



Department
for Education

Supporting adoptive families: the views of adoptive parents in four regional adoption agencies

October 2021

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Government
Social Research

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Executive summary

An online post adoption support survey was distributed by four RAAs to adoptive parents in their region. The aim of the survey was to understand adoptive parents' experiences of and satisfaction with support services. The information on support complements the information collected from prospective adopters undertaking preparation group training, and subsequent qualitative follow up interviews with approved adopters.¹

RAAs were asked to send out the surveys in January 2020, with the intention that the survey would be 'open' for a year. However, the survey was closed prematurely on the 23rd March 2020 due to the COVID-19 restrictions and was not restarted due to the subsequent changes in the way that support services had to be delivered.

The survey was completed by 208 adoptive parents: 70% had a heterosexual partner, 12% a gay/lesbian partner and 18% were single carers. The majority (93%) were of White ethnicity. They were caring for 268 children whose average age was nine years old: a third of parents had more than one adopted child. The demographics of the respondents were very similar to those who completed their preparation training in the four RAAs. However, the responses may not be representative of the support received by families in other RAAs, and recollections may have been affected by the time since they asked for or received support. The findings are not an evaluation of the effectiveness of services but of parent's feelings and perceptions of the services they received.

The parents had been approved as adoptive parents between 1997 and 2020: 70% had been approved before the RAA had formed. The Adoption Support Regulations (enacted in 2013) state that parents should be provided with information on available support services. Those approved (n=159) before the introduction of RAAs were mainly given information during their preparation and training. More than quarter (26%) had received no information on support services until after the child was placed and 9% recorded that they had never received any information. In contrast, all the parents approved by a RAA had received information and respondents noted that the information had been repeated at multiple points of their adoption journey. However, less than half (40%) recorded that support services were discussed when their own adoption support plan was being prepared. A few felt that support plans were formulaic and not an individualised plan for their child and family.

Parents were asked if they had ever asked their adoption agency for any kind of support and, if they had, were asked to provide information on the last occasion they had done so. A little over a quarter of the parents who responded to the survey (57: 27%) had never asked for support. While ten of these parents recorded that they had never

¹ The report on adopters' views on preparation training and assessment is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

needed support, others wrote that they would have liked support but did not know who to contact or stated they had been deterred from help-seeking by previous negative experiences during the assessment and approval process.

Most of the respondents had not felt deterred from asking for help and nearly three-quarters (151: 73%) of parents had done so. The majority (86%) of requests being made recently to an RAA. Four (3%) of these parents received no response to their request, 22 (15%) received no follow-up after an initial call back or visit, 21 (14%) had called to chase referrals that had not been actioned and 24 (16%) were either not offered or refused an assessment of need for adoption support services. Parents wrote that they were unaware that they could request an assessment and had not been informed of their eligibility. The majority had contacted the RAA asking for help with their child's emotional and behavioural needs in the home and/or in school. Some were at crisis point (9% had contacted the Emergency Duty Team) and were asking for urgent support. Parents expressed frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction in the way the system operated. More than a third (37%) were very dissatisfied with the response to their request for support.

Eighty-four parents (56% of those who had requested support) went on to have an assessment of need. In nine (11%) of the 84 families, the assessment decision was not to provide services: a decision that was disputed by parents. An application to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) was agreed for 58 (69%) families and 17 families (20%) had support provided by the RAA. Parents complained about long delays in assessments being started, delays in funding being agreed, waiting lists for interventions and a shortage of therapists. At the time the survey was completed, 50 families had started or completed the support that had been identified in their assessments. Families who were receiving support were generally very positive about the quality of the interventions and praised their worker or therapist. A minority felt that the intervention had ended too soon.

Parents were concerned at the lack of joint working between the RAA, the LA, and other agencies. Major themes were the poor quality of life story books provided by the child's social worker, the lack of financial support and gaps in knowledge and skills in the RAA on developing education and health care plans. Parents also identified gaps in their own training such as how to make best use of the letterbox services, and how to talk to their child about adoption and their history.

Overall, based on the evidence from this survey (and its limitations) there was little evidence that adoption support services had improved in these four RAAs since their formation two or three years previously. There was an improvement in parents feeling that they were better informed about available support services. However, the same complaints that have been reported in previous research were repeated here: feeling discouraged from using services, lengthy delays in assessments, waiting lists for services and examples of poor practice and administration. There was also a perception by those

who had been approved before the RAA had formed that some services had deteriorated. Some parents were unable to attend support groups and training sessions, as they were no longer held locally and there was perception that resources were tighter, less flexible and had reduced.

Chapter 1 Background

This report is part of our wider evaluation of the impact of the RAAs on the provision of adoption services.² In this report we consider the results of the post adoption support survey that was distributed to adoptive parents in four RAAs. The aim was to gather information on whether adoptive parents had been able to access support services, the timeliness of interventions and parent's overall satisfaction with services. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions and the early closure of the survey due to lockdown, findings are tentative and may not reflect practice in the four RAAs or RAAs in England.

Adoption support has been recognised for many years as an essential service to ensure that adoptive parents can feel confident in their parenting and children can be helped to recover from their early experiences and integrate their dual identities. For instance, evidence from research (e.g., Fratter et al. 1991; Quinton et al. 1998; Rushton 2003) and from the adoption community have stressed the life-long impact on children of early maltreatment, loss, and separation. The Adoption Act (1976) established the requirement for local authorities (LAs) to provide a comprehensive adoption service, although the Act was not fully in force until 1988. Since then, the duties of LAs have increased and become more clearly defined in legislation. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) placed a duty on LAs to prepare, publish and regularly review their plan for providing adoption support services. The Act was followed by the Adoption Support Services Regulations (2005) requiring services to be provided in “a co-ordinated manner without duplication, omission or avoidable delay” (Section 3(5)). In addition to counselling, advice, and information the following support services were prescribed:

- Financial support in certain circumstances
- Services to enable groups of adoptive children, adoptive parents and natural parents or former guardians of an adoptive child to discuss matters relating to adoption
- Assistance, including mediation services, in relation to arrangements for contact between an adoptive child and a natural parent, natural sibling, former guardian or a related person of the adoptive child
- Services in relation to the therapeutic needs of an adoptive child
- Assistance for the purpose of ensuring the continuance of the relationship between an adoptive child and his adoptive parent, including – training for adoptive parents for the purpose of meeting any special needs of the child
- Respite care

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies>

- Assistance where disruption of an adoptive placement, or of an adoption arrangement following the making of an adoption order, has occurred or is in danger of occurring, including making arrangements for the provision of mediation services
- Organising and running meetings to discuss disruptions in such placements or arrangements.

However, adoptive parents continued to report that information was not provided, services were inadequate and inequitable depending on where a family lived, and adopters felt blamed and shamed if they asked for help (e.g., Pennington 2012, Selwyn et al 2014). The duty on LAs to provide information was strengthened again in the Children and Families Act 2014 (Section 6) and in the Adoption Support Services (Amendment) Regulations 2014. In addition, to address the gap in therapeutic services for children, the Adoption Support Fund was introduced in 2015 to improve the accessibility, timeliness, and quality of therapeutic support (King et al 2017). Adoption reforms, including the regionalisation of adoption agencies (RAAs), have continued with the aim of improving the whole of the adoption system. The focus of this report is on adoption support. The Department for Education set out its vision for the delivery of adoption support services:

Every adoptive family has access to an ongoing package of appropriate support with a right to a high quality, specialist assessment of need. This support is delivered from day one and continues throughout childhood whenever it is required. Adoptive families have a supportive relationship with their local agency and know they can turn to them for additional support at any time, without judgment. (Department for Education, 2016 p 7)

Chapter 2 Aims and method

The aims of the survey were to understand the experience of and satisfaction with adoption support from adoptive parents who were parenting a child who had previously been looked after. The support survey information complements the information collected from prospective adopters undertaking preparation group training, and subsequent qualitative follow up interviews with approved adoptive parents.

Four of the seven RAAs, that have taken part in the wider RAA evaluation, consented to take part in the adoption support survey. RAAs were selected who would have been fully operational for at least a year during the survey period. The RAAs agreed to send a link to the online survey and information about the evaluation to their approved adoptive parents. However, the ease with which RAAs could access the emails of adoptive parents differed. Some did not have lists of families using the whole range of support services and others had lists that could not be separated into those who were or were not receiving support.

Three RAAs were asked to open the survey in January with the first responses coming on the 3rd of February 2020 and opened in the fourth RAA on the 13th of March 2020 when they had been operating for a year. The surveys were expected to be open for 12 months, but the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown interfered with those plans. The survey was closed on March 23rd 2020, which was the date of the first lockdown, resulting in the fourth RAA survey being open for only ten days. A decision was made during July/August 2020 not to re-open the surveys, as the questions were no longer appropriate for the way services were being delivered during the pandemic.

The online survey asked about a) adoptive parents' choice of agency, b) whether they were satisfied with the timeliness, quality and sufficiency of the support services provided and c) if adoptive parents, who had experience of support before RAAs, thought that there had been improvements since RAAs became responsible for the delivery of support services.

All the questions were optional and many of the questions used an 11-point rating scale (0 to 10 scale) with zero being very poor and ten excellent. All the survey responses were downloaded into SPSSv27 for analysis. Scales were categorised; 0-4 (poor/low satisfaction) 5-6 (average/moderate) 7-9 (high), and 9-10 (very high/excellent). Frequencies and cross tabulations were examined. Paired *t* tests were used to compare responses from those who had provided data on their satisfaction before and after the RAA had formed. The survey also enabled respondents to provide text comments. Text was analysed using a framework approach (Ritchie & Spencer 1993) of five key stages: familiarisation with the data and the context; identification of themes; indexing; mapping and interpretation. Identifiers are not provided for the RAAs or participants to maintain anonymity.

The sample

Responses came from 208 adoptive parents who were caring for 268 children in four RAAs. Due to the short time the surveys were able to be open and the different ways the RAAs distributed the survey it is not possible to know how representative the responses are. We do not know how many parents received the link as a request to take part in the survey was sent out in the RAA newsletters and/or was also sent to available lists of adopters held by the RAA. We do know that all the surveys were completed before the first lockdown in March 2020 and therefore parents' responses referred to services that were being delivered in the usual way and without any COVID restrictions.

Table 1 Survey responses from adoptive parents by RAA

| RAA | N | % |
|--------------|------------|------------|
| RAA 1 | 24 | 11.5 |
| RAA 2 | 43 | 20.7 |
| RAA 3 | 51 | 24.5 |
| RAA 4 | 90 | 43.3 |
| Total | 208 | 100 |

Base: participants (208). Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

Most of those who responded were female (80%), of White ethnicity (93%) and living with a partner: 70% had a heterosexual partner and 12% were in gay/lesbian partnerships. Single parents made up 18% of responses: 17% were single females, and 1% single males. The average age was 47 years old (range of 28 to 72 years) and 1% were over the state retirement age. The majority (63%) had one adopted child, 31% had two children and 6% had three or four adopted children.

The respondents were representative of those being approved as adopters in the four RAAs. Our analysis of preparation groups found that those attending the RAA preparation groups 90% were White, 70% in heterosexual and 12% in gay/lesbian partnerships and 18% single parents. A third of those attending preparation groups were parenting either birth or adopted children.

At the time of the online survey their adopted children's ages ranged from >1 year to 20 years (mean 9 years old). The 208 parents were caring for 268 adopted children (Table 2).

Table 2: The respondent's adopted children and age

| Child | Mean age | Age Range |
|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| First (n=177) | 8.5 years | <1-22 years |
| Second (n=78) | 9.3 years | 1-20 years |
| Third and fourth (n=13) | 9.1 years | 2-13 years |

Base: participants (177). Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

The parents had been approved as adoptive parents between 1997 and 2020: 70% before the RAAs had formed. A few parents (n=18) had been approved by a different agency but had moved home and into the RAA area or had been approved within the region but had a child placed by a local authority (LA) outside the region. As more than three years had passed since placement, responsibility for the provision of support services had passed from the original LA to the RAA where they lived. In the next chapter we set out the results of the survey beginning with how parents selected their agency and whether they had been informed of the range and availability of support services.

Limitations of the study

The survey was only open for 10 weeks in four RAAs and may have been completed by those with the strongest feelings about the gaps and deficiencies in services. The survey asked adoptive parents about their perceptions and how they felt about the services they received. Their recollections may have been affected by the passing of time. The report is not an evaluation of the effectiveness of support services but of parents' subjective views. We also do not know whether the responses are representative of those receiving support from other RAAs. Nevertheless, the responses and comments provided by parents reflect the long-standing concerns with adoption support services.

Chapter 3 Findings

This report examines the views and experiences of adoptive parents on support services. Parents were first asked in the survey what had influenced their choice of agency to approve them as adoptive parents and whether they had been informed about the available support services. Parents were also asked questions about the support they wanted, received and their satisfaction with services. Finally, there were questions asking parents who had received services before their agency became a RAA to compare with their most recent experience of support from a RAA.

3.1 Choice of adoption agency

More than three-quarters of respondents to the survey (159: 77%) had been approved as adopters before regionalisation of agencies. The reasons they gave for their choice of agency were similar to the reasons reported in previous studies³ such as: a) the agency was local and there had been positive contact with staff. b) previous contact with professionals in the agency e.g., being a foster carer or already adopted a child through the agency c) word of mouth and personal recommendations. A few did not know they had a choice of agency and assumed it had to be a local authority.

Nearly a quarter (48:23%) had been approved by social workers from a RAA. They gave the same reasons for choosing their RAA as those who had been approved before RAAs had formed with one exception. The fact that the RAA covered a wider geographical area was a plus for adoptive parents and they wrote, "Initial telephone call to them was very positive. Liked the fact the agency was across several local authorities" ... "Wider choice of children" ... "Provided a broad reach in terms of available children and shared training and resources" ... "We tried a private agency first and it wasn't for us, [RAA] works with other boroughs so we felt it was the one for us. We definitely made the right choice."

3.2 Information on support services

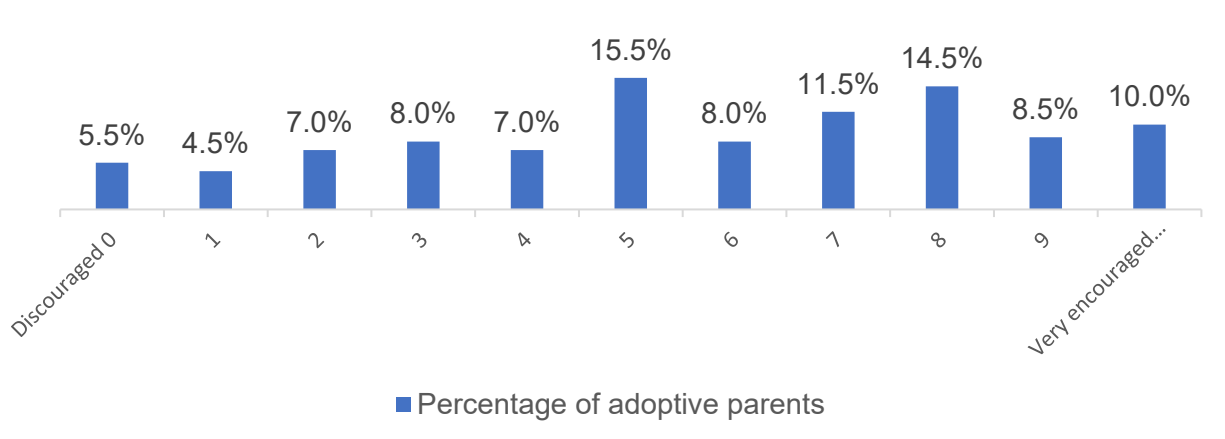
Parents were asked when (during training, assessment, matching, making of support plans, post placement and order) they were given information on support services. Those who were approved (n=159) before the formation of the RAA were given information mainly during their assessments and training (65%). More than a quarter (26%) received no information on support services until after the child moved in and a further 9% recorded that they had *never* received any information on support services. In

³ For example, Ward E. Taking the Next Step: Enquirers to National Adoption Week One Year on. *Adoption & Fostering*. 2011;35(1):6-17. Dance C, Farmer E. Changing lives and changing minds: the experiences of adoptive parents from application to approval. *Adoption & Fostering*. 2014;38(2):101-114.

comparison, all the parents (n=48) who had been approved by an RAA recorded that they had received information on support services. Most of these RAA approved parents had received information on multiple occasions and at many different stages of their adoption journey. Once the match between the adoptive parents and child has been approved by a panel, all families should have an adoption support plan that takes into account the particular needs of the child. A larger percentage (40%) of those approved by an RAA recorded that they had been made aware of support services in their adoption support plan compared with 20% of those approved before agencies became RAAs. The differences may reflect real improvements in practice, but recollections may also be less reliable and be affected by the length of time that had passed since they received their adoption support plan.

All the parents were asked if the RAA had provided information on support services in the previous 12 months. The majority (69%) could remember receiving information. Parents were asked on a zero to 10 scale if they felt discouraged or encouraged to use the available RAA support services (Figure 1). A third (32%) felt discouraged (rated 0-4 on the scale), 23.5% neither encouraged or discouraged (rated 5-6) and 44.5% felt encouraged to use services (7-10 rating).

Figure 1 Parents’ perception of encouragement to use RAA support services



Base: participants 208. Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

3.3 Post adoption support

Parents were asked about the support they had sought from the RAA and from other sources.

Use of social media and websites

Half (50%) of the parents regularly used online forums and websites. Parents wrote that they used these sites (and Google search) when seeking information about a particular

issue, were a source of regular support, or because they found the posts interesting and enjoyable to read. Parents were asked to identify which sites they used and how frequently. The most frequently used were online support groups run by parents.

The sites frequently used were: Mumsnet (often daily), New Family Social (LGBYT families), national Facebook groups of adoptive parents or therapeutic parents or those parenting a child with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Local Facebook or WhatsApp adoptive parent groups were also used as were local SEND, and religious based groups. Individuals' websites/ Facebook groups were also mentioned: Bryan Post, Hannah Meadows, Sarah Fisher coaching, INSPIRE training, and the adoption pod casts of Al Coates and Scott Casson-Rennie. Most (80%) of those using social media typically logged onto Adoption UK monthly. A few mentioned the websites of their own agency or those of national organisations: National Autistic Society, National Association of Therapeutic Parents and IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice).

Support from the Local Authority:

There are two key areas where support is usually provided by the LA and not the RAA. These are the production of the child's life story book and financial support.

Life story books

The life story book, whilst not a support service, is an essential tool that supports the adoptive parent in explaining to the child their early history and to answer the what, why, when, and how questions children have. Without an adequate explanation, children struggle to make sense of their pasts (Watson et al 2015). The book is co-ordinated by the child's social worker and produced in collaboration with the foster carers, birth family and sometimes adoptive parents. Information on how to create life story books is described in most LA's procedure manuals with exemplars of life story books available. There are many freely available online resources e.g., <https://firststeps.first4adoption.org.uk/exercises/life-story-work> and some VAAs have more developed life story services (e.g., Clifton Children's Society, The Sharing Stories Service)

The online survey asked adoptive parents two questions about the timing and quality of their youngest child's life story book and comments could also be provided. Parents were asked when their youngest child's life story book was provided; 22% had received their child's book in the first month after placement and a further 27% between two and six months later (Table 3). One in five had not received a book and there were many comments about delays. Current guidance (DfE, 2014) is for the book to be provided no later than 10 days after the making of the Adoption Order but more than a third of children had not received their books within that timescale and some parents wrote that it

was needed at placement rather than after the adoption order. Parents wrote about their frustration and delays:

“We’ve been waiting 2 years to receive the life story book. Despite complaining and chasing, it remains outstanding, even though it is recognised as very important for adopted children.”

“We have not received a life story book. We have had to write our own. No guidance has been offered in doing this.”

“I had to chase it for 3 years. When it arrived, names were wrong, spelling mistakes, out of date photos and factual errors. Disappointing.”

Table 3: Time between placement and receiving the child’s life story book

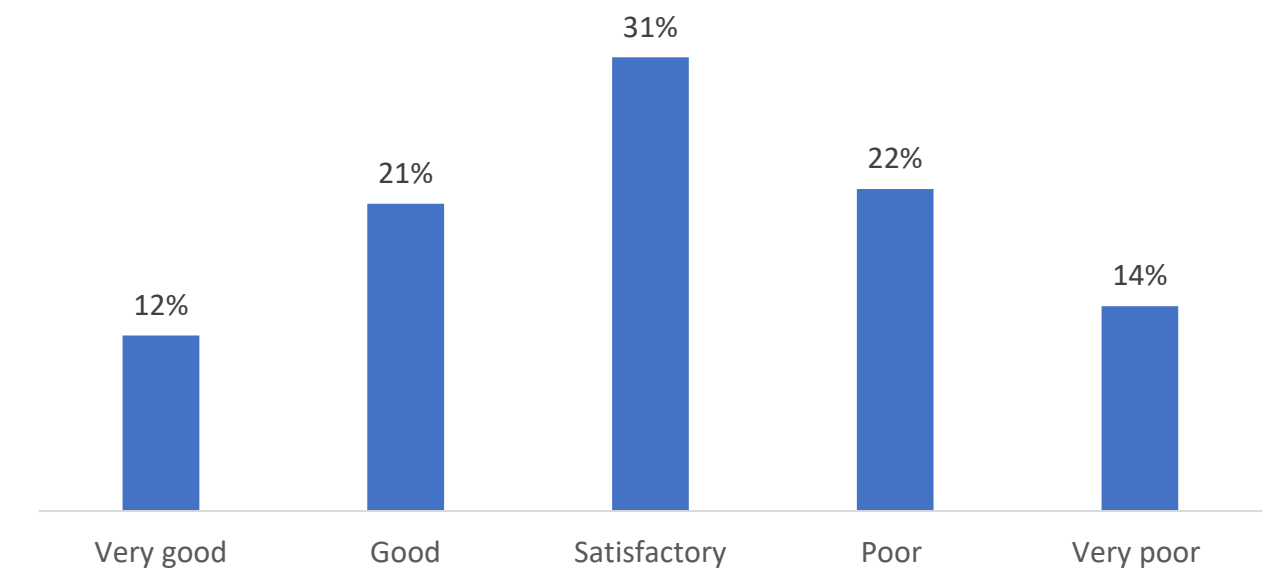
| Time after placement | N | % |
|-----------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Within 10 days | 25 | 12% |
| Within a month | 19 | 10% |
| 2-6 months | 54 | 27% |
| 7-12 months | 29 | 14% |
| More than year later | 34 | 17% |
| Not yet provided | 41 | 20% |
| Total | 202 | 100% |

Base: participants (202). Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

The quality of life story books

Parents who had received a book were asked to rate the quality on a five-point scale. About a third of books were rated as poor quality, a third were rated as satisfactory and a third as being good or very good (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Parent's rating of their youngest child's life story book



Base: participants (160). Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

Comments on life story books were provided by 150 parents. Although a third had rated the quality of the life story book as good or excellent all but six of the comments were critical. Parents complained about the content especially the use of insensitive images, clip art, conflicting information and inaccuracies and lack of detail. Parents felt that the books had been put together hastily, were “flimsy”, had been “cobbled together” and providing them was a “tick box exercise.” They gave examples of children’s names being wrongly recorded, siblings not treated as individuals and many errors and spelling mistakes. Parents wrote:

“It was full of irrelevant information, most of it was pictures from the internet and even had one of our children’s names wrong. We put them in a box and never showed the children.”

“The information clearly had been cut and pasted, e.g., gender pronouns were incorrect, wrong birth weights etc. Also, v gender stereotyped e.g., blue boarder for a boy, pink for a girl. When I complained and asked for them electronically so I could change them I was told they'd been saved as PDF files so this wasn't possible.”

“Had to chase it for 3 years and when it arrived daughter was referred to as a 'good boy.' There was extremely limited information in it ... Photos non-existent- just clip art.”

“We went to & fro with the agency over the life story book - appalling layout, inaccuracies, pictures without context (or knowing who people were) etc.”

While most complained about too little or inaccurate information, other parents thought that inappropriate information had been included. For example, including the full names and addresses of birth parents or including explicit details of the abuse the birth mother suffered during her childhood. National minimum standards in adoption state that the book should “represent a realistic and honest account of the circumstances surrounding the child’s adoption” (DfE, 2014b p. 13). However, there were complaints about the reality of the birth family circumstances being glossed over or omitted.

Parents wrote that books were often completed by student social workers (on placement with the LA as part of their training) or by workers who did not know the child. For example, writing,

“The person undertaking the production of our child’s life story book retired during its creation and it needed to be finished by someone else. ... None of it had been created or stored digitally this proved to be a timely and inefficient affair. Why on earth in 2018/19 this was still be done by hand like a scrap book is beyond me?” ...

“She had 4 social workers in the 1st year. Life story work was continually promised for 2 years before it was quickly done by a 5th worker who didn’t know her.”

Six of the 150 comments expressed satisfaction with the timeliness and/or quality of life story books. These parents wrote, “Our daughter’s social worker worked really hard to engage birth dad’s family to provide photos for us and sent them on really quickly.” ... “The life story book is so well laid out. There is even space to add to it as the years go on.” ... “My child’s book although very late is excellent.” ... “An absolutely amazing idea and (as an adoptee myself) a crucially valuable item which I know will be cherished. Could have been executed slightly better but understand the time pressures so appreciate the effort.”

Many of the parents who rated the books as good to excellent had re-written the books themselves or adoption social workers had taken responsibility for collecting information, and correcting errors before parents felt able to share with the children. The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) had also been used for psychologists to fill the gap and work with children on their life stories and books. Parents wrote, “Life story books were poor and our social worker from [name of VAA] is trying to get these fixed so I can introduce them to the children.” ... “Council life story book terrible. Our adoption social worker made it

excellent.” ... “With the help of a post adoption social worker, my son’s life story book has been completely rewritten. It is now suitable for him to see and read.” A few recognised that social workers had little time to complete life story books and one parent recorded that it had to be completed in the social worker’s own time.

Financial support from the Local Authority

Financial support in the form of statutory adoption leave and pay is available through employers for adoptive parents who meet the criteria.⁴ Additional financial support is provided by the LA in certain circumstances. The assessment for financial support is usually completed by the RAA but the LA provides the funding. Although most parents stated that they did not need financial support, 14% would have liked it but it had not been provided. Self-employed adoptive parents thought that it was unfair they were ineligible for statutory adoption pay from the government, despite being taxpayers. Thirty-eight parents (18%) had received a settling in grant and a regular adoption allowance. For these parents the financial support made a big difference enabling one parent to stay at home to care for the child. However parents also wrote that there was: a lack of transparency in LA decision-making on finance, too much variation in the provision of adoption allowances depending on where adopters lived, or that they were made to feel that they should not be asking for financial help. Parents wrote, “Refusal of continued financial support without any explanation.” ... “Social worker leaving six months ago and no one contacting us since despite my calling to ask for help.” ... “During matching I asked about the adoption allowance and was shut down without any discussion at all. Other adopters whose children have fewer issues and are from a different LA receive a generous adoption allowance. There should be a national policy on this, it should not be dependent on the will or financial situation of a particular LA.”

Most post adoption support is provided by the adoption teams and therefore, parents were asked about the support they had received and wanted from their adoption agency.

3.4 Parents who had never asked for support

Parents were asked if they had **ever** asked their adoption agency/RAA for any kind of post adoption support. Fifty-seven parents (27%) responded that they never asked for support. There were no statistical differences in the characteristics (type of household, child or adult’s age or ethnicity, length of time in placement or by RAA) of those who had or had not asked for post adoption support.

The reasons why parents had never asked for support were supplied by 42 of the 57 respondents. Although nearly half of all the parents who responded indicated that they had felt encouraged to use services (Figure 1), parents who had never asked for

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/employers-adoption-pay-leave>

support, commented that they had often felt deterred from help-seeking. They were critical of earlier contact with social workers and wrote for example,

“I don’t want to apply although we could use it as they were really patronising and not evidence-based during the adoption process, so I don’t want them to come in and do an assessment again.”

Two parents also wrote about data breaches that undermined their confidence in professionals, “A social worker from within our agency [name of RAA] leaked our court document family photo of us, our adoptive son and our birth daughter to the birth mother. They have refused to take responsibility for the leak.” ... “[Child’s social worker] has failed to keep promises ... left confidential information relating to another child here and does not inspire confidence.”

Three parents wrote that they had been given no information on support and did not know whom to contact. One parent wrote:

“I think they assume you know and understand what to do, how to reach out. When you ask you get, “Just contact [name of RAA]” - but for what? How? What can you get?”

Twelve parents wrote that they had not required additional support but suggested improvements in services. They wrote about wanting to see improved training on adoption issues for health visitors, for better communication from their RAA, and a more standardised service with less variation between LAs and RAAs. They wrote:

“Have not had any contact with agency since 2018 when our social worker went on maternity leave. We don’t need support at present, but some contact to see how we are getting on would be nice.”

“Patchy communication-when we contacted them about post adoption events that were taking place. We were often told that there had been a problem with email mailing lists.”

3.5 Parents who had asked for post adoption support

Nearly three-quarters of parents (151:73%) reported that they had asked their adoption agency for at least one type of post adoption support. Most (82%) of these requests for support had been made in the last year and had gone to an RAA. A minority (33) had last asked for support before the RAA formed. Parents were asked whom they had first spoken to when they asked for support (Table 4).

Table 4 First point of contact on the last occasion support was requested

| | Before RAA went live (n=34) | | After RAA went live (n=117) | |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|-------------|
| | n | % | n | % |
| Spoke to adoption worker | 16 | 47% | 45 | 39% |
| Do not know who I spoke to | 7 | 20% | 9 | 8% |
| Emergency Duty Team | 3 | 9% | 11 | 9% |
| Parent contacted RAA by email/ letter | 2 | 6% | 27 | 23% |
| Spoke to children's worker | 2 | 6% | 10 | 8.5% |
| Customer care centre | 1 | 3% | 7 | 6% |
| Answering machine | - | | 4 | 3% |
| Could not get through on the phone | - | | 3 | 2.5% |
| Other | 3 | 9% | 1 | 1% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 117 | 100% |

Base: participants (151). Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

Four parents received no response to their initial request and wrote: "No-one contacted me after I emailed." ... "No-one called me back. After ringing and leaving messages 3 times we were put on a waiting list for help. We still haven't been contacted so have paid privately for help."

Reasons for requesting support

Parents (n=151) were asked what kind of support they were trying to access on the last occasion they contacted the agency and given a free text box for responses. The main reason that parents had contacted the RAA was for behavioural and therapeutic support for the child in the home and in school. A few parents were asking for a referral for a specific assessment (e.g., specialist paediatrician) but most wrote about needing help with specific behavioural issues. They were asking for immediate support. For example, writing,

"Son taking drugs, involvement with police, desperate for help."

"I was at the point of adoption breakdown and my daughter had acted upon suicidal thoughts. I had previously contacted for support but had no follow up from the previous call and no response from the

call prior to that. I then contacted the Director of Children's services who intervened."

"Help with getting sensory occupational therapy as child was at risk of a permanent exclusion. LA were refusing to ask for advice on his OT needs as part of the Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment and help with a school as the relationship was at breakdown point."

Nine percent had contacted the Emergency Duty Team: a team that is contacted out-of-hours and often when families are in crisis.

Some wrote that they had contacted the RAA to chase previous referrals or assessments and to complain about delays due to documents "going missing" or staff shortages. Parents wrote that meetings to discuss their support needs were held weeks after their initial request for support due to workers being part-time. One family wrote that they were completing a third 'assessment of need' for their application to the Adoption Support Fund, as their previous two assessments had "gone missing". Parents wrote:

"When I called, they said they would respond in 48 hours. Two weeks later I chased (knowing how bad they are) but they had forgotten!"

"Help with everything, school, therapeutic, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. But gave up after 18 months and getting no response."

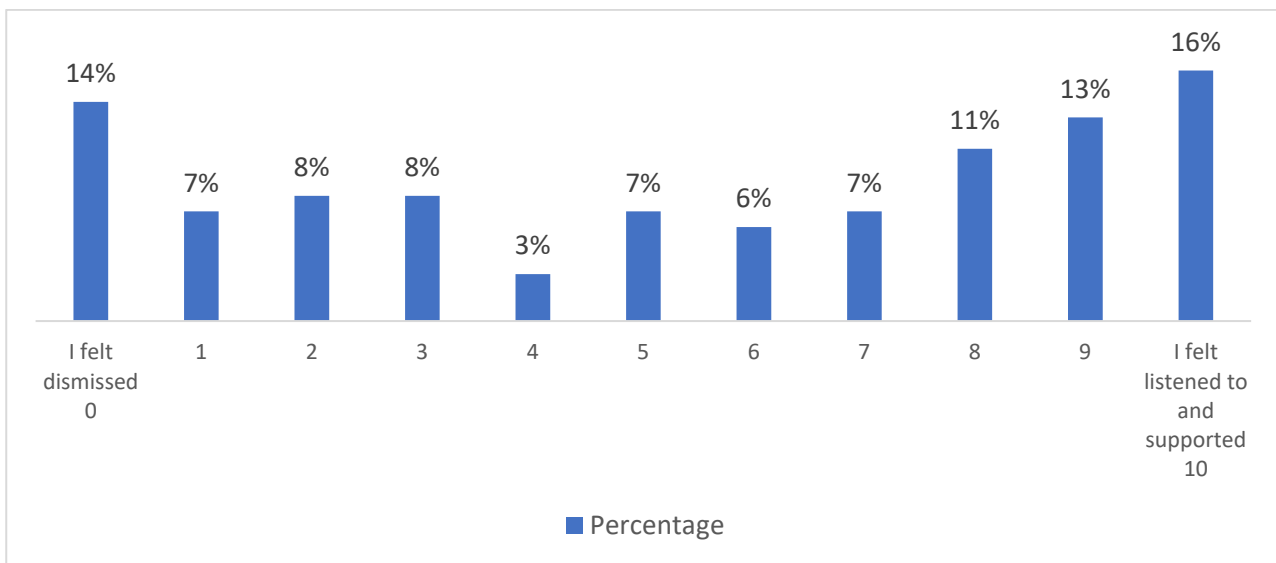
Individuals wrote about wanting general guidance on children's sleep problems, the availability of local support groups, advice on how to choose schools/ transition to college or talking to children about adoption. There were also requests for the agency to provide support for contact, life story work for the child, counselling and for financial support.

"We have asked to have our financial support reviewed and extended as we cannot use support services like breakfast club and after school services due to the issues our children have because of their neglect suffered - therefore we both cannot work full time and need some financial support to enable us to work part time."

Parents were asked how they felt about the agency's response to their latest request for support (Figure 3). The responses were on a scale with zero representing 'I felt dismissed, or the problem was minimised' rising to 10 (I felt listened to, understood, and supported). Nearly half (47%) rated their satisfaction with the response as high or very high. However, very few of those

who were satisfied left any comments on the services they received, although many of these had an application made to the ASF.

Figure 3: Parent’s satisfaction with the agency's response to the call/request



Base: participants (145). Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

3.6 Assessments of need for adoption support services

The Adoption Act and Adoption Service Regulations set out the eligibility of who can request an assessment of need and the process to be followed. The assessment is a gateway to support services. Adoptive parents are eligible to request an assessment and the local authority *must* undertake an assessment except if the request is for counselling, information, or advice only. The regulations require the person to be interviewed and a written report prepared. Once the assessment is complete, the decision needs to be given with reasons and, if support is to be provided, the agency must issue a draft plan.

Most of the 151 parents who had sought support were likely to have required an assessment: 21 (14%) parents felt that their request did not require an assessment as they were asking for information and/or chasing previous referrals. However, 22 (15%) parents who had requested support received no follow-up from the agency and a further 24 (16%) parents did not have an assessment of need. Parents wrote that they were unaware of their eligibility to ask for an assessment, were denied one, or they were still waiting for an assessment due to staff shortages. Parents wrote:

“We would have loved an assessment. It was not offered neither was a meeting with any post adoption social worker.” ...

“I was not asked. I was told that we no longer had a social worker assigned and we had to join a waiting list to be assessed whether or not the children were still in need of the ongoing attachment therapy. We were told the waiting list was more than 6 months and that there would be no therapy funding (and therefore no therapy) for that time.”

... We have requested an assessment since July 2019. Still not completed. No support provided in 8 months despite ongoing problems reported by us and school.” ... “I wasn’t made aware this [an assessment of need] was available.” ...

“Still waiting to speak to someone, as our original social worker has left and not been replaced as yet.” ... “I had a visit from a lady who told me I’d get a visit from a social worker; it would go to the MASH team - none of this happened. They didn’t communicate with me.”

Parents who had an assessment of need

Just over half (84; 56%) of those who had sought support had an assessment of need. Of these, the outcome of the assessment was:

- 58 parents (69%) support was needed and was to be provided through an application to the Adoption Support Fund
- 17 parents (20%) support was needed and to be provided through the RAA.
- 9 parents (11%) assessed as support not required or a decision was made not to provide.

Assessment decision that support was not needed or would not be provided (n=9)

Parents recorded that they disagreed with the assessment decision. For example, an adoptive parent wrote that the adoption support team would not provide support in the making of the Education and Health Care Plan as they lacked knowledge of the process.

Assessments where the need for support was identified (n=75)

Even when the need for support was agreed parents were still writing about delay and waiting lists for additional assessments or for the intervention to be provided. Parents wrote,

“We still have not received the support after six months of waiting!
We are waiting for funding to be approved for therapy.”

“We have only now received confirmation of funding (over 12 months after initial contact) and are about to start Occupational Therapy.”

“You have to wait too long. Children could die from suicidal attempts
Waiting for [name of RAA] broke my family apart.”

“Assessment was completed saying our child was eligible for ASF, but due to "getting lost in the system" no support has yet been provided.”

Interventions provided

Fifty assessments of need had resulted in interventions being provided at the time the survey was completed. Parents were asked about the types of support they received. For most, specific interventions had been provided and not just further assessments. Only a minority had funding for additional specialist assessments where the concerns were for example that the child was engaging in sexually harmful behaviours or autism was being considered.

ASF funded interventions were primarily therapeutic support for children consisting of play, music, or art therapies and EMDR. Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) was provided sometimes in combination with family therapy, Theraplay, or sensory integration therapy. There were also examples of psychologists working with children on their life stories or on attachment difficulties. The RAAs provided therapeutic parenting courses, DDP interventions, an allocated post adoption support worker who was able to act as an advocate in school meetings and/or support the adopters in their parenting. The RAAs had also worked with the child’s LA to provide a few parents with respite that included funding of adventure breaks or PGL holidays for the child. Some parents wrote “counselling” or “therapy”, and it was unclear whether this was for the child or for themselves and others wrote that they had also been allocated.

Match of the child’s needs and services

Once interventions were provided most parents thought they had made a real difference writing:

“Invaluable”

“Art therapy had been fantastic and changed things for the whole family. Our therapist is amazing and really understands trauma.”

“Daughter has one to one in Adoption Psychology which she finds useful.”

“Life Story Therapy and Play Therapy were very useful. DDP has helped one child and is ongoing for the youngest child.”

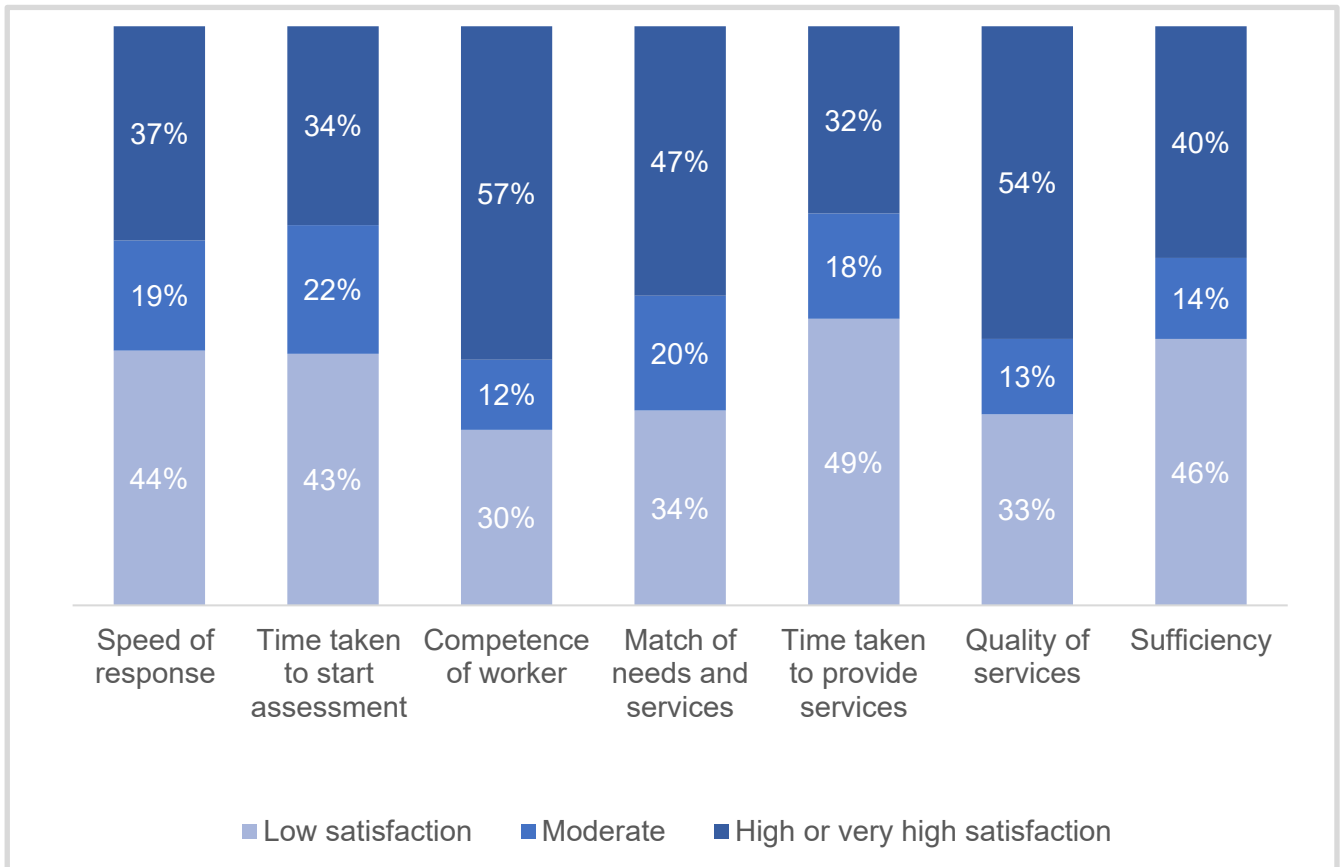
Parents were however frustrated by the slow process and the length of time it had taken to get funding in place and the intervention started. For some children, the delay had made school transitions more difficult or had exacerbated existing problems.

Forty-nine percent of parents thought that there had been a good to excellent match between the child’s needs and the services provided. A few (11%) thought that the intervention had met some but not all the child’s needs or the support had ended too soon writing “Yes [it had met child’s needs] but the funding wasn’t enough to sustain the support for a year.” ... “What we have is excellent, but we only have 8-10 session which is massively below the level of need we have been assessed as requiring.”

As the survey question asked about parent’s last request for support, interventions had not ended in some families and 20% parents replied that the outcome was not known as the work was “ongoing” or “too soon to tell.” Just five (10%) parents thought that the chosen intervention had been unhelpful. One parent wrote that the child refused to attend, and the others thought that the allocated post adoption worker lacked skills and understanding of adoptive family life.

All the parents were asked about their satisfaction with post adoption service (Figure 4), including the speed of response, time taken to start an assessment, the competence of the worker, the match of needs and services, time taken to provide services and the quality and sufficiency of support on a 0-10 scale.

Figure 4 Parent’s satisfaction with post adoption services



Base participants (132-146). Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

3.7 Most helpful support from the RAA

Parents were asked what the most helpful support had been they had received since the RAA had formed: 110 parents provided text responses. A handful of comments were from parents who wrote that they did not know what an RAA was or wrote that they had never received any adoption support. Parents wrote:

“We have a named caseworker, who has remained with us through the shift to becoming an RAA. This has been really helpful as we have been through an ASF provided clinical psychological assessment which then led into the current therapeutic provision which we now have. The social worker allocated to our family has been able to follow through from the report into accessing the right therapeutic support and has supported us in talking about our child's wider needs (engagement with CYPS, community paediatrics etc). Having a person who knows us makes a really big difference. Also, an excellent four-day training course – Therapeutic Crisis

Intervention for Families - which really changed how we were parenting our son, giving us greater confidence.”

“Being able to phone up directly an individual who you trusted and gain advice almost immediately.”

“Therapy for daughter and funding to help me stay at home.”

“Linking in with all the services to create a team around the child bringing in education psychology and adoption psychology. Accessing the adoption support fund.”

The majority wrote about the benefits of accessing the ASF funding, and the one-to-one support from their RAA adoption support social worker, the training courses and peer support events, buddy programmes provided by the RAA and financial support from the LA. Some parents named individual therapies as the most helpful support (e.g., DDP, Theraplay, and Family Therapy) or training courses such as the NVR training delivered by PAC-UK or the ‘Great Behaviour Breakdown’ training. Parents wrote about the importance of having a supportive and accessible social worker who listened and understood their concerns and could answer questions on their child’s history. They also appreciated referrals to other services such as to Head and Hearts⁵, occupational therapy, psychological services for attachment difficulties and referrals for specialist assessments e.g., neuropsychological assessments.

Whilst most parents felt that educational support had been insufficient, five parents wrote positively about being given strategies to help their child in school or the development of risk assessment and management plans (RAMP) for children displaying sexually harmful behaviour in school.

Agency facilitated letterbox support, peer support groups and social events with the opportunity to meet other adopters were also liked. Events such as family rambles, regular support groups, a group for those parenting teenagers, mothers and fathers’ groups were all mentioned. Parents wrote that the most helpful support was:

“The play group for adoptive families once every couple of months. Christmas party and summer picnic.” ...

“Monthly information sessions-some very informative sessions, beneficial to hear form other adoptive families.”

⁵ <https://www.headsandhearts.org/about>

“Workshops on different topics and through these meeting other adopters.”

“There is constant contact and offers of courses, meeting, family days etc. which is wonderful. At the moment, we have found the family days to be most fun and valuable.”

3.8 Unmet need and concerns

Parents were also asked about their concerns and gaps in RAA provision: 131 parents provided responses. They wanted the “basics done properly” and accessing information remained a problem, “Almost all information was provided very early on in terms of what could be available. No follow up and nothing to explain how to access or any entitlements.” Some adoptive parents felt that “the whole experience of seeking support is begging, being in crisis, is being fobbed off, and blamed” and earlier intervention was requested, “Early assessment and support at the very start of placement, in school, at home and in the community. Bespoke rather than generic support where needed, especially child to parent violence. Not waiting until crisis point is reached and it's too late.”

The main themes that parents wrote about were delays in accessing support, gaps in services and their own training need, especially in relation to using the letterbox service and talking about adoption with their child.

Difficulties in accessing the Adoption Support Fund and appropriate support

Parents wrote about their struggles to access the ASF, the lack of matched funding and interventions ending prematurely before the benefits could be properly evaluated. They wrote,

“Actual help to access ASF without a fight - we are all exhausted adoptive parents why is it all so hard! “

“All of our forms / paperwork about the placement, adoption order and ASF application were ignored and not dealt with for months. I could never get through on the phone and when we eventually got a visit, I was told that I had a reputation in the office for being a pain on the phone - all I ever tried to do was speak to someone about my children.”

“Refusal to help access ASF as no staff to be able to process requests. No help to understand what help we can get - we are

expected to guess what can be offered then be told if it is on the approved list. Then told can't access it. Response times poor and no one actually helps. They just say, "That sounds hard" - but no actual help."

"Support for single adopters, if the RAA match funded our ASF we would be in a much stronger position, but they will not match fund anyone, no matter what the level of need."

"The time from when support/therapy finished to the time our file was closed was too quick, there was no time taken to see if the therapy had really worked - which it hadn't, meaning that we still need help and need to start the process of getting it all over again."

To reduce delay one parent suggested that it should be possible to access therapy outside the RAA geographical boundaries "Just awaiting DDP - it's taken more than a year and hasn't started as RAA doesn't have many practitioners on their list of people to access. I would go outside ... but those practitioners are not on the RAA list." Some parents complained that although their ASF application had been accepted, they had to find their own therapist without the benefit of any advice, "We had to find our own play therapist - hard when you have no way of knowing who's good." Others complained that specific therapies were imposed without their involvement in the decision "Play therapy did not work very well in our particular case We did not have a chance to choose any particular service, it was provided. Our family was not handled as an entity."

Gaps in general adoption services and concerns about social work practice

Parents also wrote about inadequate general adoption support services provided by the RAA, social workers who had provided a poor service, and a lack of agency resources. They wrote,

"Inconsistency between social workers ... to the point where they directly contradicted each other."

Constant changes of social worker over the last 3 years, and therefore the constant need for reassessment."

"We were unvisited for 4 months between placement and adoption order. Visits should be at least every 2-4 weeks according to their own rules."

“We have had to chase adoption services for everything post adoption. Expenses for introductions were not received for 6 months, Letterbox contact was not set up for over 12 months ...It was a constant battle, and no-one wanted to take responsibility. Our Social worker, the Children's Social worker and the IRO all left so we had no support or channels of communication. There was meant to be contact with siblings, but we have heard nothing and are now pro-actively chasing this, as it is important especially for our eldest child who did live with them.”

A few parents wrote they had been upset and angered at the lack of sensitivity shown by professionals:

“When possible breach of identity was discovered the adoption social worker said that around 70% of birth families know exactly where their child is placed, so don't worry about it.”

“When the independent reviewing officer said my child has always been a funny looking kid.”

“Being told that my child was not ill enough to receive support for his ongoing needs.”

Some social events were criticised: “Christmas events when there's no food provided, no Father Christmas, no nothing!!!!” and training events that were inaccessible, “Family support workers who want to tick boxes but not actually DO anything telling us about courses that are run over a whole day, mid-week. Great idea but we both work, and no childcare means it's not possible to attend.”

Parents wrote that what they would like were: toddler groups, support groups for adopted young people, online support forums and emotional support while waiting for the adoption order especially when birth parents were contesting the order. Services for young people were described as lacking, particularly since After Adoption 's Talk Adoption helpline service ended when the agency went into administration.

Gaps in training

A major theme was gaps in training on the practicalities of using letterbox and talking with their child about adoption and the telling of difficult stories. Parents asked for more training on the management of contact. For example, writing,

“Letterbox contact - I'd like to know more about how to approach this. Are birth families getting support in reading/responding to my letter?”

How can I approach contact better to try and minimise difficulties for my son further down the line?”

Earlier we described the concerns about the quality of children’s life story books. Parents felt they also needed additional advice or training in how to use the book and how to tell the story. Parents wrote,

“All parents would benefit from training. Our daughter’s story is so difficult and if badly delivered could really damage her emotional health and sense of self.”

“We got little support with how to support the children when their birth mother died and no information as to how she died. We had to get the death certificate ourselves to understand the cause of death.”

“I would like more subject matter and info on handling things in the correct way for teenage children.”

“No-one has really said how to explain and start conversations.”

Practical advice and training were also wanted on how to manage violent behaviour, trauma, and separation anxiety.

Lack of respite

A few parents wrote that ‘out of home’ respite was unavailable even at times of crisis. Parents wanted more ‘in home’ respite too and support to enable children to attend holiday clubs or PGL type activities.

“I think more adopters would benefit from regular respite and or a babysitting service to give them a break. Often our children are challenging so we need to know the people babysitting or providing respite can cope with the challenge.”

Lack of joint working with other agencies

Parents whose children had complex needs wanted more help accessing health, CAMHS and educational services. Two parents wrote they had been refused any help in completing their children’s disability living allowance applications and many others reported lack of joined up working between the RAA, the LA, CAMHS and educational services.

“Very poor education specialist support. We have had to fight for EHCP etc all by ourselves.”

“We haven't received any guidance on schooling or given knowledge on how the funding works if extra educational help is required. Our little one is due to start nursery in September 2020 and this information would be helpful to know and a valuable tool.”

“My son's education was completely destroyed. He will never attend a formal educational establishment - out of school since mid-year 5 and not on roll.”

Parents commented on the lack of understanding in nurseries and schools on the effects of trauma and the lack of RAA support in funding educational assessments or providing advocacy during tribunal hearings, and in preparing children's ECHPs.

“We requested support with moving my adopted son to a specialist provision education setting. The virtual school could not help, and the adoption support team could not provide an educational psychologist to support with assessments. He currently doesn't have a school placement named on his EHCP for the year 6/7 transfer.”

“[We needed] support during periods of exclusion from school in terms of childcare, home educating, and finding a new school.”

3.9 Comparison of support services before and after RAAs

Parents were asked if they had noted improvements to support services since their agency became part of a RAA. On a scale of 0 to 10 parents were asked to rate different elements of adoption support services before and after their agency became a RAA. The elements were timeliness of assessments and provision of services, competence of the worker, match of needs and services, their quality and sufficiency. Parent's recall may have been affected by the passage of time, as all the RAAs had been operating between one and three years at the time of the survey. Sixty parents provided responses. The majority could not identify improvements, although the competence of the worker showed slight improvement. A few (n= 9) thought that services had deteriorated (Figure 3) with the biggest decline in timeliness of assessments. There was no statistically significant difference in ratings before or after the formation of RAAs.⁶

⁶ Paired t-tests there was no statistically significant difference in the means on each of the 0 to 10 scales.

Figure 5: Elements of post order adoption support services rated as good to excellent before and after the formation of RAAs



Base: participants (60). Source: Post adoption support survey (January 2020-March 2020)

Parents were concerned that they no longer knew who to contact writing:

“Since the centralisation I’m not sure where departments are or contact details. I am also not sure of support out there for us anymore.” ...

“When the individual agencies provided support, I felt I had an excellent relationship with my social worker and could rely on her support. Now it is very hard to contact her, our case is repeatedly closed - despite my son having ongoing complex needs and I feel like a nuisance just trying to access the help he needs”. ...

“It wasn’t brilliant before, but it was OK and local. Knew who to go to and they knew us. Atrocious since, not enough staff and support is practically non-existent.” ... “Any support in accessing anything fell apart when the adoptions got regionalised.”

There were concerns that support groups and training were no longer accessible since regionalisation because of the distance parents had to travel: “The parenting groups and things are never at an accessible time or location- with it being a regional agency most meetings which would be suitable are a couple of hours drive away” “Support groups - mostly held in evenings an hour’s drive away so unable to attend.” A few parents thought there was less flexibility in service delivery since their agency became a RAA

writing, “There used to be more holiday time meet ups prior to the RAA for children. These were really useful.” ... “Previous adoption services had a bit of budget to be used for social care, this has now gone. ...”

Parents wrote about services and standards declining with fewer staff and services and RAAs being less connected to local services.

“Issues with my council refusing services open to other children, just because my child is adopted. The move to a regional body seems to make some areas of the council think they can abdicate responsibility for my child, as they think it is the regional bodies responsibility to provide the service, even though the regional body has not been commissioned to provide it. Words fail me....” ...

“The support services are really a buffer between the local authority and the parents, who are often caught in the middle, because the local authority no longer provides the services, such as respite.”

“RAA do not readily liaise/access wider family support services provided by LA. In our case the RAA should have triggered crisis support team from the LA & intervened with practical support sooner.”

“Overall, the agency made great promises, but the reality is when you seek support, they try to discourage you and talk about budget cuts ... They just fob you off.”

Example of an adoptive parent’s difficulties accessing support.

Referral was made in 2018 to Safeguarding after an escalation in the child’s aggressive and violent behaviour. Parents were promised support, but they were not contacted, and the safeguarding referral had no response. Child’s school made a second referral in 2019 safeguarding meeting was called but the safeguarding team did not turn up. The child and family then had six assessments: one conducted by MARAC [Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference], two different assessments completed by social workers, three further assessments by a family support manager, a family support worker, and a paediatrician. Some support was received via the ASF, and a further referral was made to CAMHS by the ASF funded therapist. Aggressive behaviour continued but CAMHS declined to accept the referral. Every professional involved had requested CAMHS to be involved- but they declined despite child now having the added complexity of a ADHD diagnosis.

There were also concerns that the availability of the ASF funding was used as a reason for CAMHS to decline referrals. One parent provided a detailed timeline of poor case management and the family's attempts to get help for their child and that is set out in the box below.

Improvements

Nineteen (32%) of the 60 parents, who provided a comparison of services before and after the RAA had formed, rated support services as having improved or felt their agency had always provided excellent services. "This agency has always provided excellent support over 10 years." The third of parents who were pleased with services, had children whose average age was 12 years old (range 2- 18yrs) and were receiving services from each of the four RAAs in the sample. There was no statistical difference in the characteristics of the parents who were satisfied.

These parents left comments highlighting and praising the work of individual social workers or therapists. They wrote, "[RAA] have fabulous, dedicated social workers and it's thanks to them that I am mum to two gorgeous girls x" ... "Both [names of workers] have provided us with support which has given us all a much better quality of life!" ... "Cannot praise highly enough the help and support given by [name]."

Unlike the parents who were dissatisfied, the parents had been able to access the support services they wanted. These parents were typically those who wanted generic services such as support groups. They wrote, "[RAA] has so many in-house support opportunities. We have regular coffee mornings as well as adoption support groups in the evening." ... "We attend parent coffee mornings for adopters and their young children which are very welcome and really good particularly for those who have just adopted. We have good experience of letter box contact with our Adoption agency. We attend Adopted Children's Christmas party and summer picnics and regularly get invited to other events. Very pleased with [name of RAA] and continuing support from the Social workers and their administrators." ... In the last 12- 18 months- have been getting emails about monthly talks/ presentations, about various topics- including life story work. Have attended a few, very helpful."

A few parents made a favourable comparison between RAA provided services and those they had received from the local authority ... "[name of RAA] seems to be getting it right with post adoption support" "It feels like it's more efficient than previously when just a local authority." ... "Our agency has gone above and beyond for us, unfortunately the same cannot be said for our child's agency [the child's local authority]. There does not seem to be an overall standard!" ... "No support was offered from child's authority. Now my child is under our local team, more work helping her understand who she is and who we are as an adoptive family."

Chapter 4 Conclusions

The surveys on post adoption support were completed by 208 adoptive parents from four RAAs. All the surveys were completed before the national lockdown in March 2020 and therefore the surveys reported experiences of support before the pandemic affected service delivery. The aim of the survey was to understand the experiences of adoptive parents who had requested or used adoption support services.

There was little evidence from the survey that support services had improved. There were the same complaints from adoptive parents as have been reported in previous studies and reviews of adoption⁷. The complaints were of a lack of information, delays in assessments and the provision of services and poor social work practice. There was praise for interventions once they were received and individual social workers and therapists were named and congratulated on their work. However, there were also many reports of lengthy delays and waiting lists.

Parents' perceptions were that the delays in assessments and provision of services were the result of staff shortages, reduction in resources, and inadequate administrative data systems where documents and requests were 'lost', emails failed to work, and parents could only contact agencies during working hours. The use of paper-based systems led to duplication of effort such as repeat ASF application assessments and the life story book being restarted or having to be redone by the adoption social worker.

Some parents thought that services had deteriorated since their agency became a RAA. Those parents wrote that they could no longer attend support groups or training sessions, as they were held many miles from their homes rather than locally. Peer support is known to be a very important element of adoption support⁸. The friendships formed during the preparation groups and adopter support groups can be invaluable. Mentoring provided by other adoptive parents can be very effective in helping families through crises. Any practice that reduces access to peer support is likely to increase the stress experienced by adoptive families, increase costs and the need for support from the agency.

While all those approved as an adoptive parent by RAA had received information on support services, there were adoptive parents who had been approved before the RAAs had formed who had not received information on support services, were unsure of their

⁷ E.g.,

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219661/Further_20Action_20on_20Adoption.pdf

⁸

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/625373/Cornerstone_Adoption_Support_Programme.pdf

<https://www.coram.org.uk/sites/default/files/Cornerstone%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report%20%2806.02.17%29.pdf>

eligibility, and did not know who to contact. RAAs have responsibility for providing support to all those in their region and therefore efforts should be made to ensure information goes to everyone, including those who have not contacted the agency for some time.

Most of the support described by parents as being provided by the RAA was through applications to the ASF. The ASF provided much needed funding for therapeutic interventions and when received most parents spoke highly of the beneficial impact. However, there was evidence that accessing the ASF had proved problematic with delays at every point of the process. Some parents were unaware of their right to ask for an assessment of need. For some families, months had gone by before their child received the intervention that had been agreed and the delays were said to have had a detrimental effect on children's lives: transition between schools were more difficult, permanent school exclusions had occurred and parents reported that children had expressed their distress through self-harming or other concerning behaviours.

The communication between the RAA and LA and other partners was reported by respondents as fragmented. Parents reported poor links between the RAA and the virtual school, a lack of support from educational psychologists and a lack of knowledge in the RAA on the making of EHCPs. A few families who had been in crisis felt they would have benefitted from the wider services (e.g., respite, family support) provided by the LA but thought that the RAA and LAs did not have a joined-up service. The LA also has the responsibility for the provision of children's life story books and there were many complaints from adoptive parents of either not receiving a book or the contents being inaccurate and of poor quality.

At the time the surveys were completed, the four RAAs had been operating between two to three years. It may be that RAAs focused first on improving recruitment and placement and that support has received less attention. The impact of the pandemic may also have changed the administrative systems for the better, forcing staff to move more quickly to electronic systems than they otherwise would have done. Nevertheless, the feedback from many adoptive parents was that information on their child's history, information on available services and timely provision of appropriate support was inadequate and still needed to be improved. The complexities and challenges for the heads of the RAAs in working with the multiple LAs within its geographical boundaries (Children's Services and the virtual schools), health services whose boundaries are not coterminous and family justice boards who also have different boundaries should not be under-estimated.

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Department
for Education

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Reference: DFE- RR1154

ISBN: 978-1-83870-282-3

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