Evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies: managing culture change

Research brief

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Rachel Woolridge, Rachel Blades, James Ronicle – Ecorys UK

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1. Introduction

This research brief is informed by Ecorys' research in 2018 and early 2019, as part of the evaluation of RAAs[1] and provides a summary of the evidence on managing culture change in the transition from local adoption services to Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). The evaluation involved baseline visits to all Department for Education recognised RAAs in early 2018, followed by in depth case studies with six RAAs from autumn 2018. This brief draws evidence from the qualitative research with Heads of Service (HoS), strategic stakeholders, operational managers and frontline staff working in and with RAAs. It covers 4 key areas:

1. Preparing staff for the move to the RAA.
2. Going live – building an identity.
3. Maintaining a team identity and a positive working environment; and,
4. Managing the culture change for adoptive and birth families and foster carers.

Some of the ideas reported as part of the evaluation may not be particularly innovative, but the case study research found they were very important, with the development of RAAs suffering when these aspects were not in place.

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[1] All reports from the evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies can be found here:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies

2. Preparing staff for the move to the RAA

The research identified that building a positive staff culture was essential to ensure the effective implementation of the RAA. Engaging staff early actively helped increase buy-in to think regionally and to:

- reduce the risk of alienating staff.

- highlight opportunities for staff development; and,

- improve experiences and outcomes for adopted children and families.

RAAs prepared staff for the move to RAA by:

- Emphasising the importance of communicating the rationale for regionalisation clearly so that staff were clear on structures and roles within and outside of the RAA. This meant that the main principles (around improving outcomes for children) remained at the forefront of the change process and helped to overcome the confusion staff often felt during the long project design period.

- Bringing people together early on to build relationships, particularly if they had not worked together before. Developing RAA projects required new stakeholders to work together at the strategic level (such as Directors of Children's Services) and the operational level (in adoption teams). For example, RAAs did this by:

    o inviting strategic leads to RAA board meetings,

    o giving each local authority lead responsibility for a task (for example, leading on HR or ICT), to ensure that everyone has equal accountability from the outset, and,

    o at the operational level, RAAs did this by arranging team away days and/or visits to the new RAAs premises for frontline and managerial staff.

- Thinking about timescales and future roles. They held team building opportunities before going live. Ideally, staff should be involved in planning groups that are directly associated with their new roles.

- Building a common vision. Some RAAs engaged staff (at all levels) in designing and developing aspects of the RAA to create opportunities for dialogue. They held consultations, staff workshops, and developed 'task and finish' groups. It was important to engage local authority children's social workers and senior leaders in this process alongside RAA staff.

- Recognising and anticipating staff worries about what to expect in the new working environment. One RAA found it helpful to have an 'information pack' for all RAA staff to set their expectations on ways of working and aspects like Time off in Lieu, annual leave, parking, and electronic calendars.

- Ensuring that all LAs felt they were contributing to the new RAA and trying to avoid perceptions of 'host takeover' (in the LA hosted model). Several RAAs sought to

identify best practice from each LA and incorporate this it into a new model of practice that was unique to the RAA. In this way, they acknowledged the different approaches that staff took prior to the RAA, whilst unifying these approaches through the RAA.

- Bringing managers together to help build partnerships with LA services was also important, helping to ensure that operational boards have the right people on board.

There were challenges:

- Several RAAs reported that staff were concerned about leaving their existing teams, and warned it was important not to leave decisions around staffing structures too late. If the RAA involves a separation of staff in existing local authority teams, there should be a phased approach to separating the teams, to reduce the risk of staff feeling unsettled once the RAA goes live.

- Findings from the research suggest it is important to avoid being in the development phase for too long (for example, over two years) as this can make it hard to maintain momentum and erode staff members' enthusiasm.

- It was important not to underestimate the effects of bringing together local authorities with differing needs and previous performance records. Managers from different LAs benefitted from coming together to make decisions in the move towards becoming an RAA.

Case study

One RAA spent over a year engaging staff in the run-up to going live. The participating local authorities had a limited history of working together but decided to create a partnership because they bordered each other. At the strategic level they encouraged relationships to develop by asking Directors or Assistant Directors from each local authority to take on a specific task (for example, one area took the lead on finance and another on HR). At the operational level, the RAA launched 'task and finish' groups, comprised of social workers to work on specific areas of practice. Encouraging co-working across the different local authority teams was positive for the RAA, as it ensured staff were on board with the changes as the RAA implemented them, so they bought into the service. This appeared to work and the RAA maintained a high staff retention rate through the transition to going live.

> "Co-working before going live worked well - it meant we started to make connections with other workers." (Social Worker)

Case study

From early on in its development, one RAA invested substantial time and energy into ensuring staff bought into the idea that the RAA was about improving outcomes for children. Establishing this as the key aim of the RAA helped ensure that staff were

dedicated to the change and were enthusiastic about making the RAA work when it went live. Building on the LAs' history of working together to develop a permanence model, the RAA brought staff together again to work on particular areas of practice, held 'whole team' events to introduce staff to each other, and established an operational group to bring staff from different LAs together.

> "There's been quite a lot of commitment and goodwill and it's been quite interesting because when there's significant change that happens like this, often you get quite a lot of staff who are quite anxious and worried and who don't sign up to it. But because the principles are around the outcomes for the children and that wider sense of improving the system for adoption, it's been quite refreshing about how upbeat staff have been and their understanding about it and signing up for it." (Head of Service)

Questions arising from the research:

- Do all strategic leads in the RAA (including VAA partners), as well as those back in the LA, agree on the vision and know how to communicate it to their areas?

- Do staff know what the RAA structure is and what different people's roles are? Have managers given staff information about what to expect?

- Have social workers who will be moving into the RAA, and those who are staying in the LAs, had the opportunity to have their say? Are they satisfied with the extent of their involvement in the set-up process?

- Has there been an opportunity to assess different LA/VAA partners' practices and explore how best practice from each partner can make one RAA approach?

3. Going live – Building an identity

The research with RAAs identified that the transition from a local authority team to an RAA could affect staff members' sense of identity as well as the ways in which different stakeholders identified with the changes to adoption services. The transition could also affect the identity of teams within the LAs. The following factors influenced this:

- the choice of RAA model.

- the stability of the strategic management board.

- established teams being disbanded.

- turnover of staff.

- vacancies going unfilled.

- if, and when, case responsibility for children transfers to the RAA.

- the type and size of the local authority.

- existing caseloads; and,

- collaborating with LAs with stronger and poorer previous performance.

RAAs helped to mitigate against the risk of people feeling a loss of identity and affiliation with the RAA when going live by:

- Ensuring that both senior management and frontline staff (including those still working in the LAs) were clear on the specific vision for the RAA and that every-one knew their roles and felt confident in communicating these. In the earlier stages of delivery, this helped staff to feel more comfortable with a certain amount of ambiguity as plans were finalised, particularly in RAAs with more complex set ups (i.e., large number of local authorities, or operating across a large geographic area). For staff in LAs, it is important to ensure that they know the roles and re-sponsibilities within the RAA so they can signpost adopters/families to the right people.

- Acknowledging that staff were used to their own ways of working and that initially there would be different approaches. This was particularly the case where local authority staff previously worked very differently to the RAA way-of-working. Providing staff with a safe environment to discuss practice (for example, through regular team meetings or reflection sessions) was a way that one of the RAAs helped overcome any differences and bring greater consistency.

- Recognising that the visual identity of RAAs plays an important role for building a team identity and promoting the visual identity of the RAA from the outset, using merchandise, such as lanyards, pens, posters, and mugs. It needs to be promoted across the RAA and LA services, to ensure all relevant people get the message. This also helps to avoid misleading staff and wider stakeholders, for example, if as one RAA went 'live', some staff still wear lanyards with the local authority brand-ing.

- Ensuring senior, middle managers and frontline staff were involved in decision making processes so that they all develop and maintain 'buy-in' to the RAA. RAAs need enthusiastic, positive, and empowered managers who are able to create a sense of identity in their teams.

- Recognising that the move to RAAs can challenge managers' reputations as they move from being well-known and respected managers in LAs to being new faces in RAAs, and support them, teams, and partners within new arrangements. In some RAAs, the transition from LA adoption teams changed the team dynamics, which required careful management.

- Being present by visiting different offices on a regular basis to speak to members of staff. This was important especially for RAAs operating over a vast geographic area, where it was difficult for staff to get together regularly. The presence of the HoS across offices particularly within 'hub and spoke' models showed a high-level commitment to building an inclusive environment for all offices.

There were challenges:

- Across the RAAs, it took time (in some cases up to a year) for staff to feel as part of the RAA identity. It is therefore important not to assume staff will automatically identify with the RAA once it has gone live, to recognise that some staff will move on, and that processes need to be in place to manage vacancy recruitment.

Case study

In one RAA, some operational and managerial staff found it difficult to adopt the new RAA identity, as they had strong attachments to their previous local authority teams. Recognising this, the management team worked hard to build up the identity, by ensuring the teams had regular meetings, group supervisions and practice sharing sessions. Staff felt this was important for helping them feel they were working as 'one team', despite the fact that they were based across different offices. It also helped them to share their experiences and ways of working.

> "[The meetings, supervisions and practice sharing sessions are helpful] not only to establish ourselves as [the RAA] but to get to know each other as workers as we are all coming from such different professional backgrounds." (Social worker)

It was also important that managers shared positive news amongst staff, so the RAA created a newsletter, which they circulate through the team on a regular basis, as a way to boost morale and build networks.

Questions arising from the research:

- Is there an understanding at both the strategic and operational level about the main aim of the RAA? Have LAs & VAA partners signed up to this?

- Do staff have the ability to discuss practice in an open and safe environment? Do managers receive and act on this feedback?

- Are there visual reminders of the RAA's identity, such as lanyards, pens, posters etc. in all offices?

- Are managers bought-in to the RAA, and do they feel empowered to lead their teams through it?

- Does management maintain a presence or visibility in different offices?

4. Maintaining a team identity and a positive working environment

RAAs said it was important for managers to continue to reinforce the RAA identity and ensure that staff feel positive about their new working environment. They did this by:

- Encouraging regular feedback from all staff about their views on processes and practice (including administrative staff, social workers, HR, finance, panel staff and LA social workers.) The research found that a key part of maintaining the team identity after going live was to continue engendering staff member's sense of ownership. This process could be resource intensive, but it was beneficial because it kept members of staff informed about developments, and they felt valued because managers were listening.

- Telling staff about the outcomes of their feedback. The research found that it was important to close the feedback loop and follow up with staff to inform them of what did or did not change and why.

- Using visual aids and reference points (for example, flowcharts, central service information folders) to support staff with working in new ways. For staff, a key aspect of moving into an RAA was learning about new systems and processes. Without appropriate support, some members of staff could feel frustrated, which could in turn dampen morale.

- Introducing policies about reserving seats and keeping desks in a tidy condition, which helped to ensure consistency for all staff, regardless of where they worked. Some of the geographically larger RAAs had 'hot desks', because staff needed to travel and work in different offices quite frequently.

- Holding regular team meetings to bring staff together to discuss experiences, once or twice a month. This was important especially in 'hub and spoke' models, where teams were working across different localities.

- Celebrating the successes and achievements made so far. In one of the RAAs that had been operating for over a year, and where the change process had settled, the HoS held a whole RAA away day, as well as team-based staff forums. Staff appreciated the opportunity to come together, which was especially important for members of staff working in the spokes who often felt distanced from the rest of the team.

- Establishing a monthly newsletter for staff circulation where it was not feasible to run whole team away-days. Some RAAs used different approaches to celebrating achievements and sharing news, including case studies or good practice examples that showcased the good work that staff were doing.

- Maintaining links with LAs to ensure that the partnership works across RAAs and LAs and reduces the potential sense of separation, for example by holding wider events or joint training.

There were challenges:

- In all of the case study RAAs maintaining team identities and a positive working environment took effort and drive from management teams. It was important for the management team to initiate activities that continue to bring staff together. In one of the more established RAAs, these activities had started to become embedded in the culture, which staff had begun to organise themselves.

- It is important to ensure that there are strong links with LAs and partner VAAs. Working to build relationships early and continuously helps to facilitate a shared understanding, improve and formalise collaboration between existing and new partners.

Case study

Having a leadership team that is available, listens to staff about what they need and then takes action has been the key to successfully managing the culture change for one RAA. Staff commented that they felt listened to because their Head of Service was visible (by visiting the different RAA offices often), approachable, and regularly provided clear communications about changes to the service. This culture of sharing information with staff was positive for retaining staff once the RAA went live.

> "Carry people with you; share thinking – staff are your biggest resource" (Team Manager)

The Head of Service also ensured that there were frequent opportunities for staff from the different geographical areas to come together, either through team meetings or whole-RAA events or 'away-days'.

Case study

In one of the 'hub and spoke' RAAs that covered a very large geography, many members of staff (both management and frontline) felt as though they were still working in their respective LAs and did not feel a part of the RAA identity. This was because the 'spoke' offices were all far from each other, and most of the key meetings were in the 'hub' location.

Recognising these challenges, the RAA management has worked hard to ensure that there are team meetings, group supervisions and practice sharing sessions. They have also had whole RAA days to bring staff together. These approaches have started to have a positive impact, and staff are realising the importance and value of them, however, the vast geography is still causing challenges.

Questions arising from the research:

- Are staff asked for feedback regularly? Are they aware about what is happening because of their feedback?

- Are there resources readily available and easily accessible to staff, about policies and processes?

- If the RAA spans across different offices, is staff access to these sites sorted out before going live?

- Are IT systems set up and do all staff have access to relevant files and systems?

- If there are hot desks, is there a policy in place about how the system works?

- Are there team or whole-RAA events scheduled in to celebrate the RAA's achievements?

- Are there ways to share updates and good practice among the team (for example, newsletters)?

- Are there processes in place to support effective partnership working with LAs and partner VAAs and methods to assess the effectiveness of these?

5. Managing the culture change for families

It was also important to consider how the move to RAAs changes the culture of adoption services for families. Some RAA staff told us that families can have strong attachments to their local authority teams, and it is important they are aware of the reasons for the changes. RAAs have helped to guide them through the process and make them aware of what the RAA can, and cannot, offer by:

- Implementing a 'front door', with known, named contacts that adoptive families could get in touch with if they needed to. This helped families to manage new interactions with services.

- Developing a range of channels to communicate the changes they are making to adoption services through the RAAs, such as letters, emails, postcards, texts, or posters. One RAA consulted families about what the RAA should look like and were kept informed of changes throughout the development period, which helped them to adjust to the process of regionalisation. Another area provided information packs for all families, which had details on the adoption process in the RAA and adoption support.

- Ensuring there is adopter representation in the leadership or on the board, where someone with first-hand experience of adopting has provided guidance and insight on the best way to manage the culture change for families. This has helped to develop a better understanding of the potential impact of the move to RAAs on families and helped RAAs to respond.

- Using consistent RAA branding throughout different offices was a key way that some RAAs helped families feel they were part of one service if they had to go to multiple locations for support. The research found that not only do visual aids help staff feel part of the RAA identity, but they also help families.

There were challenges:

- RAA managers need to instigate many of these changes to help provide a consistent message. The research found that communications about changes should not be left to frontline practitioners managing large caseloads who might have a different understanding about processes (especially in the early stages when things are new to them).

Case study

Staff in one RAA reflected on how some families have experienced a sense of loss as their adoption support moved to RAAs. Some have lost their social worker, while others have to travel to new places to access their support. Some were just saddened that the changes had not been communicated to them adequately.

> "What we did is we paid attention to our workers' transitions and sense of loss, but we may not have paid as much attention to those adopters. Some of them weren't bothered either way, but some of them were really distraught" (Manager)

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The RAA has been trying to overcome these issues by implementing a front door serviced by a small team of people, so that adoptive families can have a single point of contact and can build up a relationship with the service again. However, it is too soon to say how effective this has been.

Questions arising from the research:

- Do families have known and named contacts that they can contact within the RAA?

- Have staff told families about the RAA, using a range of different channels?

- Is there adopter representation on the board, and if not, could the RAA benefit from this?

- Is there consistent branding across the offices, so regardless of location, families know they are receiving support from the same organisation?

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