

- Involving a voluntary adoption agency in a regional partnership as a specialist adoption support provider. In addition to longstanding specialism in adoption support services, voluntary adoption agencies can access funding through their charitable status, enabling vulnerable children to benefit from private sector funding in a responsible way. Specialist voluntary adoption agencies like AdoptionPlus in Milton Keynes and Family Futures in London provide services across a number of local authorities – and could do so formally as part of a regional adoption agency.

- A voluntary adoption agency leading a regional partnership, providing adoption management services to a group of local authorities, and working with and through local authority staff in social work positions. Coram has pioneered provision of management services to local authorities, and the case study of Coram Cambridgeshire below is an exciting innovation in this area. Voluntary adoption agencies can also offer similar services across more than one local authority. In the Midlands and North West, After Adoption is providing process improvement and planning services to Telford and Wrekin, Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Manchester local authorities with a particular focus on family finding for harder to place children.

- A voluntary adoption agency providing specialist services to a number of local authorities as part of a formal partnership arrangement. These might be specialist adopter recruitment services – perhaps recruiting and preparing adopters who are willing to care for hard-to-place children – or other specialist services such as lifestory work; concurrent planning and fostering for adoption services; step-parent adoptions; or adult adoption counselling. A partnership of two voluntary adoption agencies, Adoption Matters and Caritas Care, has established the North West Concurrent Planning Service across 13 local authorities, operating through a contract with a single local authority partner, Blackburn with Darwen. Since being established in 2014, the partnership has made 11 concurrent planning placements. CCS Adoption in Bristol has a contract to deliver preparation groups and training for prospective adopters in four local authorities: Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucester. This means that

prospective adopters have more frequent access to sessions delivered by a specialist trainer, and benefit from CCS experience in preparing adopters to take children who are harder to place.

- Finally, partnering with a voluntary adoption agency should be considered as a way to give adoptive parents and adopted young people a voice in service design and delivery. There are many examples of this working effectively.

We are not saying, however, that all agencies operating at a small scale are inefficient. We recognise the significant value of some smaller, very specialist voluntary adoption agencies and believe that they continue to have an important role to play. For those voluntary agencies that do not see partnership with local authorities as an option for them, the service they provide in recruiting adopters, particularly for some of our most vulnerable and complex children, will still be much needed by the new regional agencies.

Coram Cambridgeshire Adoption

In 2014, Coram and Cambridgeshire County Council formed a new voluntary adoption agency, Coram Cambridgeshire Adoption. The agency brings together the best skills and expertise from Coram and Cambridgeshire County Council, building on an earlier successful partnership, to help more children find permanent, loving homes quicker. The agency provides an integrated service by delegated function from the local authority for recruitment and assessment, family finding, post adoption support and panel management to secure early permanence decisions for children, including concurrency. The formal service framework agreement enables this delegation and is underpinned by effective and continuous working relationships across the parties.

The agency's reach of primarily Cambridgeshire also extends to surrounding regions, including Norfolk, Suffolk, West Essex, East Hertfordshire and North East London. Early soundings from this new delivery model are positive including a Good rating in all categories by Ofsted as part of the post registration inspection (January 2015). A Partnership Advisory Group made up of local professional experts, including the Judiciary, CAFCASS and health and social care partners, adds additional strategic and local knowledge in the development of the services.

Practice innovations

As highlighted above, we don't think delivery models are the answer to everything. One of the key benefits of the new delivery models outlined in this paper is that they create conditions in which excellent and innovative practice can develop and flourish. We expect to see evidence from all proposed regional adoption agencies of how their planned model will drive excellence and innovation in practice. Therefore, whilst thinking about alternative delivery models, you should also think about what practice improvement and innovation you will be using the new model to embed.

Some questions to consider when thinking about practice innovations are below:

- Are there new ways to structure teams, or to get teams dealing with different parts of a child's journey to work together in a more integrated way?

- Are there opportunities for greater integration across all permanence services?

- Are there new approaches to decision making that could be introduced?

- Are there opportunities for cross-authority supervision and challenge to raise standards and improve timeliness?

- Could you change approaches to matching and recruitment so that specific adopters are found for the children waiting without causing delay?

- Are there processes that could be redesigned? For example, could panels be done at a regional level?

- Are there new approaches to staff supervision and development?

- How can data be used to best aid tracking and matching?

- How can recruitment be more targeted?

- How can we ensure support is available to the right people at the right time?

After Adoption - finding specific adopters for children who wait the longest

After Adoption uses a child specific model to find families for children who are difficult to place by putting the child at the centre of all activity in identifying a suitable family. This means planning and preparation of recruitment is centred on the needs of child.

Initially, a consultation is held to gather information about the child, including information about early life experiences, health needs and behavioural and emotional needs. The communications team then arranges the filming and photographing of the child to develop a profile for a specific recruitment campaign. The recruitment campaign will use the profile to target a range of prospective adopters through different routes, such as adoption events open to the general public, local press and radio and adopter preparation groups.

Once a family has been identified and is suitable for the child, a child specific assessment is conducted. The assessment is tailored towards how the adopter(s) will meet the needs of the particular child. Any weaknesses in the capacity of adopter(s) that are identified will enable a worker to support the adopter(s) through this. Any support plan will be informed by this assessment. The adoption panel will then approve the adopter for the specific child before the match is ultimately decided by the local authority.

This model has led to the identification of families for 80% of the children referred to the programme since 2010.

What are we offering?

The overall aim of this funding is to stimulate initial change in the sector. We want to provide £4.5m of support to early adopters of regional adoption agencies to accelerate their development and early implementation in 2015-16. Therefore, we are looking to work with local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and other organisations who wish to redesign radically their approach to adoption this year. We will support:

- the implementation of innovative models of delivery that have already gained some traction in the system, but have not spread widely, where people are ready to do this; and

- the design and planning of new delivery models for adoption. We appreciate that some areas may have big ambitions, but need some time and support to turn those into practical plans. We could support you to take the time to develop your ideas and implementation plans, as well as helping you to start to lay the foundations for transition.

What will be available and when?

We will be offering both practical support from a project coach and financial support during 2015-16. Following conversations with the sector, the support the coach might provide could include: a brokerage service to help build relationships across organisations; help marshalling ideas and formulating a new model; and help with planning for implementation. The financial support could be used for things like: extra management capacity over the transition period; backfilling roles to give staff the space to develop and implement ideas and plans; or staff training costs. However, we would also like to hear from you about what you think you might need – both in terms of financial and non-financial support. We want to ensure that, as far as possible, we are providing you with what is required to make this vision a reality.

We understand that some projects will need time to work up their full proposals before moving to implementation. We are therefore proposing a staged approach to delivering projects in 2015-16:

June 2015   Government publishes 'Regionalising adoption', inviting expressions of interest from early adopters who want to access start-up funding.

July 2015   Sector engagement to develop thinking and ideas. We would also like to hear from you about your initial ideas and what support you might need to make them a reality, so we design our offer accordingly

By 7 September 2015	Deadline for projects to submit expressions of interest
September 2015	Expressions of interest assessed
From October-March 2016	Coaching support offered to projects to develop project plans. When plans have been worked up, projects can submit proposals to the Department for funding required until March 2016. Proposals can be submitted as soon as they are ready, but no later than 1 December 2015. Coaches will continue to support projects in delivery.

Decisions on funding for 2016-17 and beyond will be subject to the Spending Review and so will be communicated in due course.

What to do next if you are interested in this programme

We would encourage you to have conversations with other organisations in the sector, both local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies, to align thinking and to bring ideas together where appropriate. We are recommending the Regional Adoption Boards use their next meetings to discuss this paper and any potential ideas and would urge you to use any other forums you may have as well. Following engagement:

1. **We want to hear from you informally**. This paper is the start of a conversation and we want to work with you throughout this programme. It is therefore crucial we understand what it is you want to do and what you would need to do it.

   We are asking you to email us at: adoption.reform@education.gsi.gov.uk during July to set out:

   - any initial ideas you have that could fit with this programme of work; and

   - what support you would need to make them a reality.

   At this stage, we are not looking for fully worked up proposals. This informal communication will allow us to develop our support further before opening up the bidding process to ensure you get what you need from it where possible.

2. **We then want to receive expressions of interest.** The form you need to fill in is available here. All expressions of interest must be submitted by **noon on Monday 7 September 2015** to adoption.reform@education.gsi.gov.uk