Department for Education

Evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies

Annex to the Second report: 2019 to 2020

October 2020

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

Government Social Research

Contents

List of figures 3

List of tables 4

Annex one - Theory of Change 5

Theory of Change assumptions 7

Theory of Change risks 7

Annex two – Research questions 9

Objective 1: Understand what RAA models are being implemented 11

Objective 2: Explore the practice, governance, and financial impacts of the RAAs on the speed of matching with adopters 12

Objective 3: Explore the practice, governance and financial impacts of the RAAs on adopter recruitment 13

Objective 4: Explore the practice, governance and financial impacts of the RAAs on adoption support 15

Objective 5: Explore the practice, governance, and financial impacts of the RAAs on efficiencies and cost savings 16

Objective 6: Explore the lessons learnt and impact on wider elements of the adoption system 17

Annex three: Methodology 19

Work completed to date 21

Inception phase 21

Longitudinal data analysis 22

Case studies 25

Adopter research with 5 of the 7 RAAs 28

Annex Four: Local Authorities involved in each RAA 31

List of figures

Figure 1: RAA Theory of Change as at October 2020 6

Figure 2: RAA Method overview 23

Figure 3: Case study stakeholder sample.....27

List of tables

Table 1: Research objectives and key tasks 10

Table 2: Outcomes of interest 25

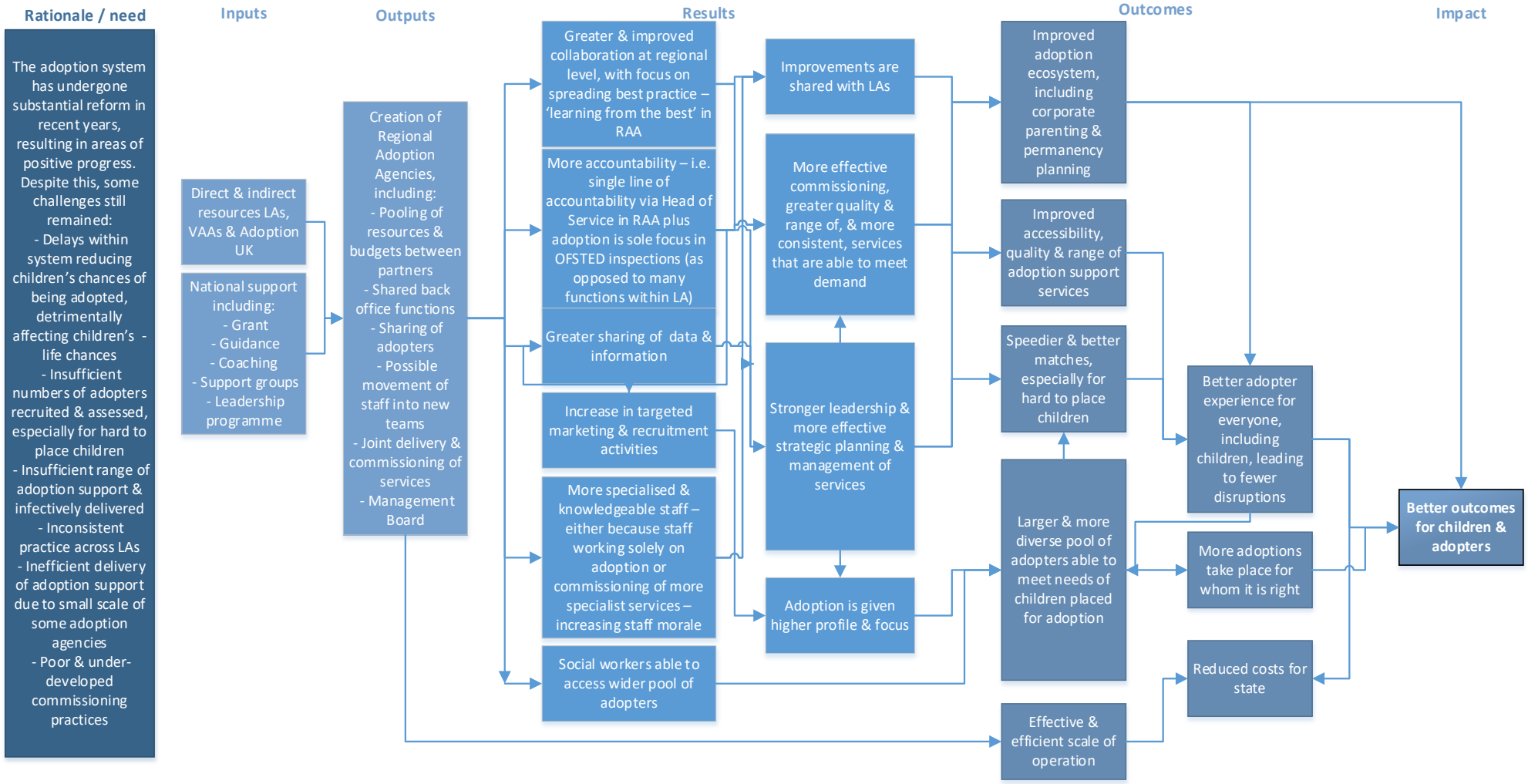
Table 3: Interviewee breakdown 27

Annex one - Theory of Change

Figure 1 provides a Theory of Change (ToC) for the RAA policy, accompanied by the assumptions and risks. This was created by the evaluation team, based on the policy objectives as set out in *Regionalising Adoption*[1], and comments made during scoping stage evaluation interviews, and at the Research Advisory Group and RAA steering group meetings. The ToC is being tested throughout the course of the evaluation.

[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

Figure 1: RAA Theory of Change as at October 2020



Theory of Change assumptions

- There is sufficient support (from the Department and LA) and resources (financial and staff-related) including health and legal services and the courts at a local level for the changes to be implemented.
- There is sufficient buy-in within the RAAs to ensure changes are implemented and done so voluntarily.
- There are good levels of partnership working and collaboration at all levels in the RAA, and between RAAs and the wider adoption system.
- The correct issues were identified.

Theory of Change risks

- Regulations and other factors prevent VAAs and Adoption Support Agencies (ASAs) from partnering in RAAs, resulting in less sharing of best practice and reduced innovation.
- Financial constraints lead to RAAs placing more children and / or using services in-house, reducing choices in matching & support services.
- Adopters not having a central role in some RAAs may create more inconsistencies.
- Creation of RAAs interferes with adoption work too much, resulting in reduced quality of services, especially recruitment.
- The transition of RAAs leads to staff instability and turnover, affecting the quality of services.
- Creation of RAAs requires large amount of resource which risks negative effect on services delivered for children. Could also lead to cuts to adoption services.
- 'Ring-fencing' of adoption services via the RAA reduces ability to transfer money between adoption services and other parts of Children's Services system, leading to inefficiencies, higher costs, and lack of ability to meet peaks in demand.
- Removal of adoption staff out of LAs weakens links between social workers in LAs and practitioners in RAAs, diminishing quality of communication and support.
- Movement of expertise from LA to RAA risks negative effect on activities that remain within LA e.g. making of adoption recommendations.
- RAA creates silo working between adoption services in the RAA and other services in the wider ecosystem, including other parts of adoption where for example, SGOs are not incorporated.
- Less accountability because members in individual LAs have less oversight.

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

Annex two – Research questions

The evaluation runs from January 2018 to December 2021. The first waves of national data analysis and case study research that informed this report are detailed below. **Table 1** lists the overall research objectives and the key tasks that will help to answer these.

Table 1: Research objectives and key tasks

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

The research questions are set out in full below, the main questions are in bold.

Objective 1: Understand what RAA models are being implemented

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Does the information on the characteristics of children waiting to be matched drive recruitment? How?
- How is information between recruitment/matching teams shared?
- How well does this compare with before?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

l) What are the adopter recruitment strategies?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

g) How is support commissioned within the RAA?

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

i) How do adopters access support?

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

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

l) Do adopters get timely support?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

f) What factors are affecting changes in costs?

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

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

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

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

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

- **What are the internal impacts (e.g. development of expertise, leadership, commissioning, and decision-making capabilities)?**
- **What are the optimum working relationships and processes necessary to achieve the optimum outcomes?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Annex three: Methodology

Between 2018 and 2021, the evaluation will involve five key strands as shown in Figure 2:

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

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

- *Two rounds of telephone interviews with the other RAAs and RAA projects not involved in the case studies* to understand delivery models and plans, assess outcomes, and explore learning[2].

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

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

2. **Longitudinal analysis of national adoption data from 2014-2020** to understand the short- and medium-term impact of the RAAs on matching, adopter recruitment and provision of support to adoptive families, comparing the speed of matching[3] pre-RAAs to post-RAAs. For this Second Report data sources included child-level adoption outcomes (SSDA903) data (this data comprises individual records of timeliness measures and characteristics for all children adopted and/or placed for adoption) and data from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (quarterly collection), covering outcomes related to adopter recruitment.

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

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

Regression analysis was undertaken to explore the differences in efficiency between live and RAA projects. To understand whether RAAs are having an impact on timeliness, analysis using propensity score matching (PSM) was undertaken to provide a population level overview.[4]

3. **Analysis of cost data** as part of the case study research to explore efficiency and effectiveness. For this report, the analysis utilises Section 251 data[5] (s251), which is publicly available information on local authorities, schools and the general public regarding education and children's social care funding. The analysis examines the costs of running RAAs and any changes to income, expenditure, and net expenditure because of regionalising adoption services.
4. **Analysis**: To analyse the qualitative data, we used 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. The data interpretation phase involved synthesising the findings across the multiple sets of interviewees in each RAA and across case study areas, and other interviews, identifying codes and categorising the data using the software. We searched for similarities, differences and any other patterns occurring in the data in relation to the key variables linked to the typology developed during the scoping phase and reviewed the typology as the fieldwork progressed.

   The findings overall were triangulated and, using the qualitative research, we applied Contribution Analysis, to help explain the result of longitudinal data analysis at a more granular level, and to assess the extent to which changes in the data can be attributed to the introduction of the RAAs. Rather than setting out to isolate the effects of a single intervention, the approach aims to build a credible 'performance story', drawing upon the available evidence to consider whether the intervention, alongside other factors, contributed towards the observed outcomes (Mayne, 2008[6]). It is a useful approach when multiple factors, including the one under examination, are likely to impact upon the ultimate outcomes – as is the case with RAAs and matching rates, adopter recruitment, quality of adoption support and efficiencies. Findings from the case studies were used to feed directly into the longitudinal data analysis.

[4] 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.
[5] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/section-251-2019-to-2020

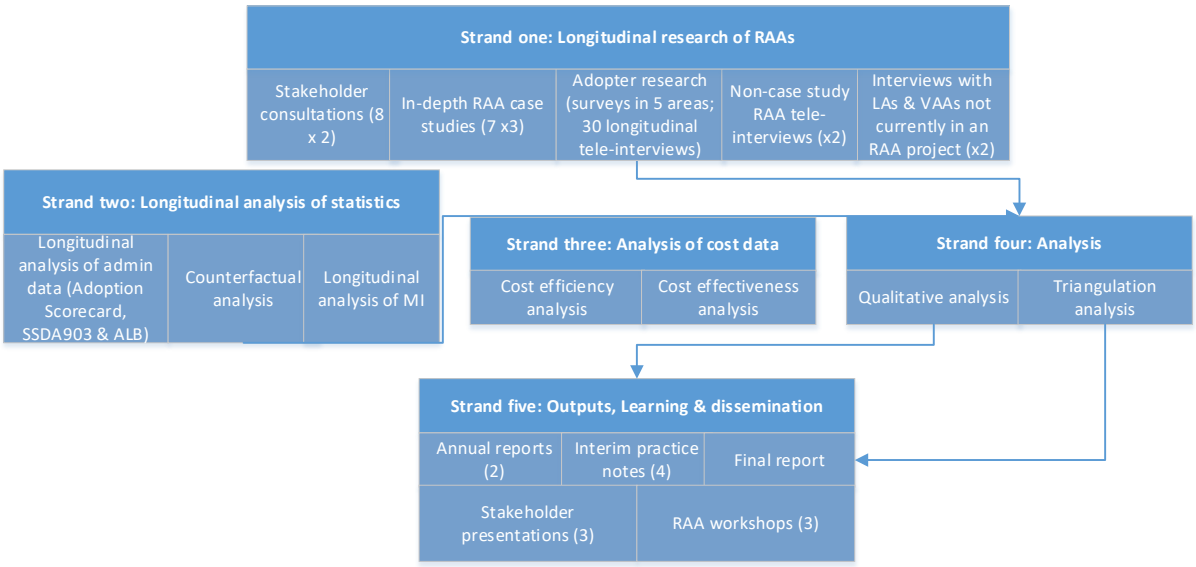
[6] Mayne, J. The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative, (2008). *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect.*

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

- Two annual reports (the first in spring 2019[7] and this second report in autumn 2020).
- Four interim practice notes (autumn 2019, autumn 2020, spring 2021, and autumn 2021).
- A final report (winter 2021).

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

Figure 2: RAA Method overview



Work completed to date

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

Inception phase

The inception phase involved:

[7]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906095/Evaluation_RAAs_Year_1_Annual_Report.pdf

- Initial calls with 20 RAAs approved at the time of the research; baseline visits to 23 RAAs[8] involving interviews with 124 individuals (through 23 group interviews and three individual interviews) as part of strategic, operational or mixed groups, including wider stakeholders.

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

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

- An Inception and Scoping Report[9].

- Longitudinal data analysis.

Longitudinal data analysis

Listed below are the key outcome measures for the evaluation, this cover: matching, adopter recruitment, adoption support and efficiency. The longitudinal data analysis this year involved regression analysis and PSM which are explained in more detail below.

1. Matching

- The number and characteristics of children matched.

- The average time between entry to care, placement order, match, placement, and order.

- The number of inter-agency/inter-RAA placements.

- The relationship of inter-agency payments with matching times and characteristics of children.

- The number and characteristics of children with adoption breakdowns/adoption disruptions.

- Number and characteristics of 'waiting' children.

2. Adopter recruitment

[8] One RAA for London became four RAAs – North, East, South and West.
[9] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/regional-adoption-agencies-evaluation-scoping-report

- Number and characteristics of prospective adopters registering (Stage 1).
- Number and characteristics of adopters approved.
- The number (and proportion) and characteristics of registrations that are converted to approvals within 6 months.
- The number (and proportion) and characteristics of approved families matched with a child.
- The number (and proportion) and characteristics of approved families matched within 3 months of approval.
- The number and characteristics of adopters withdrawing from the process (pre/post approval).

3. Adoption support

- The number in receipt of pre-adoption support and the funding streams.
- The number of requests for assessments for post adoption support.
- The proportion of post-order assessments that lead to in-house/outsources/ASF support.

4. Efficiency

- Trends and patterns in number of children adopted.
- Progress in a larger proportion of 'hard to place' children being placed.
- The relationship between adopter recruitment, matching and the type of RAA structure.
- Understanding the factors that predict delays, adopter withdrawals, matching reversals, and pre-adoption breakdowns.

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).

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 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.

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 analysis examined 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. The analysis also involved a counterfactual impact evaluation, which matched children in live-RAAs based on their characteristics to children in non-live RAAs, to determine the impact of RAAs on timeliness. Analysis was undertaken on the time from placement order to matched with an adoptive family. To complete the counterfactual impact analysis on timeliness for all children, a PSM was conducted. 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 groups. 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:

- Gender (binary where "MALE" = 1)
- Ethnicity (binary where "ethnic minority" = 1)
- Age at the time of placement order (continuous "age_at_PO")
- Number of care episodes prior to the adoption (continuous "episode_count")
- Date of placement order (date "PO_DATE")

- Start date of period of care (date “POC_START)
- The year in which the adoption was processed (date “PROCESSING_YEAR”)

In the previous (processing) year:

- The total number of adoptions for the LA the child comes from (total_adoptions)
- The relevant average timeliness for the LA the child comes from (avg_time)

The factors above cover a wide range of child-level and LA-level factors which could affect timeliness. By including LA-level factors, we ensure matches are made to (historically) similarly performing LAs. Recognising the variables are on different scales (e.g. MALE is binary and age_at_PO is continuous) the differences were standardised to allow meaningful review. A high level of balance was achieved on all variables (and the overall propensity score) – i.e. the treatment and comparator groups are similar, allowing for meaningful comparisons. 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.

Case studies

Over time, the case studies are exploring the experience of implementing RAAs from a range of perspectives and contexts, capture quantitative and qualitative information to measure the outcomes being achieved, explore any changes, and identify lessons learnt. Six of seven planned RAA case studies were completed to inform this report[10].

Sample

- Model (see Chapter two) – 3 hub and spoke, 1 centralised, 1 centralised/hub and spoke, 1 Local Authority Trading Company (LATC), and 1 decentralised/partnership model.
- Location – 2 North, 4 South, 1 Midlands.
- Stage of delivery – 4 RAAs had been live for more than two years at the time of the research, 2 RAAs had been live for less than a year and another RAA had just gone live.
- Size – a range in number of participating LAs (including a smaller RAA (3-4 LAs), average size (5-6 LAs), and a larger RAA (7+)).

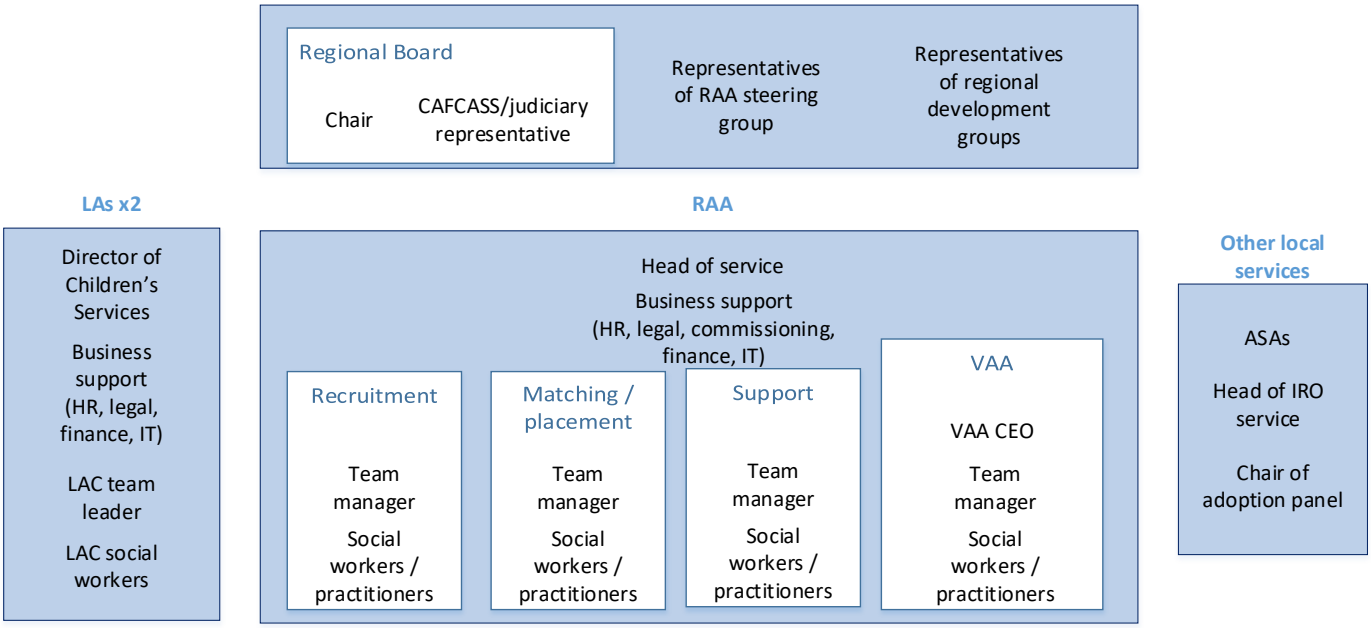
[10] The seventh case study visit was put on hold due to the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

- History of partnership working - considered to be strong in 4 RAAs, mixed or poor in other RAAs based on self-reports during the baseline visits (e.g. how long LAs have been working together, the level of buy-in and consensus amongst partners).
- VAA involvement - in most but not all RAAs and to varying degrees.
- Progress – based on self-reports during baseline visits (e.g. whether RAAs were on track and pleased with progress, behind schedule and/or experiencing some issues or making little progress and/or meeting major hurdles).
- Performance – based on averages calculated from the adoption scorecards (number of approved adoptive families waiting, number of children for whom permanence decisions has changed away from adoption, Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, rank, Ofsted rating and new placement offers granted).

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

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

Figure 3: **Case study stakeholder sample**



Across the six case studies for this report, 210 individuals were interviewed as shown in **Table 3**. The 'Other' sample included regional bodies (e.g. CAFCASS, Councillors/Board Members, Directors of Children's Services (DCS)/Assistant Director of Children's Services (ADCS), Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), Panel Members). In most cases, face-to-face group interviews were completed (167 people took part in group interviews), the remainder were individual interviews (43), the majority of which were face-to-face (and 17 were telephone interviews).

Table 3: Interviewee breakdown

RAA HoS	Social work managers	Social workers	Business support/ finance	Other	VAA	Total
6	55	74	21	50	4	210

Interview topics

Topics covered included:

- any changes to the RAA model, roles and responsibilities and changes made to adoption services.
- the impact of RAAs on the organisation, delivery, and quality of adoption services in the area.
- issues affecting progress, including successes and challenges.
- RAA costs; and
- next steps for the RAA**.**

Adopter research with 5 of the 7 RAAs

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

1. Surveys of prospective adopters attending preparation groups.
1. In-depth telephone interviews with adopters who have completed a preparation group.
2. Surveys of adopters receiving adoption support.

Survey of prep groups

The intention was to collect 12 months of evaluation questionnaires from the five RAAs. The questionnaires asked about satisfaction with the location, comfort and frequency of preparation groups, knowledge of adoption and matching preferences. The period of collection differed by RAA, as each went 'live' in different months and years. Collection began in November 2018 and was due to end in August 2020. However, due to the impact

of Covid-19, a decision was made to cease collection in March 2020. At that point, 12 months of questionnaires were available for analysis from two RAAs, 11 months from one RAA, and nine and eight months of returns from two RAAs who had gone 'live' later than the first three.

Participants (n=620) attending preparation groups in the five RAAs were given the paper questionnaires and a stamped addressed envelope for returning to the Rees Centre, University of Oxford for analysis. The trainers reported that attendance at the groups was excellent: it being extremely rare for both members of the couple to be absent. Size of training groups varied, by month and by RAA, with a range of eight to 28 individuals (usually 6-10 couples) attending the groups.

Questionnaires were returned from 471 prospective adopters from 255 households: a response rate of 76%. Most trainers had asked prospective adopters to complete the questionnaire on the final day, achieving a 85%-100% response rate. One RAA gave the questionnaire to participants to complete at home and had a lower return rate of 26%.

Interviews with prospective adoptive parents

The research design was intended to capture the 'adopter voice.' One of the ways this was achieved was through an exploration of how the development of RAAs had affected the experience of individuals wishing to adopt. The work plan was to interview 20 prospective adopters in 2019 and a further 20 in 2020. Twenty-five of the 40 would be interviewed twice (with a 6-month gap between interviews) to follow their experiences, as they moved from assessment to approval, linking, matching, and placement. It was expected that a few would withdraw or not be approved, and they too would have a follow-up interview.

Sample

To select a sample of adoptive parents, prospective adoptive parents who had attended preparation training groups in five RAAs were asked if they would consent to a telephone interview: 223 gave written consent to be contacted. The interview sample was selected based on the following criteria: a) had expressed a willingness to adopt a 'hard to place child' defined as an older child, or a sibling group or a child with a disability or a child with an ethnicity different to their own b) eight prospective adopters from each of the five RAAs. The RAAs were established with the aim of recruiting adopters to meet the needs of waiting children especially those who are thought of as 'hard to place'. The children who wait the longest are older than 4 years of age, needing to be placed with siblings, children with a disability and those of minority ethnicity. Therefore, those willing to adopt a 'hard to place' child were selected to follow on their adoption journeys.

Eighty-four prospective adopters met the criteria from the 223 who had given consent to be contacted. It is important to note that only 38% met the criteria reflecting the difficulty

adoption agencies have had in recruiting adopters. In a small RAA, all those who met the criteria were emailed asking for a convenient time to interview. In larger RAAs, those who had given consent were emailed until the sample size was met. In this report, we focus on the first 30 telephone interviews with individuals wanting to adopt and their experience of assessment and approval. The average interview length was forty-five minutes. The RAA or interviewees' numbers are not provided to ensure that anonymity is maintained.

Between March 2019 and March 2020, thirty prospective adopters (12 males and 18 females) were interviewed:

Adoption support survey

This survey of adopters asks about the range and quality of support received from RAAs. The surveys of adoption support went live in January 2020 and were due to be live/ issued over a 12-month period but were paused due to impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on fieldwork. At the time of the pause the Rees Centre had received 209 responses from across 4 RAAs. In the future, adopters will be asked about their views and experiences of adoption support through the remaining adopter interviews.

Annex Four: Local Authorities involved in each RAA

Adoption Agency	LAs involved
Adoption Connects	Central Bedfordshire
	Milton Keynes
Adopt East London	Barking and Dagenham
	Havering
	Newham
	Tower Hamlets
Adopt North East	Gateshead
	Newcastle upon Tyne
	North Tyneside
	South Tyneside
	Northumberland
Adopt North London	Camden
	Hackney
	Islington
	Enfield
	Haringey
	Barnet
Adopt South	Hampshire
	Portsmouth
	Southampton
	Isle of Wight

Adopt South London	Lambeth
	Lewisham
	Southwark
	Wandsworth
	Croydon
	Kingston upon Thames
	Merton
	Richmond upon Thames
	Sutton
Adopt South West	Devon
	Plymouth
	Torbay
	Somerset
Adopt West London	Hammersmith and Fulham
	Brent
	Ealing
	Hounslow
Adoption @ Heart	Dudley
	Sandwell
	Walsall
	Wolverhampton
Adoption Central England	Coventry
	Solihull

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

	Wokingham
	Oxfordshire
Adoption West	Bath and North East Somerset
	Bristol, City of
	North Somerset
	South Gloucestershire
	Wiltshire
	Gloucestershire
AIM	Knowsley
	Liverpool
	Sefton
	Wirral
Ambitious for Adoption	Bromley
	Harrow
	Redbridge
	Slough
	Waltham Forest
	City of London
	Kensington and Chelsea
	Westminster
	Hillingdon
	Greenwich
Aspire	Dorset

	Bournemouth/ Christchurch/Poole
Cambridgeshire	Cambridgeshire
	Peterborough
Coast to Coast	Sunderland
	Durham
	Cumbria
Adoption East Midlands	Derbyshire
	Derby
	Nottinghamshire
	Nottingham
Family Adoption Links	Leicestershire
	Leicester
	Rutland
	Lincolnshire
	North Lincolnshire
Adoption Partnership South East	Bexley
	Kent
	Medway
Lancashire	Lancashire
	Blackpool
Together for Children	Staffordshire
	Stoke-on-Trent
	Shropshire

	Telford and Wrekin
One Adoption North Yorkshire and Humber	Kingston Upon Hull, City of
	East Riding of Yorkshire
	North East Lincolnshire
	North Yorkshire
	York
One Adoption South Yorkshire	Barnsley
	Doncaster
	Rotherham
	Sheffield
One Adoption West Yorkshire	Bradford
	Calderdale
	Kirklees
	Leeds
	Wakefield
Tees Valley	Hartlepool
	Middlesbrough
	Redcar and Cleveland
	Stockton-on-Tees
	Darlington
Together for Adoption	St. Helens
	Wigan
	Halton

	Warrington
	Cheshire West & Chester
Adopt East	Essex
	Hertfordshire
	Luton
	Norfolk
	Southend on Sea
	Suffolk
	Thurrock
	Bedford Borough
Birmingham Partnership	Birmingham

Department for Education

© Department for Education 2020

Reference: DFE-RR1000a

ISBN: 978-1-83870-182-6

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:
maura.lantrua@education.gov.uk or www.education.gov.uk/contactus

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications