Evaluation of regional adoption agencies

Research Report - Inception and Scoping Report

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Summary

This summary presents the findings from the scoping phase (January – May 2018) of the evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) which is based on extensive qualitative research. The inception and scoping phase provides the background context to RAAs, the models being developed and an assessment of progress in implementation. It also details future plans for the evaluation. The inception phase involved:

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

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

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

The evaluation runs from January 2018 to December 2021. Over the next three years, the evaluation will involve five key strands:

- Longitudinal research of RAAs;

- Longitudinal analysis of national adoption data from 2014-2020;

- Analysis of cost data;

- Analysis;

- Outputs, learning and dissemination.

Throughout we refer to RAAs in the following ways:

- **RAAs**: All DfE recognised RAAs involved in the research to date, including live RAAs and RAA projects.

- **Live RAAs**: RAAs which had launched at the time of the research and are operational (also known as the Leaders Group).

- **RAA projects**: RAAs which had not launched at the time of the research and are largely within Cohorts 2 and 3. Once the RAA head of service is appointed, they join the leaders group'.

- **Leaders Group; Cohort 2; Cohort 3:** The Department for Education (The Department) have provided RAAs with tailored support and sought to obtain

their input on key issues. Arrangements have varied over time, at the time of writing, there were three groups: Leaders Group; Cohort 2 and Cohort 3 with Cohorts 2 & 3 meeting together before dividing later in the day. Membership of these groups changes as RAA projects move toward 'go live'.

In spring 2018, 10 projects were live after one to two years of planning. Typically, RAAs were taking a phased approach, which looks set to continue with a further three RAA projects due to launch in autumn 2018. The remaining RAAs will become operational in 2019 through into 2020.

Background

National statistics (DfE, 2017[1]) show that at March 31st 2017 there were 72,670 children who were looked after in England: 2,520 of these children were placed for adoption and a further 380 children were in early permanence placements (i.e. concurrent planning, fostering for adoption). Adoption concerns only a small proportion of children who are unable to safely return to their families, but they are some of the most vulnerable children in society. When the adoption reforms began (DfE, 2011[2]) there were over 6,000 children waiting to be placed for adoption; many of whom had been waiting years. There were delays and poor practice in every part of the adoption system and great variation in local authority (LA) performance (DfE, 2013[3]). The reforms have seen improvements in the system with delays reducing, early permanence approaches becoming more mainstream, and the Adoption Support Fund[4] (ASF) developed to meet children's therapeutic needs. Nevertheless, the adoption system has struggled to respond to changes in demand.

The regionalisation reforms as set out in *Regionalising Adoption*[5] intend to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services by creating 25-30 regional agencies. The expectation is that larger organisations should be able to pool resources and share best practice resulting in: targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters; speedier matching with a larger more diverse pool of adopters; and an improved range of adoption support services.

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[1] Department for Education (2017). *Children looked after in England (including adoption), year ending 31 March 2017*. SFR 50/2017
[2] Department for Education (2011) *Breaking down the barriers to adoption*. Crown
[3] Department for Education (2013). *Further Action on Adoption: Finding more loving homes*. Crown
[4] See: http://www.adoptionsupportfund.co.uk/
[5] Department for Education (June 2015) *Regionalising Adoption*.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

Key findings

Models

LAs were free to decide the size and makeup of the RAAs and choose from one of four broad RAA models[6]:

- Single LA hosting on behalf of the other LAs
- Joint venture between the LAs and VAAs creating a new VAA
- Joint venture between the LAs and VAAs under a local authority trading company (LATC)
- Outsourcing service delivery to an existing VAA

In spring 2018 a small number of RAAs were in the initial stages of development, the RAA models were fluid and RAA projects were subject to change post-launch. However, their apparent differences meant we could place each RAA (involving between three and ten LAs) on a spectrum based on the extent to which services and responsibilities were centralised. At the far end of the spectrum sit the 'LA hosted – centralised' RAAs (3); followed by those setting up joint ventures / local authority trading companies (LATCs (2)); then 'LA hosted – hub and spoke' models (by far the most common approach (14 RAAs)); and at the other end of the spectrum sit decentralised RAAs (2).

The overriding factor that influenced LAs and VAAs choosing to work together was historic relationships. Geography also played a role as did, in a small number of cases performance of each adoption service. One of the main factors that influenced the decision over which model to adopt was the degree to which the LAs were willing to each take on, or give away, control and risk. To a large degree, LAs reported choosing to adopt a model whereby most adoption services remained within LAs because they took their statutory duties in relation to adoption very seriously, and were uncomfortable with responsibility for this moving outside of a LA.

Progress to date

There was a mixed picture of whether RAAs and RAA projects were on track with agreed plans. At the time of the fieldwork, some of the live RAAs had met their target launch date or agreed to take a phased approach to 'go live'. The interviews show that in these areas they were able to build on the strength of previous relationships from an established position of trust, which meant that individuals and organisations felt better prepared and more willing to help each other to do the best for children as an RAA. This made for

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[6] Department for Education (June 2015) Regionalising Adoption.

speedier and smoother negotiations. The interviews found that 'go live' was generally somewhere between three to six months behind planned launch dates because there were challenges in agreeing key aspects of RAA project models, such as hosting responsibilities. Further delays happened when the challenges centred on even bigger decisions like what form the RAA project should take.

Go-live

Projects often talked about 'go live' in relation to broad changes they were making that involved people, systems and resources and the new 'front door'. The interviews show that RAAs viewed key markers of 'go live' as an established public presence and profile, and a single point of entry often supported by centralised marketing (e.g. branding, strapline), centralised recruitment roles and a functioning RAA website. To 'go live' it was also necessary to have overarching structures and systems in place for governance, legal, Human Resources (HR) and Information Communication Technology (ICT), as well as model-specific aspects such as joint panels and training plans.

The interviews demonstrate the importance of "breathing space and adjustment time". A number of the early implementers said it took around six months for the new service to "bed in".

Challenges and success in launching the RAAs

At the time the research was undertaken, with more than half of RAA projects yet to go live, there was a tendency for interviewees to focus on the challenges associated with establishing live RAAs when asked about what was working well and less well so far. An overarching challenge raised was balancing the structural change the move to RAAs required with the focus on practice to improve the quality of adoption services. In the planning, 'go live' and wider implementation of the RAA, this tension was ongoing as were decisions around what would be in and out of RAAs, for example whether to include SGOs.

RAAs were experiencing ongoing challenges around securing buy in and consensus from participating LAs (including elected members, senior staff and practitioners); particularly where services previously performed well because many LAs involved could not always see the benefits the RAA model would bring. They wondered what they stood to gain in terms of performance, sharing good practice or financial efficiencies. Staffing RAAs proved difficult at times, for example when recruiting to the Head of Service role. Staff were not always willing or able to travel the distance required to RAA hubs. There were reports of staff anxieties about losing or changing the identity of their local adoption service, and what the new service and culture would look like, and there was an expectation that this would take 12 to 18 months to establish.

Interviewees also reported challenges around agreeing financial models. Some were concerned that RAAs would cost more, although others were confident there were opportunities for cost savings. There was concern about financial risks for LAs that were hosting. There was a view that there were more "financial losers" than had been originally expected and that instead of bringing savings and efficiencies for LAs and VAAs, adoption services would actually cost more. Whilst several RAAs reported working within the "financial envelope" they had been given to set up the RAA, others believed the funding was insufficient. There was a common view that the overall set-up costs were high. Some LAs reported that they were now contributing proportionately more than they were spending on adoption and unpicking the costs to get to this point had been extremely difficult. There were cases where partners have reached agreements, for example to ring-fence their existing budgets for the next two years, but this took a lot of time and energy.

There were ongoing challenges around developing shared systems for IT, HR and legalities, regarding differential pay, secondments, terms and conditions and Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE). Developing commissioning arrangements also proved difficult for some. In some areas, joint Practice and Improvement Fund (PIF) bids had been developed and funded and were seen as an excellent way to promote joint working between the RAAs and VAAs. However, other interviewees were concerned at what they perceived as a risk to their services, such as reduced sharing of best practice and innovation and threats to business continuity.

In addition to the challenges stakeholders were facing at the time, they were also concerned about potential forthcoming challenges or negative unintended consequences. These included: structural disconnection of adoption services from the rest of children's services; inconsistent practice around Adopter Voice; and negative impact on the sustainability of VAAs.

Despite these challenges, several aspects were working well, especially where there was strong joint working and staff engagement and they were starting to see some early advantages. The interviews show RAAs have offered an opportunity to share what is working well, develop new ideas and provide an impetus to improve the quality of poorer performing services. The strength of previous partnership working has influenced the ease with which partners have been able implement the RAA programme. When asked what was working well, most RAAs referenced partnership working as a facilitating factor and improved partnership working as an early outcome. Building on strong foundations, the process of becoming an RAA has brought some LAs closer in a very positive way, creating a sense of cohesion and perceived mutual benefits for staff, adopters and children.

Several RAAs highlighted examples where their efforts to engage operational staff in the development and implementation of RAAs had proved empowering, yet at the same time, retaining and engaging staff has been a challenge. As a result, middle managers and frontline staff have gained ownership over the process when they perhaps did not have before, remained in post, and bought in to the change process. RAAs have engaged staff in various ways depending upon the model and governance structures; these include mixed project teams comprising strategic and operational staff, separate operational boards, and task and finish/working groups, all of which interviewees said were contributing towards a smoother transition to RAAs. The interviews show that it has been important for staff to understand the rationale for the move, how RAAs should help to address the issues that local areas were facing (e.g. in relation to adopter sufficiency) and their belief that it would ultimately mean better outcomes for the children. In models where staff were TUPE'd across they were positive about the benefits, such as finding more support as part of a bigger specialist team and more regular supervision.

Emerging impact

At this stage, there were anecdotal examples of positive impacts on four areas: speed of matching, recruiting adopters, adopter support, processes and timeliness, which the longitudinal data analysis will explore. Some of the live RAAs in the Leaders Group outlined where they were starting to see early successes and there was a view at a national level that there are "exemplars that others can look up to", which the evaluation will explore further in future.

There were several reported examples of increasing numbers of adoption panels leading to more timely adoption decisions. There were some indications that RAAs had started to have a positive effect on the number of adopters recruited, but the data is not yet available at RAA-level or national level and will be analysed as part of the evaluation in future. There was evidence from the interviews that RAAs were already leading to practices that were more consistent. Examples given included the development of a consistent adoption support offer, consistent approaches in matching panels and disruption meetings, and the development of adoption packs. In several RAAs, interviewees described adopter feedback and engagement as being positive. Staff coming together was perceived to have enabled the pooling of ideas and expertise, which is central to the programme's future, as is an increased emphasis on performance management.

Critical success factors

Critical success factors for RAAs in spring 2018 included strong, consistent and effective leadership, taking a phased and thoughtful approach together as a partnership and placing sufficient emphasis on changing culture and identity. Live RAAs from the Leaders

Group emphasised the importance of working to create an RAA culture that all could identify with.

Effectiveness of support with RAA development and outstanding support needs

The interviewees suggest that support and guidance from the Department has improved over time and new features such as the leadership development programme are welcome. However, RAAs would like a greater steer on some fundamental aspects such as the Ofsted inspection requirements, more opportunities for sharing learning, and more clarity on the coaching role.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this report has provided a snapshot of stakeholders' experiences in the first steps towards regionalising adoption. It paints a picture of frustration and challenge in the early stages of implementation, but also of hope as some RAAs have worked through the difficulties and have seen the first signs of greater collaboration, consistency and improved practice and associated benefits. The picture will evolve as the RAAs develop further and more RAA projects become live RAAs. Our next evaluation report, after we have undertaken in-depth case studies, analysis of the SSDA903 and Adoption & Special Guardianship Leadership Board statistics and analysis of RAA cost data, will provide further information on this evolution and impact.

Chapter one - Introduction

Our first report on regional adoption agencies (RAAs) presents the findings from the scoping stage of the evaluation. We draw on interviews with RAAs, local authorities (LAs) newly involved or not yet part of RAA projects, voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs), adoptive parents (Adopter Voice) and national stakeholders. Quotes have been made non-attributable to ensure that confidentiality is maintained.

In this chapter, we provide the background to the policy, a summary of the evaluation aims and objectives, method, timeline and work completed to date. Chapter two outlines the different RAA models. Progress to date is discussed in Chapter three. Chapter four discusses the effectiveness of support for RAA development and support needs. Lastly, in Chapter five we draw the preceding chapters together to conclude on the evaluation findings to date. In the Annex, we set out the implications of the findings from this scoping stage for the national evaluation.

Throughout it is important to recognise the fluid and evolving nature of the RAA programme development and to interpret the findings as reflections in spring 2018. RAAs continue to evolve as local authorities and partners move towards and beyond 'go live'. The longitudinal nature of the evaluation will enable us to examine the impact and effectiveness of these changes over time.

In the report we refer to the RAAs in the following ways:

- **RAAs**: All DfE recognised RAAs involved in the research to date, including live RAAs and RAA projects

- **Live RAAs**: RAAs which had launched at the time of the research and are operational (also known as the Leaders Group)

- **RAA projects**: RAAs which had not launched at the time of the research and are largely within Cohorts 2 and 3. Once the RAA head of service is appointed, they join the leaders group'.

- **Leaders Group; Cohort 2; Cohort 3:** The Department for Education (The Department) have provided RAAs with tailored support and sought to obtain their input on key issues. Arrangements have varied over time, at the time of writing, there were three groups: Leaders Group; Cohort 2 and Cohort 3 with Cohorts 2 & 3 meeting together before dividing later in the day. Membership of these groups changes as RAA projects move toward 'go live'.

The majority of the findings reported here are drawn from baseline visits to 23 RAAs (including live RAAs and RAA projects).

Regionalisation policy

Background context

National statistics (DfE, 2017[7]) show that, at March 31st 2017, there were about 72,670 children who were looked after in England: 2,520 of these children were placed for adoption and a further 380 children were in early permanence placements (i.e. concurrent planning, fostering for adoption). In the year April 1st 2016-31st March 2017, 4,350 previously looked after children had an adoption order made.

Adoption concerns only a small proportion of children who are unable to safely return to their families, but they are some of the most vulnerable children in society. Adoption usually offers the benefits of family life throughout childhood and beyond into adulthood. It provides the opportunity for secure relationships to develop and the chance of developmental recovery for adopted children; the majority of whom have been maltreated and/or suffered significant trauma (Selwyn. et al., 2015[8]).

When the adoption reforms began (DfE, 2011[9]) there were over 6,000 children waiting to be placed for adoption; many of whom had been waiting years. Delays were occurring at every point in the system resulting in children's life chances being detrimentally affected. Reducing delay is important because with every year of delay the chance of being adopted reduces by 20%; the likelihood of moves in foster care increase; children become distressed; and emotional and behavioural difficulties are more likely to emerge (Selwyn et al., 2006[10]). Before the reforms prospective adopters were also complaining that they too waited years to be assessed or were rejected because of trivial reasons. Those who had adopted a child felt abandoned and blamed if they later asked for help with their child's difficulties and promised adoption support did not materialise (Selwyn et al., 2015). There were delays and poor practice in every part of the adoption system and great variation in local authority performance (DfE, 2013[11]).

There were many reasons for poor practice. At the start of the reform programme there were about 180 adoption agencies in England with most agencies operating at a very small scale. Whilst some adoption agencies operated in consortia, there was limited budget sharing or strategic planning. Consequently, agencies responded slowly to changes in demand with recruitment activities being targeted ineffectively and

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[7] Department for Education (2017). *Children looked after in England (including adoption), year ending 31 March 2017.* SFR 50/2017
[8] Selwyn J., Meakings S., and Wijedasa, D. (2015). *Beyond the Adoption Orde*r. London, BAAF.
[9] Department for Education (2011) *Breaking down the barriers to adoption*. Crown
[10] Selwyn J., Sturgess, W., Quinton, D. and Baxter, C. 2006). *Costs and Outcomes of non-infant adopti*ons. .London, BAAF.
[11] Department for Education (2013). *Further Action on Adoption: Finding more loving homes.* Crown

inefficiently. Support services were under-developed, reactive and not designed to meet the life-long nature of adoption. The reforms have seen improvements in the system with delays reducing, early permanence approaches becoming more mainstream, and the Adoption Support Fund[12] (ASF) developed to meet children's therapeutic needs.[13]

Nevertheless, the adoption system has struggled to respond to changes in demand. Although delays have reduced, at March 31st 2017 there were still 2,470 children waiting to be found a family, of whom 27% had been waiting for 18 months or longer (ALB 2018)[14]. Research on the reasons why children wait has highlighted the mismatch between children's needs and prospective adopters' preferences (Dance et al), social workers preferences for 'same race' placements and adoption by couples rather than single parents (Selwyn et al 2010). Perceptions amongst the sector[15] on the reasons why the number of prospective adopters has declined are:

- negative reports of adoption in the press and social media;

- a perception that there are no available children;

- demographic changes (ageing population, more people living alone, housing costs); and

- the availability of special guardianship orders (SGOs), which have increased rapidly since their introduction in 2005 and are now nearly on parity with adoption orders.

Regionalisation reforms

The regionalisation reforms[16] are intended to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services and create 25-30 regional agencies. It is hypothesised that larger organisations should be able to pool resources resulting in:

- targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters;

- speedier matching with a larger more diverse pool of adopters; and

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[12] See: http://www.adoptionsupportfund.co.uk/

[13] Selwyn J., Harris P., Quinton D., Nawaz S., Wijedasa D. & Wood M (2015) Pathways to Permanence for Black, Asian and Mixed Ethnicity Children. London BAAF

[14] Adoption Leadership Board (2018) Adoption Leadership Board headline measures and business intelligence Quarter 4 2016 to 2017 update

[15] Such as ALB (2017) What does our data tell us about what is happening in the adoption system?; ALB (2014) Impact of court judgements on adoption; and Masson, J, 2017, 'Disruptive Judgments'. Child and Family Law Quarterly, vol 29., pp. 401-422

[16] Department for Education (June 2015) Regionalising Adoption. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

- an improved range of adoption support services and regulatory compliance.

Overall, the RAAs are expected to provide, in the longer term[17]:

- better outcomes for children and adopters;

- reduced practice and performance inconsistencies,

- more effective strategic management of the service delivering efficiency savings; and

- a culture of excellence in adoption practice through strong partnerships with the VAA sector.

In **Figure 1** we provide a Theory of Change for the RAA policy, accompanied by the assumptions and risks. This was created by the evaluation team, based on the policy objectives as set out in *Regionalising Adoption*, and comments made during evaluation interviews, evaluation Research Advisory Group and RAA steering groups on the rationale for the programme and how interviewees believed the RAAs would achieve these aims. Whilst, there has been significant investment and improvements made to adoption services, the overall response was variable and there was room for improvement. Therefore, throughout the course of the evaluation we will test the Theory of Change, including the assumptions and identified risks. We will assess any necessary changes, reflect and report on what this means for the programme design and future roll out to 2020.

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[17] http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC16_Thurs_A.pdf

Figure 1: RAA Theory of Change as at April 2018

Rationale / need

The adoption system has undergone substantial reform in recent years, resulting in areas of positive progress. Despite this, some challenges still remained:
- Delays within system reducing children's chances of being adopted, detrimentally affecting children's life chances
- Insufficient numbers of adopters recruited & assessed, especially for hard to place children
- Insufficient range of adoption support & infectively delivered
- Inconsistent practice across LAs
- Inefficient delivery of adoption support due to small scale of some adoption agencies
- Poor & under-developed commissioning practices

Inputs

Direct & indirect resources LAs, VAAs & Adopter Voice

National support including:
- Grant
- Guidance
- Coaching
- Support groups
- Leadership programme

Outputs

Creation of Regional Adoption Agencies, including:
- Pooling of resources & budgets between partners
- Shared back office functions
- Sharing of adopters
- Possible movement of staff into new teams
- Joint delivery & commissioning of services
- Management Board

Results

Greater & improved collaboration at regional level, with focus on spreading best practice – 'learning from the best' in RAA

More accountability – i.e. single line of accountability via Head of Service in RAA plus adoption is sole focus in OFSTED inspections (as opposed to many functions within LA)

Greater sharing of data & information

Increase in targeted marketing & recruitment activities

More specialised & knowledgeable staff – either because staff working solely on adoption or commissioning of more specialist services – increasing staff morale

Social workers able to access wider pool of adopters

Improvements are shared with LAs

More effective commissioning, greater quality & range of, & more consistent, services that are able to meet demand

Stronger leadership & more effective strategic planning & management of services

Adoption is given higher profile & focus

Outcomes

Improved adoption ecosystem, including corporate parenting & permanency planning

Improved accessibility, quality & range of adoption support services

Speedier & better matches, especially for hard to place children

Larger & more diverse pool of adopters able to meet needs of children placed for adoption

Better adopter experience for everyone, including children, leading to fewer disruptions

More adoptions take place for whom it is right

Reduced costs for state

Effective & efficient scale of operation

Impact

Better outcomes for children & adopters

Theory of Change assumptions

- There is sufficient support (from the Department and LA) and resources (financial and staff-related) including health and legal services and the courts at a local level for the changes to be implemented.

- There is sufficient buy-in within the RAAs to ensure changes are implemented, and done so voluntarily.

- Good levels of partnership working and collaboration at all levels in the RAA, and between RAA and wider adoption system.

- The correct issues were identified.

Theory of Change risks

- Regulations and other factors prevent VAAs and ASAs from partnering in RAAs, resulting in less sharing of best practice and reduced innovation.

- Financial constraints lead to RAAs placing more children / and or using services in-house, reducing choices in matching & support services.

- Adopters not having a central role in some RAAs may create more inconsistencies.

- Creation of RAAs interferes too much, resulting in reduced quality of services, especially recruitment.

- Staff instability and turnover.

- Creation of RAAs require large amount of resource which risks negative effect on services delivered for children. Could also lead to cuts to adoption services.

- 'Ring-fencing' of adoption services via the RAA reduces ability to transfer money between adoption services and other parts of Children's Services system, leading to inefficiencies, higher costs and lack of ability to meet peaks in demand.

- Removal of adoption staff out of LAs weakens links between social workers in LAs and practitioners in RAAs, diminishing quality of communication and support.

- Movement of expertise from LA to RAA risks negative effect on activities that remain within LA e.g. making of adoption recommendations.

- RAA creates silo working between adoption services in the RAA and other services in the wider ecosystem, including other parts of adoption where e.g. SGOs not incorporated.

- Less accountability because Members in individual LAs have less oversight.

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

Evaluation aims and objectives

The overarching aim of the evaluation is to assess the impact of RAAs on improving the delivery of adoption services.

There are three main objectives:

- To understand the RAAs in further detail, including what models RAAs are adopting:

- To understand what impact these changes are having on 4 main areas:

    - Reducing unnecessary delay in **matching** and placing children with adopters

    - The sufficiency of local and national adopter **recruitment**

    - The provision of Adoption **support as defined in regulation**

    - Efficiencies and **cost savings**: and

- To explore the effectiveness of the local plan in implementing each RAA in making progress towards achievement of the desired outcomes.

Method overview

The evaluation runs from January 2018 to December 2021. The inception and scoping phase from January to May 2018 that informed this report is described in detail below. **Table 1** lists the overall research objectives and the key tasks that will help to answer these.

Table 2: Research objectives and key tasks

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

Over the next three years, the evaluation will involve five key strands:

1. Longitudinal research of RAAs, including:

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

- *Annual telephone interviews with the other RAAs not involved in the case studies* (both launched and in development) to understand delivery models and plans, assess outcomes and explore learning.

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

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

  2. Longitudinal analysis of national adoption data from 2014-2020 to understand the short- and medium-term impact of the RAAs on matching, adopter recruitment and provision of support to adoptive families, comparing the speed of matching[18] pre-RAAs to post-RAAs. This includes a counterfactual analysis and longitudinal analysis of Management Information (MI) data. The counterfactual analysis will aim to assess what would have happened to adoption outcomes without the introduction of a RAA using a quasi-experimental design focussing on the timeliness of matching. We will implement child-level propensity score matching (PSM), using historical cases as a comparison group, to assess the impact of RAAs. To strengthen any causal claims of RAAs we will also explore the use of interrupted time-series (ITS) and multiple-baseline (MB) designs at the LA/RAA-level. In addition to analysing administrative data, we will also analyse the Management Information (MI) gathered by the RAAs to assess the effectiveness of implementing the RAAs, including progress and impact on wider elements of the adoption system and progress against local aims and objectives.

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

3. Analysis of cost data as part of the case study research to explore efficiency and effectiveness. Cost efficiency measures the input or resources devoted to each standardised unit of output (or vice versa). In this context, cost efficiency will be judged as the average cost per adoption, and will investigate the most efficient way of securing adoptions through each of the models. In addition, cost-effectiveness analysis will also be undertaken based on the timeliness and quality of matching, which will be collected through children looked after datasets.

4. Analysis:

To analyse the data, we will use a Framework approach to thematic analysis to compare and contrast the views of different interviewees within each RAA using a structured grid. This will be organised into two distinct phases - data management and data interpretation. The Project Manager, Director and subject experts will draw upon the topic guides and early stages of fieldwork to develop a framework of themes and sub-themes organised around the key research questions. We will review these as the fieldwork progresses. The data from the field notes will be summarised and synthesised under the headings and sub headings within the framework, alongside illustrative quotes. This will allow us to establish the degree to which these different data sources support or refute each other and allow us to present a consolidated view from each area.

The data interpretation phase will involve synthesising the findings across the multiple sets of interviewees in each RAA and across case study areas, identifying codes and categorising the data using qualitative software (Nvivo). We will search for similarities, differences and any other patterns occurring in the data in relation to the key variables linked to the typology developed during the scoping phase. We will review the typology as the fieldwork progresses.

The annual longitudinal analysis of national adoption data will involve descriptive analysis and econometric techniques (e.g. multi-level regression analysis and latent growth trajectory modelling) to assess changes over time and causal impacts.
As well as examining individual and overall RAA performance, we will also compare the performance between the different RAAs. The analysis will help our understanding of whether type, size and structure of an RAA is associated with performance. Our analysis will explore if different types of RAA are excelling in recruiting, matching and having stable placements. A particular focus of the analysis will be to understand if certain RAAs have more or less success with hard to place children.

The findings will be triangulated and, using the qualitative research, we will apply Contribution Analysis, to help explain the result of longitudinal data analysis at a more granular level, and to assess the extent to which changes in the data can be attributed

to the introduction of the RAA to build a credible 'performance story'. Rather than setting out to isolate the effects of a single intervention, the approach aims to build a credible 'performance story', drawing upon the available evidence to consider whether the intervention, alongside other factors, contributed towards the observed outcomes (Mayne, 2008[19]). It is a useful approach when multiple factors, including the one under examination, are likely to impact upon the ultimate outcomes – as is the case with RAAs and matching rates, adopter recruitment, quality of adoption support and efficiencies. Findings from the case studies will be used to feed directly into the longitudinal data analysis by developing more accurate or useful models.

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

- two annual reports (Spring 2019 and 2020);

- four interim thematic insights (Winter 2018/ 2019, Summer 2019, Winter 2019/ 2020, and Autumn 2021); and

- a final report (Winter 2021).

To support learning and dissemination there will be three stakeholder presentations and three RAA workshops (In Spring 2019, Spring 2020 and Winter 2021).

Aims of the scoping phase and work completed to date

In the first six months of the evaluation (January to June 2018) the evaluation involved a scoping phase. The aim of the scoping phase was to:

- Refine the overall evaluation approach and research questions;

- Agree the overall project plan and timetable;

- Understand the background context to RAAs, the models being developed, progress in implementation and plans for collecting Management Information (MI);

- Engage RAAs in the evaluation process; and,

- Develop a typology of RAAs to select a representative sample.

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

To the end of June 2018, we completed the following tasks as part of the scoping stage:

- initial calls with 20 RAAs approved initially; baseline visits to 23 RAAs involving interviews with 124 individuals (through 23 group interviews and three individual interviews) as part of strategic, operational or mixed groups, including wider stakeholders;

- individual telephone interviews with the lead contacts in five new RAAs awarded funding as part of the expansion of the programme from April 2018[20], four LAs and two VAAs – one involved in multiple RAAs and one not yet involved;;

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

In nine RAAs, the groups comprised interviewees with a strategic role such as Head of Service or Director of Children's Services.

In three RAAs, the individuals we interviewed had predominantly operational roles including adoption team managers, business and IT managers.

In seven RAAs, the groups involved a mix of strategic and operational staff.

A further four RAAs also included wider stakeholders such as VAAs and Adopter Voice.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of interviewees. To analyse the data, we used a Framework approach to thematic analysis to compare and contrast the views of different interviewees within each RAA using a structured grid. This was organised into two distinct phases - data management and data interpretation. We drew upon the topic guides and early stages of fieldwork to develop a framework of themes and sub-themes organised around the key research questions, which will be reviewed as the fieldwork progresses. The data from the field notes was summarised and synthesised under the headings and sub headings within the framework, alongside illustrative quotes. Attention was given to key similarities and differences in perspectives and experiences, according to RAA area, stakeholder type and professional roles.

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[20] In October 2018, the number of new RAAs approved as part of the programme expansion was six.

Chapter two - Models

Summary

- On average, a RAA consisted of five LAs and two VAAs, ranging from three to ten LAs and five to no VAAs.
- The RAAs could be placed across a spectrum based on the extent to which services and responsibilities had been centralised. At the far end of the spectrum sat the 'LA hosted – centralised' RAAs; followed by those setting up joint ventures / local authority trading companies (LATCs); then 'LA hosted – hub and spoke' models; and at the other end of the spectrum sat decentralised RAAs.
- Not all RAAs fitted neatly into the four models – some straddled two models across the spectrum (e.g. hosted and hub and spoke, or hub and spoke and decentralised).
- The most common model was the LA hosted – hub and spoke model. Although the RAAs could be divided into broad models, there were a large degrees of variation in terms of the specific division of roles and responsibilities between organisation types.
- Several factors influenced the LAs' decisions over the size, makeup and model of the RAAs. In most cases these were based on 'softer' factors around historic relationships and appetites for risk and control.

In this chapter we describe the different models being adopted by the Leaders Group and Cohorts 2 and 3 Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). We firstly describe the size and makeup of the different RAAs, followed by division of roles and responsibilities between the LAs, RAAs and VAAs, before presenting the overarching RAA models. In each section we explain the main factors that influenced the decisions within local authorities (LAs) over how the RAAs were formed.

The analysis is based on 23 RAAs. These are the RAAs that were formally recognised as RAAs at the time of writing (May 2018).

When reading this chapter, the reader should be aware of four things:

- The models being adopted are fluid. It is very possible that the precise models that are launched vary from the ones described here. It is also possible that they change further post-launch as the RAAs evolve.

- Some RAAs were in the initial stages of development and for these it was not possible to provide substantial amounts of information.

- The specific RAA characteristics (for example, the split of responsibilities between the LAs, RAA and VAA(s)) varied greatly between the RAAs.

- Within the RAA projects other models were in development, such as VAA hosted RAAs. However, they do not feature in this chapter because these models were not being developed by the RAAs approved initially, who were the main focus of this stage of the evaluation.

The description of the models and the typology should therefore be regarded as time-limited, indicative and a summary. We will be updating the models and the typology throughout the evaluation.

Size and make up of RAAs

On average, a RAA consisted of five LAs and two VAAs, ranging from three to ten LAs and five to no VAAs.

During their development the precise makeup of many RAAs changed substantially, and LAs joined and left RAAs. Even at the time of the baseline visits in some RAAs it was apparent some LAs may join or leave. In the early stages of development this tended to be in order to ensure the size and geography of the RAA was right (see below); in the later stages this tended to be because there were disagreements over the RAA model.

Factors influencing size and make up of RAAs

LAs were broadly free to decide the size and makeup of the RAAs. Some LAs during the baseline visits did report that the Department suggested considering particular aspects, such as the RAA size and encouraging RAAs to include VAAs. .

The overriding factor that influenced which LAs and VAAs chose to work together was **historic relationships**. In the vast majority of cases groups of LAs had already been working closely together through consortium arrangements and had a *"degree of comfort working together"*. In multiple examples these relationships extended beyond 15 years.

> "There was always a strong sense of a link…We were part way up the mountain."

Geography also played a role in determining around one third of the groups (and likely influenced the historical partnership working in the first place). Where LAs did not already have historic relationships, they partnered with bordering LAs. Equally where the original consortia felt their cluster would be too small, they also brought in neighbouring LAs.

In a small number of cases the **performance** (in terms of Ofsted ratings) of the adoption services with the LAs was a key factor. Some high-performing LAs 'cherry picked' similar-

performing LAs for fear that partnering with lower-performing LAs would bring down the quality of their service.

In the majority of areas, LAs were also very conscious of the overall **size** of the RAA. Many wanted to achieve an 'optimum' size – large enough to achieve efficiencies of scale without being too large that they lost their local focus and ability to be flexible. This influenced some decisions, with some original RAA partnerships breaking into smaller groups, or larger LAs leaving partnerships, in order to achieve an optimum size. Based on this first set of RAAs it would appear that LAs perceive the optimum size to be five LAs and two VAAs; future evaluation activity will explore the extent to which this proved to be correct, through examining whether RAA performance (in terms of the speed of adoption) differs based on the size of the RAA. .

Division of roles and responsibilities between RAA and LAs

During the baseline visits, stakeholders were asked to state how 25 different responsibilities were being split between the LAs, RAA, VAA(s) and commissioned services. 12 RAAs provided this information. It is important to highlight that this was very fluid and many of the RAAs could not complete it because they did not yet know which responsibilities would be divided between different organisations. Some were piloting the transfer of different responsibilities to see which approach worked best. We provide a detailed breakdown of this in **Annex III**, however, the key points to emerge include:

- The responsibility for the child transferred to the RAA at different points within the adoption journey.

- The absence of consistency across the 12 RAAs, with no responsibility being allocated to the same type of organisation in all 12.

- The variation across the RAAs, even when they were adopting the same overarching model. Some RAAs had also taken on SGOs, step parents and inter-country adoptions.

- The only responsibility that was remaining with the LA in most cases was writing the children permanence reports (CPRs).

Overarching RAA models

As well as having the freedom to determine the size and makeup of the RAA, LAs were also able to choose four broad RAA models, which are explained in detail below:

- Single LA hosting on behalf of the other LAs;

- Joint venture between the LAs and VAAs creating a new VAA;

- Joint venture between the LAs and VAAs under a local authority trading company (LATC); and

- Outsourcing service delivery to an existing VAA.

In **Figure 2** overleaf we summarise the different models the first set of RAAs were either implementing or planning. These models could be seen as part of spectrum of centralisation; on the one hand, there were a set of RAAs where a large degree of services and responsibilities were centralised within the RAA (LA hosted – centralised); on the other hand, there was a set of RAAs where the majority of services, staff and responsibilities remained within the LAs (decentralised). At the time of writing the Department was in discussion with some of these about the extent to which their model met the policy expectations. Not all RAAs fitted neatly into the four models – some straddled two models across the spectrum (e.g. hosted and hub and spoke, or hub and spoke and decentralised).

The diagram also summarises the main features of the models, though it is important to recognise there was a reasonably large degree of variation within the RAAs, particularly the LA hosted – hub and spoke RAAs.

Figure 2: RAA models as at April 2018

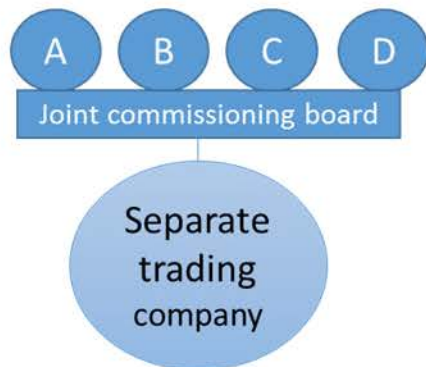Centralised & integrated ←———————————————————————→ Decentralised
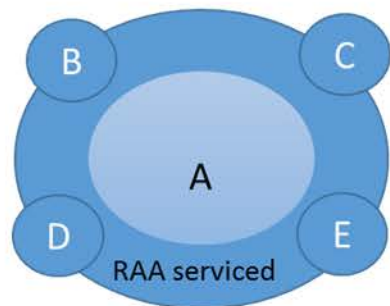
LA Hosted - centralised

Key features:
- Hosted by one LA
- Majority of responsibilities shifted from LAs to RAA
- Majority of staff TUPE'd / seconded into hosted LA
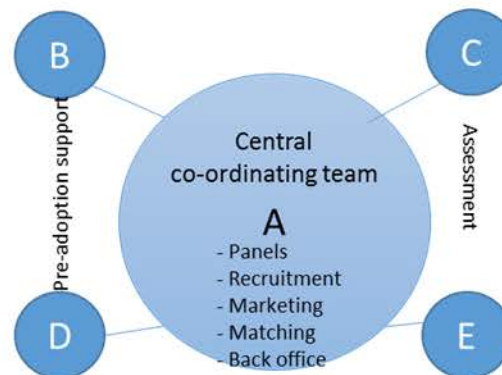- Centralised teams (with some agility)

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

LATC / Joint venture

Key features:
- RAA is separate trading company
- Shared responsibility between LAs
- Staff either centralised or in local teams

LA/VAA Hosted – hub & spoke

Key features:
- Hosted by one LA
- Central co-ordinating team
- Frontline staff TUPE'd / seconded into host LA but located in local offices

Decentralised*

Key features:
- No LA host (or host with minimal role)
- Majority of responsibilities remain within LA
- Small pooling of resources for shared services
- Majority / no staff TUPE'd/seconded

* The Department is in discussion with some of these about the extent to which their model meets the policy expectations.

Other models are in development, such as a VAA-led RAA

- **LA hosted – centralised**: Three RAAs[21] were using this model, all of which were live. Although the original models set out by the Department only included one 'LA hosted' model, in reality there were two key variants of this model – the centralised and the hub and spoke model. In the centralised model the majority of services and responsibilities were shifted from the LAs to the RAA. Staff were TUPE'd or seconded into the LA host, though in all of these RAAs they were expected to work in a mobile way across the RAA and maintain links with the LAs they originated from.

- **LATC / Joint Venture**: Two RAA projects were using this model. In this model the LAs were setting up a separate trading company. Each LA had a shared and equal responsibility for the RAA. In one RAA the model had not yet been fully worked through; in the other the LAs were establishing a joint commissioning board to oversee the LATC. The two RAAs using this model varied in whether frontline staff would be based in a central team or split over a number of local teams, and hence straddled the 'centralised' and 'hub and spoke' models.

- **LA/VAA hosted – hub and spoke**: This was the most common model, with 14 RAAs using this model; six of these were live and eight still in development. This model was similar to the LA hosted – centralised model, except that in addition to the centralised team, other staff were TUPE'd or seconded into the host LA but then split into multiple teams in different locations. The rationale for this was usually to maintain local links, both with the social work teams within the LAs and with local communities and adopters. The RAAs were quite varied in which services were centralised and which were taking place within the local teams.

- **Decentralised**: Two RAAs were using this model, a live RAA and an RAA project. In this model the majority of responsibilities, services and staff were remaining within the LAs. In one model there was a LA lead, but they had very few lead responsibilities; in the other the responsibilities remained within each of the LAs and there was no lead. The LAs were pooling a central budget, through which they would commission joint services such as having a joint 'front door' (e.g. website) and joint assessments. As most staff were to remain in their original LAs, very few, if any, staff were being TUPE'd or seconded to other LAs. At the time of writing the Department was in discussion with some of these projects about the extent to which their model met the policy expectations.

As with the size and makeup of the RAAs, in some RAAs there had been a reasonable degree of fluidity with the model being adopted. Several RAAs were originally exploring

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[21] One RAA project does not feature in these numbers as they had not finalised their model.

LATC joint ventures before shifting to a LA hosted model – and one LA hosted model was considering moving to a LATC in the future. One was VAA-led, before shifting to being a LA hosted. In one RAA project they were exploring two models simultaneously (LA hosted and decentralised).

The interesting pattern in these changes was the gravitation towards the LA hosted model. The reasons for this are outlined in the next section.

Factors influencing choice of RAA model

One of the main factors that influenced the decision over which model to adopt was the degree to which the LAs were willing to each take on, or give away, **control and risk**. In a large degree of cases LAs reported choosing to adopt a model whereby adoption services remained within LAs because they took their statutory duties in relation to adoption very seriously, and were uncomfortable with responsibility for this moving outside of a LA. They perceived that a LA hosted model would ensure responsibility still stayed within LAs. It was likely (though not explicitly stated in all cases) that this was why some LAs considered other models before finally settling on the LA-led model.

The issue of **control and risk** did not just determine LA's preferences towards a LA-led model, it also determined *which* LA-led model they adopted, i.e. whether they selected a LA hosted, decentralised or joint venture model. In some cases, the LA wanted to take full responsibility (and risk) of leading the RAA. In other cases, the LA wanted to transfer responsibility (and risk) to another LA; in these instances, a decentralised or joint venture model was chosen, with one stakeholder describing the joint venture model as the "least offensive option" during the baseline visits. Equally, some chose a 'hub and spoke' model to reduce the risk for the host LA.

These developments explain why few RAAs were adopting the VAA-led model at this stage – most LAs were reluctant to move responsibility for adoption outside of a LA. Interestingly it seems that both LAs and VAAs were unwilling to adopt this model – LAs were uncomfortable with responsibility for adoption sitting outside LA-control, but also many cited that no VAAs came forward as wanting to take on the responsibility, as they wanted to maintain their independence. However, this was largely reported by LAs rather than VAAs directly – we will explore this in further detail during later stages of the evaluation.

For most LAs the decision about the local model was based on their evaluation of and then their position on their primary duty to deliver adoption services and the model that best met that position. This meant that some questioned the usefulness of bringing in external consultants to help them review the different RAA models. In some instances, the recommendation from the external organisation was overturned when it reached committee stage, and in others only a small number of options were considered from the

outset. However, it is also worth highlighting that others considered a range of models extensively and found the process a useful way of systematically working through the different RAA models.

Geography also played a key role in determining the type of model – as well as playing a key role in determining the size and makeup of the RAAs more broadly (as discussed previously). In RAAs where transport across the RAA was difficult (such as in large rural RAAs, or where physical barriers existed such as rivers), they tended to opt for a hub and spoke model, for fear of losing the links with local communities.

Costs were commonly raised, although not to the same extent as control and geography. In particular, the cost of setting up a LATC was seen as being prohibitively expensive – both establishing the setting up a new organisation and the responsibility to pay VAT. Interestingly, however, one RAA was given legal advice that this would not be the case.

In a small number of instances **identity** also affected decisions over the proposed model. Some LAs chose to implement the LATC model as they wanted to create a new organisation with a new identity; these LAs also felt that the Department for Education were encouraging more innovative models, such as the LATC.

Although not explicitly mentioned, it is also interesting to note that historical strong working relationships were cited less frequently in the RAAs adopting a decentralised model. It could be that the 'degree of comfort' that existed in other partnerships was not present, leading to less willingness to integrate.

In the LA hosted model, a number of factors were considered in deciding who would be the host. The main factor was willingness – and in many instances only one of the LAs was willing to act as the host (and in some no one was willing to act, leading to a decentralised model). Where more than one LA was willing, decisions were often made based on which LAs were the highest performing, and which were already of sufficient size and had the resources to lead.

Specific elements within RAAs

Governance

RAAs were typically overseen by a strategic and an operational group. The strategic group always consisted of representatives from each of the member LAs, though the specific role of the representative varied (including elected members, directors of children's services and assistant directors of children's services).

The makeup of the operational group depended on the RAA's point of development. Where the RAA was not yet set up and/or staff were not in post, the group typically

consisted of service directors and managers from the member LAs. For the RAAs live and/or further developed this also included heads of service and service managers from the RAA.

In most cases VAAs also sat on either the operational or strategic group, as we detail below.

VAA role

On average each RAA had two VAAs engaged. It was very common for VAAs to sit on the strategic boards (in some cases they sat on the operational boards). However, they had no voting rights and were usually invited to input ideas, expertise and challenge.

In most instances the role of VAAs within the RAA was complicated. They were seen as having a valuable role, but some RAA representatives struggled to ascertain what their specific role should be. Whilst many LAs wanted the VAAs on the board of the RAAs and input their ideas, they also wanted the VAA to be distanced because in many instances they were either, or could be, commissioned by the LA/RAA to undertake services. It was for this reason that they had no voting rights.

> "The advice generally was that it would be difficult to involve the VAAs in strategic level discussions, or indeed any discussions that would be thinking about what services might look like, what excellence looks like, what the costings might be, because in theory that might give some VAAs who were sat around the table during those conversations a competitive advantage when it comes to procurement".

Therefore, procurement rules prevented them from being too closely involved. It is also worth noting that some VAAs actively chose to keep a distance from the RAA to maintain their identity and independence – and as mentioned above in very few instances was a VAA willing to lead on the RAA development.

VAA involvement differed not only because of procurement rules but also because of the willingness of some local authorities to include VAA representation on the RAA strategic/operational boards. In some RAAs, the VAAs were there only to "offer challenge", some VAAs have felt completely excluded, whilst in other RAAs they played a fuller role. Where VAAs were included at operational board level, their presence was perceived as very helpful. Nevertheless, LA managers (and other stakeholders) frequently expressed their discomfort at the limits of the VAA role, recognising they were not being compensated for the time they were giving to the RAA.

As a consequence of this the role and involvement of the VAAs had generally diminished over time. One stakeholder during the visits reported that it was "not a real partnership", whilst another described it as a "confusing relationship".

> "We've [LAs] been so focused on setting everything up that we've neglected the relationship a bit."

> "It feels like we've been very much on the periphery. It feels like voluntary adoption agencies have invested a huge amount of time, given their size, in the regional adoption journey, but we've come to a position where we've now been dismissed from attending the meetings where decisions are being made."

Some stakeholders during the baseline visits felt the Department's involvement to date regarding VAAs had not been very helpful – stating that the Department had strongly encouraged the LAs to involve VAAs but had an "oversimplified" view of the complex relationship, and there was a tension between what the Department would like and what was possible under LA procurement rules.

However, many LAs valued the input from VAAs and were keen to increase their role once the RAA was live. At the moment, though, most were unclear as to what that role would be.

> "We do want to work with them more closely and put in some transparency for working with them."

Use of inter-agency fee

Many of the RAAs were planning or had already abolished the inter-agency fee internally. Some RAA interviewees spoke about the use of the inter-agency fee as a "failure within the RAA", as there was an expectation that with a larger entity they would become self-sufficient in adoptive placements, although the Department had set an expectation that RAAs should allow for interagency placements to continue at a similar rate to previously, at least in the first year of operation. While other RAAs accepted that they would continue to use inter-agency placements but would be trying to achieve a neutral position in their buying/selling of placements. The role of the VAAs and fears for their future was mentioned by those interviewed in the VAAs, by national stakeholders and by RAA/local authority managers and staff.

Conclusions

The RAAs could be broadly placed across a spectrum with regards to the extent to which they had centralised responsibilities and services. At the far end of the spectrum sat the 'LA hosted – centralised' RAAs; followed by those setting up joint ventures / LATCs; then LA centralised – hub and spoke models; and at the other end of the spectrum sat decentralised RAAs.

Below this broad summary there was a large degree of difference across the RAAs, including in the division of roles and responsibilities across different organisation types.

A number of factors influenced the LAs' decisions over the size, make up and model of the RAAs. In most cases these were based on 'softer' factors around historic relationships and local assessments for financial and reputational risk and control.

What was certainly clear is the level of fluidity within the RAAs, both in terms of their makeup and the model being adopted. It is highly likely that the RAA make up and models will change leading up to the launch of more RAAs, and probably beyond.

Chapter three - Progress to date

Summary

- 10 projects were live in spring 2018 and have typically taken a phased approach.
- Projects often talked about 'go live' in relation to broad changes they were making that involved people, systems and resources and the new 'front door'.
- RAAs were experiencing ongoing challenges around securing buy in and consensus, particularly where services previously performed well. Staffing, agreeing financial models, developing shared systems and commissioning also proved difficult.
- Despite these challenges several aspects were working well, especially where there was strong joint working and staff engagement and they were starting to see some early advantages.
- RAAs helped to increase the focus on improving practice and in examples where staff feel involved, the process has been empowering.
- There were anecdotal examples of positive impacts from live RAAs on four areas: speed of matching; recruiting adopters; adopter support; and processes and timeliness.
- Critical success factors included: strong, consistent and effective leadership; taking a phased and thoughtful approach together as a partnership; and placing sufficient emphasis on changing culture and identity.
- Being involved in the process of creating RAAs has often proved to be an intense, challenging and at times empowering and motivating experience.
- Support and guidance from the Department has improved over time and new features such as the leadership development programme were welcomed. However, RAAs require a greater steer on some fundamental aspects such as Ofsted, more opportunities for sharing learning, and more clarity on the coaching role.

In this chapter we describe what progress the RAA programme has made with delivery to May 2018. It covers:

- What it means to 'go live'

- Progress in delivery

- Experiences of becoming part of a RAA

- Effectiveness of support and outstanding needs

It should be noted that this section draws on qualitative evidence from the baseline visits; what is yet to be seen is whether the quantitative evidence base supports these views. The findings from all strands of the research will be triangulated in the first annual report (spring 2019). Using the qualitative research, we will apply Contribution Analysis, to help explain the result of longitudinal data analysis at a more granular level, and to assess the extent to which changes in the data can be attributed to the introduction of the RAA to build a credible 'performance story'.

'Go live' and beyond

10 projects were live in spring 2018, generally after at least one to two years of planning (see **Figure 3**). Typically, RAAs were taking a phased approach, which looked set to continue with a further six RAA projects due to launch from autumn 2018. The remaining RAA projects will become operational in 2019 through into 2020. Two projects were paused as partners worked to achieve consensus around the model within the RAA and with the Department.

Figure 3: Local authority areas involved in Regional Adoption Agency projects – as at August 2018
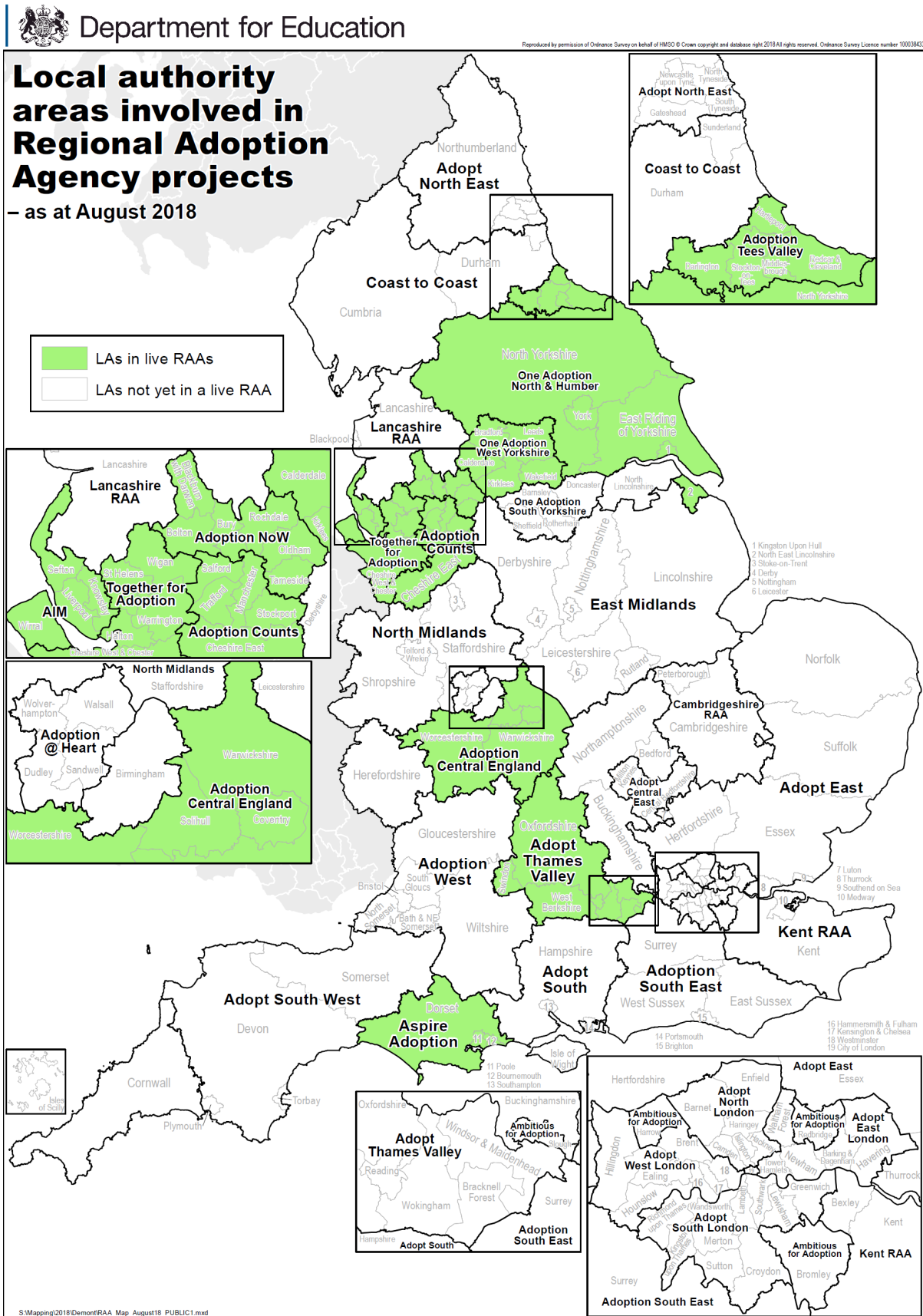
Timelines

There was a mixed picture of whether live RAAs and RAA projects were on track with aspirations. To date, some of the live RAAs hit their target launch date or reduced their expectations of what 'live' meant.

The interviews found that 'go live' was generally somewhere between three to six months behind planned launch dates; and several were operating nine months plus behind their original plans.

> "Can't exaggerate how complex it was. Started in the role [month] 2016 – before I started, [predecessor] said you're going to take this to cabinet within 3 weeks of arrival…. 2 years later! It did not happen! That is how complicated it got."

The interviews show that RAAs that were on track had been able to build on the strength of previous relationships. By working from an established position of trust, individuals and organisations felt better prepared and more willing to help each other to do the best for children as an RAA. Partners in different situations may have had similar intentions but often faced a period of greater change and challenge in moving forwards.

'Go live'

In addition to the Department's progress indicator milestones (see **Table 1**), RAA interviewees talked about changing practices involving **people, systems and resources**. 'Go live' happened when partners had established and maintained positions of clarity, consensus, and mutual support around each of these aspects to open the 'front door' at RAA level. The 'go live' process was influenced by the local context, model, previous history of working together, and which RAA cohort they belonged to.

Table 1: DfE progress indicator milestones

DfE progress indicator milestones before going live.

- Chosen structure agreed by programme board
- Funding formula agreed by programme board
- LA sign-off on structure, funding formula and business case
- Final sign-off on launch implementation plan and design
- Head of Service appointed
- Launch

People

The interviews show that RAAs viewed key markers of 'go live' as an established public presence and profile, a single point of entry (often supported by centralised marketing (e.g. branding, strapline), centralised recruitment roles and a functioning RAA website. Alongside and irrespective of the model, RAAs needed sufficient staff in post to run services, including a Head of Service. Depending on the model, staffing a RAA project did or did not involve TUPE'd staff transferring/co-locating after cabinet approval.

> "[Going live is the] TUPE transfer…Can't be anything else on the day that they are employed by the RAA then the RAA is delivering the service."

To support 'go live' a project manager has helped to drive things forward, particularly in smaller local authorities where capacity was limited or where there was little previous history of joint working.

Systems

To 'go live' it was also necessary to have overarching structures and systems in place for governance, legal, HR and ICT, as well as model-specific aspects such as joint panels and training plans. LA partnerships needed to be stable and structures and systems standardised on some level.

Resources

Projects highlighted the significance of agreeing the financial model with funding in place. Where there was a central hub, the new office had to be set up.

Launching

In most cases RAAs had or were planning a 'soft launch', where some but not all aspects are in place, recognising that, "it will take some while to move into a uniform process."

Some live RAAs launched with a central enquiry line but with staff still based in their own teams and planned to integrate later. Several estimates suggested 75-80% of changes partnerships planned to make as part of launching RAAs actually happened ahead of a soft launch with the aim of facilitating a smoother transition.

Embedding

Quite a few RAAs highlighted the importance of a transition period to "keep business continuity whilst undergoing period of change." The interviews demonstrate that this "breathing space and adjustment time" was extremely important.

"Our ethos is that we are pacing this and trying to bring staff with us ... Staff are feeling mixed, they understand the reasoning behind it, but until there's certainty about their respective roles, we can't be expecting them to embrace it open-handed."

A number of the early implementers said it took around six months for the new service to "bed in". One interviewee described the deluge of work that arrived once they went live.

"For the first six months it was like a tsunami had hit us with all the adoption support referrals which were waiting. The team probably had double the number anticipated. Things were at a much higher level of needs, as they had been waiting so long."

In cases where staff were only notified about new team structures close to the 'go live' date, RAAs have maintained existing caseloads to ensure continuity for staff and families.

Where the model involved fully or largely integrated adoption services, it took a year to embed the agreed changes. Varying levels of integration in adoption services pre-RAAs required participating local authorities to "compromise" and find "the RAA way of doing things." The first year offered an opportunity to have the conversations once the relationships and foundations were in place. The interface between the RAA and the different authorities was seen to be important here.

"It became apparent a bit more later on that although they were providing the same service, how differently we were all delivering that service... "

Challenges and successes in launching RAAs

Challenges

An overarching challenge raised was balancing the structural change the move to RAAs required with the focus on practice to improve the quality of adoption services. In the planning, 'go live' and wider implementation of the RAA policy, this tension was ongoing as were decisions around what is in and out of RAAs, for example whether to include SGOs.

Securing buy in and consensus

Where RAAs have been able to secure buy-in it has helped them to move forward at as quick a pace as was practical. However, the interviews show that RAAs continued to work through several barriers that have been tricky to overcome.

Securing political and partnership buy-in was particularly problematic where adoption services were performing well (Scorecards, Ofsted rating) pre-RAA because the LAs

involved could not always see the benefits the RAA model would bring. They wondered what they stood to gain in terms of performance, sharing good practice or financial efficiencies. There was a view that regionalisation was trying to solve a problem which did not exist for them and there was little incentive to change:

> "It feels a bit like handing over our family silver; we have a really strong service here. Our performance is good. There's no problem really to solve."

Whilst the programme has been designed to improve performance at a national level rather than just locally, there was a common view the evidence base or rationale underpinning RAAs was not compelling, and some were concerned that there would be negative unintended consequences.

> "Instead of focusing on what we can all do collectively to improve the journey for children we've been diverted into cul-de-sacs around structural solutions."

Several respondents used the phrase "form over function" to describe RAAs and felt resources would be better focused on improving frontline delivery than on websites, legal advice and setting up new agencies. The following quotes capture a common view held across the RAAs:

> "There is a centrally imposed [DfE] focus on form over function. The focus on the outcomes for children has almost got lost."

> "It is disappointing that a structural model is being imposed, when most of the issues could have been dealt with through more joined up working."

As a consequence, there has been pushback from politicians in some areas because they wanted to ensure that the arrangements would be beneficial for all LAs. There was a suggestion that this was within the context of elected members having little involvement in planning before the business case being put forward. There were also concerns about accountability and the limited role of members.

> "…Members need to be involved at the start, and there was a suggestion that members were being difficult and holding the process up but in fact members were being asked to sign off proposals on faith and rubber stamp …. It's one of the easiest ways to wind up elected members as they do have enormous responsibility around children's and adoption services."

As RAAs are new entities they also involve "different players, new senior people at the council" who people trying to form the RAAs need to bring along and engage in the idea. Often, the challenge has been in finding consensus and applying a consistent approach across the RAA. Drawing on the experiences of live RAAs it is clear that partners have sometimes made different assumptions about what was happening.

Securing buy in and consensus has remained a challenge post 'go live' because some of the differences only became apparent further down the line.

Later in 'What is working well', we explain how effective partnership working has helped to secure buy-in and manage the change process in some RAAs.

Staffing – recruitment, retention and capacity

The Head of Service role is vital as RAAs move past 'go live'. The interviews suggest that recruiting to this role has proved challenging, particularly but not just for smaller RAAs because it is a strategic role but also needs someone "who knows adoption inside out". Reaching staff with the right skills has also been important for the RAAs' new front doors.

> "Again, going back to what was very important at the beginning of [RAA] was what adopters were saying to us… as the reason that they went to whatever adoption team they went to was because of that initial rapport and relationship that they formed with the agency…So we need to make sure that our change in our process doesn't lead to us having less people coming through. It feels positive at the moment…at least they are getting a speedy response."

> "Some of that also comes in the skill and quality of our admin at the front door… it is very person dependent as well."

At a broader level, staffing RAAs has been difficult when staff did not move with the model. For example, in rural areas and large RAAs, staff were not always willing or able to travel the distance required to RAA hubs. Where partner authorities operated mixed teams, not all staff transferred across because they did not work exclusively on adoption. In both of these cases, transitioning has proved unsettling for staff and brought logistical challenges regarding the allocation of tasks across the teams.

There were reports of staff anxieties about identity, and what the new service and culture would look like, and an expectation that this will take a year to 18 months to establish. Changing culture is discussed later with regards to the experience of being part of an RAA. These and other anxieties have taken their toll on staff retention. Interviewees talked about the extended development phase (and high workloads this brought) and the negative effect on staff morale and communication.

> "We didn't have time…because we were doing it on top of our day jobs. Our day jobs we ended up doing in our own time and [RAA] became our day job… and staff are now wanting procedures, but we are actually working like mad to try and get some procedures together…we're getting flow charts out and asking, 'Can you make do with this?'."

> "The team managers have been excellent [but] had we realised the extent of work and considerable extra hours, we would have wanted more support."

Interviewees highlighted how hard it was to keep momentum going and to communicate knowledge and information when staff moved on.

> "It's having the key changes of staff as well. Cause there are managers in post that when some of decisions were made that are no longer there. So, there are new managers that have taken over, so the information that they have been shared by one manager to another manager, while both of them are no longer there and so there's those gaps about how those things have been passed further down."

There were reports of staff leaving within LAs because they knew RAAs were coming and were concerned about the implications of staying, in one case particularly because some aspects (e.g. permanence manager) were not included in the model.

Meeting set-up costs and agreeing financial models

Some interviewees were concerned that RAAs would actually cost more, although others were confident that there were opportunities for cost savings. There was concern about financial risks for LAs that were hosting. Interviewees wondered what happens if an RAA fails. Some interviewees felt that not all LAs were honestly expressing the financial position / number of staff to be TUPE'd. Quite a few LAs felt there were more "financial losers" than had been originally expected.

Interviewees felt that some models, like joint ventures, involve greater upfront costs to cover the administrative, legal and other costs associated with establishing a new agency, which RAAs have not always anticipated.

Whilst several RAAs reported working within the "financial envelope" they have been given to set up the RAA, others believed the funding was insufficient. There was a common view that the overall set-up costs were high and thought to be too high in relation to the benefits they might achieve.

> "In terms of funding, I think that the programme has provided sufficient funding for the development of RAAs, but what there hasn't been is any flexibility when you run into difficulties or you incur additional or unforeseen costs."

Larger RAAs, or those which covered a wider geographical area, were often the ones with concerns about their ability to generate efficiency savings. A large number of LAs were not convinced RAAs would lead to the expected efficiency savings and there was a suggestion that the business model would only work for smaller and poorer performing authorities.

Moreover, in agreeing financial models, many RAAs have made decisions based on last year's budgets and with an expectation of no overspend and they highlighted that the adoption landscape has since changed. In one example, the inter-agency budget was agreed between the LAs early on but there was then a rise in the number of children needing placements and a decrease in the number of adopters, putting pressure on the inter-agency budget.

The resource bases for different aspects of adoption services were also very different, which made pooling budgets challenging. In one instance this led to a LA pulling out of the RAA (see 'Reasons why some organisations have not engaged with the RAA agenda').

Some LAs reported that they are now contributing proportionately more than they were spending on adoption and unpicking the costs to get to this point has been extremely difficult. "It's a mammoth task".

There were cases where partners have reached agreements, for example to ring-fence their existing budgets for the next two years, but this has taken a lot of time. As one RAA reflected, lots of energy has been spent focusing on the finances and the model, to the extent that they have had to pause everything else.

> "I worry that we have lost sight of the service improvement agenda; that's just been swamped by the finance and legal issues."

Furthermore, when thinking about what is included and excluded within RAAs, the interviews show there is a need to consider the ongoing costs of supporting the child and family beyond placement as part of wider discussions around permanency planning.

The costs associated with the setup of RAAs and whether RAAs will be more cost-efficient in the long-run will be explored quantitatively at a later stage in the evaluation when the data is available.

Developing shared systems

Almost without exception, RAAs talked about the challenges in developing shared systems and in particular IT systems. There was a view that any new system will not be able to establish full links and access across areas, which is further challenged by new GDPR regulations if the model means that details about adopters remain within LAs.

There was an example where at least one LA in an RAA underestimated the number of cases they were bringing and therefore the assessment of staffing needs was inaccurate. Consequently, there have been delays in placements. The difficulty in getting accurate information made it hard to deliver and forward plan which put pressure on developing relationships, as staff started to question the validity of the information they have received.

There were also ongoing challenges around HR and legalities, regarding differential pay, secondments, terms and conditions and TUPE. Several RAAs also talked about challenges negotiating RAA developments with the unions.

> "The lawyers were a real help and a real hindrance… And then lawyers would change so the advice changed. A clear example of that is: We made a decision

> relatively or part way through the process that we would go down a secondment route for staff with a view to TUPE at a later stage. Because that was the simplest way of doing it... that was agreed. All the lawyers agreed, all HR people agreed. Then when one local authority had a new lawyer look at it, he said, 'No actually you can't that's unlawful'...So, we had to have another go over. So that delayed us and in the end, we said, 'No, we're going to go with what we said in the first place'.... So, had to be quite assertive about that."

However, once some of these challenges were overcome some saw the changes as a positive development, such as TUPE'ing staff.

The more different the model from the current situation, the greater the number of additional challenges there were. For example, in models where the LA was not hosting, managers developing the model needed to address issues like pension rights, VAT status, contracting and commissioning law.

Regulatory framework

Several RAAs and national stakeholders raised the issue of Ofsted inspection and what that meant in practice for RAAs. Whilst the Department has issued guidance and invited Ofsted to a meeting of the RAA leaders group, there remained some confusion amongst RAAs about what exactly RAA inspections would involve. The RAAs adopting a LATC-joint venture model were having to register as an independent foster agency as well as a voluntary adoption agency, which was resulting in additional costs and resources.

Commissioning

The provision of adoption support services are the statutory duty of local authorities although they are typically provided by a mix of in-house services, and services commissioned from VAAs, CASA (Consortium of Adoption Support Agencies) and independent providers approved by the LA. RAA interviewees emphasised their wish to develop a culture of practice excellence, particularly in the area of adoption support. In some areas, joint PIF bids had been developed and funded, and this was seen as an excellent way to promote joint working between the RAAs and VAAs. However, other interviewees were concerned at what they perceived as risks to their services, such as reduced sharing of best practice and innovation and threats to business continuity.

There were also concerns that in some RAAs plans for adoption support were not including the specialist support services to birth families or for adopted adults. Only a small number of adoption support agencies (ASAs) were interviewed during the baseline visits[22], but a common view held amongst those that were interviewed as that they felt they had been excluded from RAA discussions and from all the policy documents. They

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[22] ASAs will be consulted as part of the case study visits planned for future research waves.

felt this was a "missed opportunity" to use their expertise to improve support services. ASAs interviewed were concerned that the bureaucracy associated with the ASF, the spot purchase commissioning model used by most RAAs and the costs of Ofsted registration requirements could mean that some ASAs leave adoption and focus on looked after children instead. One interviewee asked, "Do they want us to disappear?". Overall the present regulatory framework was seen to work against strong partnerships with VAAs.

Additional potential concerns

In addition to the challenges stakeholders were currently facing, they were also concerned about potential challenges or negative unintended consequences. These are detailed below.

Structurally disconnecting adoption

Respondents frequently reported being concerned at the continuity from care to adoption being structurally disconnected. Planning for permanence remains the statutory duty of local authorities and there were concerns that the drive to improve permanence and timeliness could being hampered. As one interviewee said:

> "Adoption is everyone's business [but how does] … chipping off adoption from the rest of the care journey fit with the aspirations for permanence? And I think that's one of the unanswered questions of the RAAs."

Some were concerned that the development of RAAs would be the first step in the break-up of the wider children's services, though others saw this regionalisation as a positive step, and some RAAs were also taking on responsibility for Special Guardianship.

Inconsistent practice in relation to adopter voice

One area where a small number of interviewees felt that RAAs could lead to less, rather than more, inconsistency was in relation to the role of Adopter Voice. Some respondents felt that reductions in central funding levels would put the presence of Adopter Voice on regional boards at risk if RAAs choose not to support this, which might lead to Adopter Voice having less influence in some regions:

> "Adopter Voice was set up to meet the statutory duty of putting the adopter voice at the heart of services. But now DfE are no longer funding it [as from March 2018] so RAAs are going to have to take the decision as to whether they want it and are going to fund it. That review reveals quite a lot about the RAA. Some are very enthusiastic wanting it built in and others haven't thought about how they want to relate to adopters, if they have gaps how they will fill them … it's really patchy."

Negative impact on VAAs

To date the experience of VAAs has been mixed but, even where positive, somewhat uncertain. Whilst in some RAAs it was clear VAAs had a voice and were being listened to, others felt excluded. VAA staff were unsure about what the demand would be for their services, the consequence for their employees and importantly the effect on services for children who are hard to place and those who require access to specialist services.

> "It's felt a bit in limbo - it's a difficult place to be, and what we didn't anticipate at the start of the process is how long this limbo period would be, and it's getting to its limits. Instead of spending time planning and developing our practice, we're stuck … We have had nothing really tangible to tell our staff moving forward. As the RAAs move closer to delivery point, we can start having some more real conversations about what, if anything, we can bring."

Many interviewees spoke about their concerns for the future of the VAA sector. Some VAAs were fearful that RAAs were planning to provide support services that historically had been procured from them. Additionally, they were fearful that RAAs intended to place children within the RAA, thereby reducing reliance on VAA placements. Ultimately, they feared that VAAs would be put out of business.

RAA interviewees confirmed that where budgets were limited, the aim was to upskill staff to provide more therapeutic services in-house, whilst in others budget provision had been made for specialist clinical and educational psychology input into their adoption support teams. Respondents said:

> "There is a fragility in the VAA market and nervousness."

> "It was very clear that most of the RAAs and the coaches from DfE were looking at one or more variations of a local authority trading company…and that they would procure services, as they need them from the VAA. A consequence of that was in some of the RAAs we've been talking to, they immediately came to the conclusion that if they got their act together and made economies of scale, that with the efficiency savings that they make they could provide the services that they currently procure from the VAAs themselves."

However, in some areas the RAA has actually strengthened the partnership between LAs and VAAs, as we discuss in the following section of what is working well.

What is working well

Despite the ongoing challenges, the interviews demonstrate that a number of early advantages are emerging, which we discuss first before moving on to outline indications of early impact.

Spotlight on adoption practice

Several, predominantly live, RAAs and other stakeholders highlighted how the implementation process has really brought attention to adoption services within local authorities and put a spotlight on what they do.

> "The national government focus on the importance of adoption has felt supportive and positive...The focus of RAAs has definitely contributed to that national message that adoptions are a really important thing for children."

The interviews show a raised profile has offered an opportunity to share what is working well, develop new ideas and provide an impetus to improve the quality of poorer performing services.

> "Creating an RAA shines a light on the whole piece."

> "[RAAs] bring a voice to a part of the system that probably wasn't all that well represented in strategic conversations previously."

Within and between RAAs, LAs and partners are learning from each other and there is a sense that stakeholders have welcomed the chance to rethink practice and drive improvement, which for some "was well overdue".

Joint working

When asked what was working well, most RAAs referenced partnership working as a facilitating factor and improved partnership working as an early outcome. This ability to nurture honest and productive relationships appears fundamental to the early success of RAAs in reaching 'go live' and moving towards achieving the intended outcomes.

> "There is lots of trust and a joint sense of responsibility for the area."

> "We have an ability to have difficult conversations, and underpinning that we all want the same thing, we want it to make a difference for children, so that their experience is better, and that child-centeredness has run through the discussions and that's really helped, that we don't lose sight of why we're sitting round the table two years on".

> "We have more power to change things in a regional footprint."

Positively, RAAs have further strengthened relationships between LAs and VAAs in some areas, supported by strong political support from LAs. This was especially the case in areas where VAAs were involved in other related projects bringing in VAA expertise like PIF, or where VAAs played an active role on the Board.

In one area, partners reported being so positive about the RAA partnership and its potential impact on outcomes for adoption services longer term that they were already

starting to think about regionalising other services for looked after children. Whilst the perceived disconnection of children's social care services was making others fearful, this illustrates just how beneficial some partners felt regionalisation in this area was proving to be.

Staff engagement and empowerment

Whilst retaining and engaging staff could be a challenge, several RAAs highlighted examples where their efforts to engage operational staff in the development and implementation of RAAs has proved empowering. As a result, middle managers and frontline staff have gained ownership over the process, remained in post, and bought in to the change process. RAAs have engaged staff in various ways depending upon the model and governance structures. Having a good cross-section of people involved, including support services such as HR and IT too has helped to counter feelings of imposition and perceptions of host take over.

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

The interviews show that it has been important for staff to understand the rationale for the move, and their belief that it will ultimately mean better outcomes for the children. There was also some evidence to suggest that being part of RAAs has given staff the confidence to move forward.

In models where staff were TUPE'd across they were positive about the benefits, such as finding more support as part of a bigger specialist team and regular supervision. Whilst there was unsurprisingly some anxiety from staff about what the move to RAAs would mean for them, staff in one RAA were generally positive about regionalisation and highlighted opportunities for the service and for professional development. By engaging staff in the process, they were able to settle more quickly and work on developing a team identity.

Emerging impact

In this section, we assess the emerging qualitative evidence in relation to the impact of the RAAs on four key areas:

- Recruitment of adopters;

- Speed of matching with adopters;

- Adoption support services; and

- Processes and timeliness.

Some of the RAA leaders group outlined where they were starting to see early successes and there was a view at a national level that there were "exemplars that others could look up to". However, at this very early stage, the evidence is limited, and has not been examined using quantitative data.

> "Strong advocates doing well is where you'd like to be at this point."

Speed of matching

There were several reported examples of combining adoption panels leading to more timely adoption decisions. Furthermore, the move to a specialist team model in one live RAA with dedicated workers has led to improvements in timeliness as staff have a good working knowledge of the children in the pipeline and have been less likely to miss potential matches. However, interviewees were also keen to point out the need to ensure that partners put their energies into service improvement (e.g. regarding adopter recruitment) to ensure the demands of making structural changes do not lead to a dip in performance.

Recruitment of adopters

There were some indications that RAAs are having a positive effect on the number of adopters recruited, but the data is not yet available and stakeholders were unclear as to why this was happening.

> "We've had excess of 80 contacts to ask for information [in last two months], 35 initial visits, prep groups are ongoing, 60 approved adopters…they have had an influx because they are now [a RAA], when they have a stable number they will be able to tell if it's different."

There was also an indication that among the RAA Leaders Group there are examples where they are identifying matches for children and "lots of placements" are being made.

> "Figures for adoption are the highest we've ever had".

Several RAAs pointed to more placements being achieved within area, in one case increasing from already high numbers pre-RAA. A live RAA made up of LAs with a good track record in finding placements for hard-to-place children saw their strong performance continue as an RAA and their fears around a drop in performance did not materialise.

> "Children's guardians and the judiciary were often quite sceptical about our success [in placing large sibling groups], but actually we've been able to continue to demonstrate to the Court, statistically, that we have been successful in placing sibling groups and difficult to place young people - not all, we still have some challenges, but on the whole we have been successful, and been able to reassure the judiciary and the guardians that we can do this."

Adoption support services

There was evidence from the interviews that RAAs are already leading to more consistent practices. Examples given included developing a consistent adoption support offer, consistent approaches in matching panels and disruption meetings, and the development of adoption packs. Some RAAs had begun to look at greater consistency in adoption medicals and in the variation in adoption allowances.

In several RAAs, adopter feedback and engagement were described as being really positive. This was in part due to their involvement in the development of the model, which highlights the benefits of adopter engagement. In other RAAs, there was positive feedback on the enquiry line/new front door, which appeared to be working well.

Processes and timelines

Staff coming together was perceived to have enabled the pooling of ideas and expertise, which is central to the programme's future, as is an increased emphasis on performance management.

> "We are seeing evidence of that real sharing of best practice and learning from each other … all those aspirations we are starting to see … the enthusiasm for the opportunities is definitely there."

> "They [RAAs] are also needing to use performance management tools and techniques and budgeting tools and techniques because there are more throughput, whereas before they might be able to name them or know them intimately they now can't do that because there are too many to hold in their head... at the frontline still need good social workers ... on people's streets ... ".

In one live RAA, referrals were coming in centrally and despite essentially providing the same service as before, LAs had become better at sharing ideas and practice.

> "Although we set it up as kind of an induction for new workers … everyone is learning and everyone is skilling up so the spread, the breadth of knowledge amongst the workers is increasing, some people were really really good at doing certain things but that's what they were doing, they were doing their thing really well. But now everyone is learning from everyone else … skilling up new workers but also giving 'older' workers a reason to stay ... because they are getting their expertise valued but they're also building expertise and learning new things and getting enthused…"

In an RAA that has included work around permanence, teams reported that this was working very well. As well as progressing a child's case without delay, the team's work has improved the quality of the assessment plan, which they hope will feed into more resilient placements for the child - after six months they reported to have seen a positive impact on the journey for a child. Different interviewees said that this kind of early permanence tracking would be key to support recruitment, inform commissioning and plan for sufficiency.

Commonly, RAAs have engaged in what has been described as a "race to the top", where they have carried out practice audits, agreed which partner is best at different aspects and started building their practice model around that. Whilst this is a positive development, the interviews did highlight concerns around the benchmarking of good practice and the available budget to deliver the good practice.

RAAs have started to think differently about various aspects of adoption services. Interviewees talked about seeking to better understand their recruitment strategies using mapping software and historical data and thinking more clearly about sufficiency planning.

Critical success factors

Critical to success was taking a **phased approach** to implementation. Given the magnitude of the change process that has been required in most areas, there was a common perception that phasing activities has helped to make the tasks more manageable. This is because it provides individuals and teams time to adjust and make progress.

Across the interviews, it is clear that the composition, stability and leadership of the RAA **Governance** Board(s) has been central to the success of joint working, offering a governing steer and a forum for support and challenge. Interviewees spoke about the importance of having influential proactive and consistent Chairs who are passionate about adoption. Sharing roles across the Board has proved helpful for joint accountability. Securing DCS buy in is imperative given their overall responsibility for children's services, ability to engage lead members and because "they hold the purse strings".

Continuity and consistency in **leadership** was seen as essential for successful project implementation, though many RAAs have struggled to recruit the right people into senior leadership positions and/or manage the change on top of their day jobs, as discussed previously. There were mixed views on whether this role should have a predominantly adoption or project management background. On the one hand some believed project managers need specialist knowledge whereas an alternative perspective was that the ability to oversee project implementation is more important because other staff bring the adoption expertise.

Building a positive staff **culture** and new identity was described as a vital aspect of developing good strategic management within RAAs. Early and active engagement of all staff in the process was perceived as resulting in greater buy-in to a regional identity.

However, the interviews show there is more work to do around things like how to place children with the most complex needs. There was an argument at national level and

among RAAs that had they been asked to focus more on practice than on structure, they might have got further by now.

"Not enough focus on better, too much focus on bigger."

The experience of becoming part of an RAA

As we have touched on throughout this chapter, being involved in the process of creating RAAs has often proved to be an intense and challenging experience, but also empowering and motivating.

When asked about how things were going overall, interviewees' responses were varied. Some focused on the positives listed in this chapter and said it was really interesting, and "quite uplifting to see how working cooperatively together can bring about positive change". It did not feel as though the process had been done to the staff because there was a clear focus on improving practice.

"Weirdly enjoyable" appreciated how local authorities have come together."

"Staff are very well engaged. There's a buzz, they have a good understanding of how it will work. They have a shared culture and buy in."

"The process has been like herding cats so far but I've enjoyed it; people are really receptive and open to the idea of RAAs but are just frustrated that nothing has happened so far."

Conversely, some RAAs that are part of the Leaders Group and Cohorts 2 and 3 were more reflective and sombre about the experience in the context of the challenges they had faced, as we discuss throughout this chapter. There were examples where staff felt insecure and unsure, with some taking early retirement or leaving. For example, interviewees said:

"It's been the duration that this has been happening for. So, people have put moving house on hold, or it's impacted on their personal lives, so they've been waiting for a conclusion, and because it's gone on longer than anticipated, actually people are feeling really really frustrated and are feeling 'Is it really happening?'

"It has been a long, drawn out, excruciating process… It's been very difficult to corral everyone to get things agreed in our timescales and the difficulties are only being magnified."

The feelings of grief and loss for staff who had worked for many years in their adoption teams needed to be acknowledged. Whilst managers had been involved in planning meetings, those on the front line delivering services were often unsure about what was happening and grieved the loss of their team.

> "I do feel we've been forced to do it. I went through a period of grieving at the beginning of the process because I didn't feel it was a positive move. I want it to succeed and I present it positively to the team. I have to lead the team into it".

The difficulties of trying to change practice before a new culture is established were emphasised.

> "There's still people on that journey … and that should be underestimated at a huge cost."

Several interviewees were keen to point to the powers of diplomacy. This was particularly relevant when many staff in an RAA LA hosted model originated from the host LA.

> "It has felt to an extent like they had "moved to LA".

> "Feels like we just work for LA."

The interviews show that whilst the Leaders' Group were beginning to feel light at the end of the tunnel, it often took a lot of time and effort to get there and came at some cost. So, at this stage there were only a few clear advocates.

> "The reform is not hugely popular for anyone ... even those people who are champions are almost champions in spite of … it does not have passionate advocates ... as a result support has often tended to be almost apologetic rather than challenging".

Reasons why some organisations have not engaged with the RAA agenda

A number of LAs have not committed to joining a RAA. The evaluation team interviewed four of those who were not involved in RAAs in spring 2018 to understand the reasons why. Their concerns were similar to others (e.g. about partnering with others) but stronger. Some were in consortia developing a RAA but withdrew as they could not reach a decision that they felt benefitted their LA. In particular, some were uncomfortable with the financial model and whether it could be sustained without income generation for the LA; they felt the RAA put them in a worse financial position, which would affect the quality of services.

> "We were struggling to reconcile putting more money into a RAA and not being able to do what I refer to as income-generating."

These LAs were not in principle opposed to joining a RAA but had not yet found a solution that they felt was manageable.

> "We haven't said we're not signing up and we never will – we would still come around the table with a dialogue and debate, but we'd want it to represent best value for our area, and we'd want to achieve best outcomes for our children and adopters."

Conclusions

Three years on from the announcement of the first RAAs in 2015, the interviews show that progress has generally proved slower and more challenging than stakeholders anticipated but some early benefits are starting to emerge.

Taking a phased approach to 'go live', building, strong consistent and effective leadership, and working in partnership to develop a new identity has helped to tackle the ongoing difficulties many RAAs face in securing buy in and consensus. In these examples, there were anecdotal examples of positive impacts on four areas including speed of matching, recruiting adopters, adopter support and processes and timeliness indicating there is 'light at the end of the tunnel'.

Chapter four - Effectiveness of support with RAA development and outstanding support needs

In summary, the overall impression from the RAA Leaders Group and national stakeholders was that the support and guidance nationally from DfE and delivery partners has become clearer and more supportive over time but some gaps remain.

Practice sharing and learning through cohort groups

The RAA Leaders' Group was described as "fantastic", constructive and useful for pointing RAAs in the right direction.

> "The cohort meetings have been very useful and good investment of time."

> "As the work has gone on...[DfE] have been very willing to listen, and that's been helpful. They went into the process with the simplicity 'this will work for everyone' – before they did that they hadn't quite thought about the complexities - but over the course of implementation process they've grappled with the complexity."

The plans for the leadership development programme from September 2018 are welcome. Interviewees highlighted how RAAs need strong and capable leaders who can work with the wider market to deliver outcomes and hope the new programme will help to further develop leadership skills and address differing support needs (e.g. around systems change, options appraisals, financial modelling).

Cohort 2 have had the benefit of learning from the Leaders Group. They described the meetings as being useful to get perspective on some of the challenges they have been facing.

> "When I go to the meetings with the leads from the other agencies in the cohort. One of the things that they say – they say is it takes 6 months. And they are right. And that's what I hold on to when we're still having hiccups. I think, well, actually we're only into month 3 now. It's still quite early days. That's quite useful to have that group. In terms of implementing change I think it's been good nationally that there's been that point of reference. I always come away thinking I've got something from it. But it also gives you that reality check."

However, there is a sense from some RAA interviewees that RAAs could be more honest at these meetings about things like the frustrations over each RAA project having to develop their own legal documents, and specifications for the Head of Service role and IT, all of which are examples of key documents that RAAs feel could and should have been shared.

Technical and individual support through coaching

Projects typically receive coaching on a monthly basis (around 1.5 days per month) before 'go live' after which RAAs continue to receive support via the cohort group meetings. Feedback on the coaching role was mixed. There was a belief that the success or otherwise of the coaching came down to the quality of the coach and their ability to balance their management knowledge and content knowledge. Some RAAs were positive about the support and advice they have received on specifics such as financial modelling and found the opportunity to reflect with coaches useful.

> "We were very naïve and thought we'd just be implementing this in our spare time. We really didn't anticipate what a big job it would be. The coach made us realise that we needed to bring in extra capacity, and that it needed to be someone who knew the business."

Others had not had much contact with their coach, in part because it was still early days, or the assigned coach changed. In one RAA, interviewees did not understand what the coaching role entailed. They believed the delivery partner chose to work with RAAs that were more willing to run with the policy and was less concerned with RAAs that had other views. The delivery partner was described as an "agent to the state" though DfE set out that they try to handle any issues with projects rather than the coach acting as an intermediary. In another RAA, the advice from the coaches was described as "narrow in their advice around [the] form [an RAA might take] stifling innovation".

> "Their advice around procurement was narrow and risk adverse, and local authorities have to take their advice very seriously, but opportunities along the way to be more design focused and commissioning focused have been lost ..."

The interviews also indicate that the coaches have not been able to help with what is perceived to have been "poor national selling of the evidence base of RAAs"; which as we reported earlier made it difficult to encourage local political buy-in. A "real positive promotion of the evidence" would have been helpful,

> "In the absence of something positive, people fear the worst."

Interviewees suggested that the coaches could play more of a role in disseminating the Department's guidance / example documents and other learning from RAAs working at a similar scale. Based on the interviews, it appears that there is potential to provide more tailored support. One RAA said of the coaching role, "It was more reflective support than actually giving any answers to particular questions." More openness and transparency about the role of coaches and how the Department is keeping track of RAA progress would be welcome.

Guidance from the Department

In general, interviewees believed the central support and guidance, particularly around some of the practicalities, could have been clearer given the scale of structural change.

> "What is frustrating is that it was forced upon us before they [DfE] had thought about it. That has made it far more challenging. We've mentioned things to the DfE and no-one has thought about it at a practical level and worked it out."

> "That would have been OK if they [DfE] had been geared up to be responsive... It's felt like we've had to muddle through."

Some RAAs had commissioned consultancy support locally to support them and increase their capacity to facilitate the change process. There was a common perception that this was leading to some 'reinventing of the wheel' locally and was very expensive, though there are limits to the extent that areas, such as legal advice, can be provided nationally.

> "Examples of one prepared earlier would be useful."

RAAs would like more guidance where appropriate on these issues, although DfE and RAA projects have shared examples on a variety of issues throughout. They would also like to know more about framing business cases, the VAT restrictions around LATC models, annual reporting, working with Ofsted, SGOs and support for permanence planning. It should be noted that RAAs have already received guidance on some of these issues. For example, Ofsted attended a recent RAA leaders group meeting, attended an all-project event and DfE has produced a guide in conjunction with live RAAs that have been inspected and will be updating it shortly.

There was also a suggestion that the Department might need to think more carefully about how ready organisations are to join an RAA and what support they might need if they are judged inadequate, as well as what governance arrangements will need to be in place to manage this.

It was proposed that a web-based interactive forum would be useful because it would allow RAAs to share learning and "trouble-shoot" outside of cohort meetings. A forum does however already exist which is part of the support provided through the Delivery Partner contract but it seems there is a need for DfE to raise awareness among all RAA cohorts as not everyone is aware of it. The interviews show RAAs like having the opportunity to learn from other RAAs that are live and think sharing experiences is important.

> "Would like to know exact details of RAAs. Who does what and what is their structure, from other RAAs."

It is important that future activities build on the work that has already been done at a national level to disseminate learning, for example the learning papers based on the early experiences of the original demo projects and the practice development notes on key aspects like matching and tracking early permanence.

Future priorities

RAAs future priorities were dependent upon where they were at in the process. In spring 2018, newer RAAs were still at the stage of refining and gaining approval for their business model, focussing on the recruitment of staff and/or adopters to address sufficiency, getting 'front door' and back office ready and, in some cases, training staff. Live RAAs emphasised the need to continue to embed the changes, further establish and "unify" team identities, relationships and skills, and to monitor and evaluate performance.

Conclusions

More opportunities to share learning and new aspects such as the leadership development programme will no doubt help RAAs to make further progress. However, RAAs also require a greater steer on some fundamental aspects to support them through the regionalisation process.

Chapter five - Conclusion

On completion of the scoping phase it is clear that 2018 will be pivotal for the RAA programme. The number of live RAAs is approaching the mid-way point and it is important to reflect on what progress has been made, what opportunities exist and what challenges remain. It is our hope that in reading this report, all stakeholders will develop a better sense of where they are within the national context of RAA development, learn how common their experiences and challenges have been and what achievements they might reasonably expect to see in the coming year.

As Chapter two explains, RAAs can be placed on a spectrum based on the extent to which adoption services have been centralised. In spring 2018, the most common model being the 'hub and spoke' (14 RAAs out of 23 interviewed at the scoping stage) and even within this model, the degree of variation was large.

This report has provided a snapshot of stakeholders' experiences in the first steps towards regionalising adoption. It paints a picture of frustration and challenge, but also of hope as some work through the difficulties and see the first signs of greater collaboration, consistency and improved practice and associated benefits. The picture will evolve as the RAAs develop further and more are launched. Our next evaluation report, after we have undertaken in-depth case studies, will provide further information on this evolution and impact.

There were some factors that have helped partners work through the change process which we covered in Chapter three. These included strong leadership, taking a phased and thoughtful approach together as a partnership, engaging operational staff and wider partners pre and post 'go live', and emphasising culture change in shaping a new identity. Navigating culture change was particularly important because whilst many stakeholders could see the potential benefits of working at scale, there was a general sense that the challenges have been underestimated and that there may be negative unintended consequences. An overarching challenge raised was balancing the structural change the move to RAAs requires with the focus on practice to improve the quality of adoption services and this tension is ongoing.

Our longitudinal work[23] begins in autumn 2018 and this will provide the first opportunity to explore further in detail. Future work will also pick up on the issues raised at this scoping stage. These include the extent to which any activities have been paused whilst RAAs are in the set-up stage, what any perceived slowdown in services looks like and what are

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[23] Annual case study research with 7 RAAs, annual telephone interviews with RAAs launched and in development, and a sample of those not yet involved with RAAs, and longitudinal analysis of national adoption data 2014-2020.

the implications. Other issues to be explored are staff turnover and whether attempts to raise standards across the board leads to less innovation.

Next steps

Working towards the first annual report in March 2019, the following tasks are planned:

- Seven case studies selected by autumn 2018;

- Start collecting cost data in autumn 2018;

- First wave of case study research begins in autumn 2018;

- Longitudinal analysis of national adoption data begins in autumn 2018;

- First thematic insight report in Winter 2018; and

- Year 1 annual report in Spring 2019.

Annex I: Implications for the national evaluation

This section discusses the implications of the scoping research for the national evaluation, focusing on the next phase of the research through the longitudinal case studies, areas of particular interest, gaps, and considerations.

Proposed case study selection

The case study selection criteria has been developed as a result of the baseline visits and the criteria agreed with the Department:

- Model;

- Location;

- Live status;

- Size;

- History of partnership working;

- VAA involvement;

- Progress; and

- Performance (adoption scorecard).

The case studies were primarily selected because of their differences in model, status, size, VAA involvement and softer factors like self-reports on progress and strength of partnership working. The sample also includes a range in term of performance scorecard averages.

In addition, the Department has set the following criteria:

- The sample must include at least one of the first three to 'go live'

- Case studies must be recognised as an RAA project by the Department

- The case studies do not overburden RAAs that might be involved in other evaluations e.g. Innovation Fund and therefore these RAAs should be excluded

To ensure the independence of the case study selection, we have agreed with the Department that we will approach the selected RAAs for case studies without naming them to the Department at this initial stage. In approaching the potential case studies, we will explain how we have chosen the case study sample and the reasons for choosing their RAA. We will reinforce the independence of the selection process and explain that if they agree to take part we are proposing to tell the Department at that stage. The case studies will be anonymised in the reporting and no attributable information will be shared with the Department. The purpose of the Department being aware of the case studies is

so that they can manage and minimise the burden of requests on the RAAs on them and help with practicalities going forwards. We will then take discussions forward from there.

At this stage we have agreed to choose five of the seven case studies. The remaining two case studies will be selected in autumn 2018 to allow us to select 2 case studies from RAA projects due to go live late 2018/early 2019 to ensure that the final sample is representative and to maximise the learning from the case studies. This is likely to involve delaying the fieldwork in the sixth and seventh case studies and would therefore have implications for the work plan and inclusion in the first annual report.

The proposed case study selection is as follows:

- Model – 2 hub and spoke, 1 centralised, 1 centralised/hub and spoke, 1 LATC, 2 to be confirmed to include one with a large number of LAs and one VAA led.

- Location – 2 North, 2 South, 1 Midlands.

- Live status – 2 live at the time of reporting in spring 2018, 3 to 'go live' later in 2018.

- Size – a range in number of participating LAs (including a smaller RAA (3-4 LAs), average size (5-6 LAs), and a larger RAA (7+)).

- History of partnership working - considered to be strong in 3 RAAs, mixed or poor in other RAAs based on self-reports during the baseline visits (e.g. how long LAs have been working together, the level of buy-in and consensus amongst partners).

- VAA involvement - in most but not all RAAs and to varying degrees.

- Progress –based on self-reports during baseline visits (e.g. whether RAAs were on track and pleased with progress, behind schedule and/or experiencing some issues or making little progress and/or meeting major hurdles).

- Performance –based on averages calculated from the adoption scorecards (number of approved adoptive families waiting, number of children for whom permanence decisions has changed away from adoption, Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, rank, Ofsted rating and new placement offers granted).

We will be sharing the sampling criteria with the wider group of RAAs.

Reflections on the method

RAAs and national stakeholders were broadly positive about the evaluation method. Interviewees said it felt "comprehensive"; they were supportive and there were no concerns.

Areas of particular interest to RAAs include:

- What data would be analysed as part of the quantitative strand (suggesting the number of disruptions, adoption support provided, ages of children placed, characteristics of the cohort involved). All these variables are part of our intended data collection.

- Building in case study interviews with CAFCASS which we will explore with regional boards through the case studies and the judiciary, which is already planned. Case study interviews with children, adopted teens and birth parents were also suggested. We carefully considered whether children should be interviewed at the tender stage and decided that it would not be appropriate for the following reasons:

    - Most children being adopted are under four years of age – too young to be interviewed

    - Children could give no view on services before and after the RAA developments

    - Inappropriate to interview children who are undergoing a course of therapy

    - The ASF evaluation includes children and we do not want to duplicate

    However, if any of the case study areas run young people's support groups we would talk to young people if we were able to gain parents' and young people's consent.

- What the evaluation shows in relation to the potential benefits to service/adopters/children from operating at scale, maintain/improving Ofsted judgements, and regionalising fostering services. Most of these areas are included in the planned evaluation except fostering services.

- What the evaluation shows in relation to the optimum scale for an RAA and its impact on practice. Plans to assess scale are part of the evaluation.

RAA interviewees highlighted several overarching potential gaps:

- There was quite a strong call from several RAAs for the longitudinal data analysis to go back five years to 2012, rather than 2014, to capture any changes in adoption rates referencing the regular swings, the cause, scale, and impact of any changes. We have reflected on this and in **Figure 4** we present changes in adoption rates from 2002. This shows that the peak year of adoptions was in 2015, before returning to around 4,000. Therefore, on reflection, we feel that the planned three-year period prior to 2017 will cover the range and the impact of the adoption reforms.

Figure 4: Adoptions from Care 2002-2017
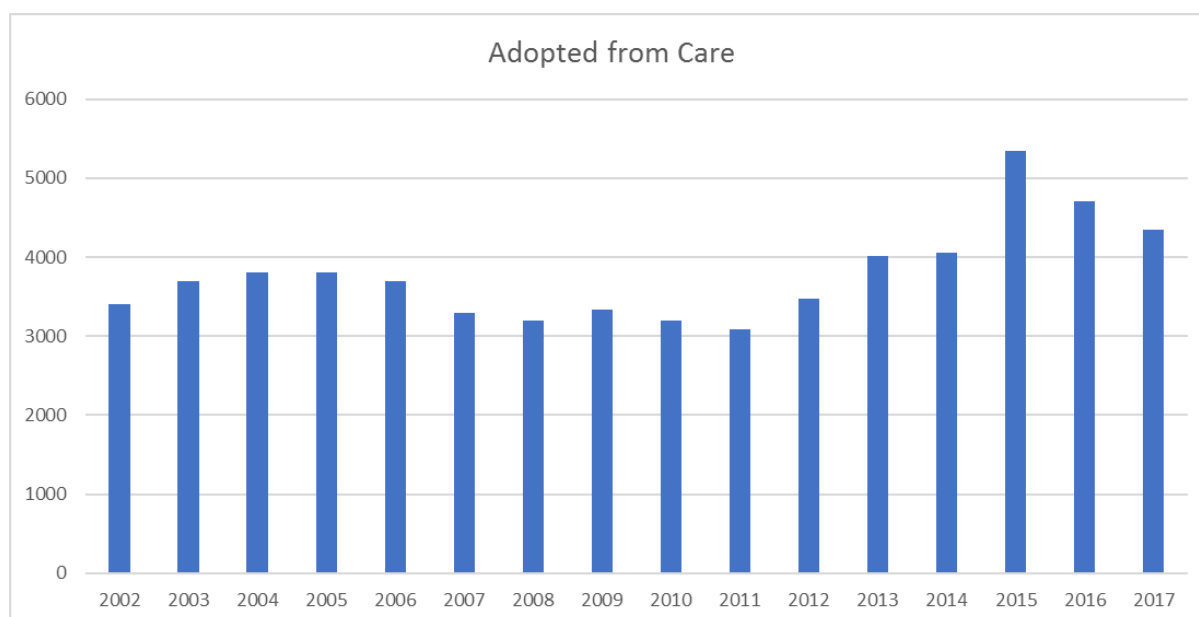
- Interviewees highlighted that if the RAA policy (and the evaluation) focuses on adoption to the point of placement, it will lose sight of the whole of adoption, in relation to permanence and lifelong adoption support for children and adoptive parents, birth families (the adoption triangle). The evaluation is considering adoption support. We will explore the links between the RAAs and other parts of the adoption system and have included research questions to reflect this (see **Table 2**).

- The case studies should include interviews with political leads, IRO teams, health/medical advisors and childcare solicitors, which we will explore on a case by case basis as part of the longitudinal case study research.

- National strategic stakeholder sample should include Ofsted, which we agree is important to include in future interviews.

The interviews show a number of things to consider for the case studies:

- Not all staff will be in post so there will be potential gaps in the data collection in the first wave of case study research and will be less of an issue over time.

- Some staff who are new in post and might lack the long-standing contextual knowledge.

- At least six weeks will be required to organise the interviews, which is planned for.

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- The evaluation method will need to be flexible, for example in interviewing adoption panel members by phone if they cannot make dates, which is planned for.

- The data time lag and access to MI within the RAAs, which will be explained in analysis and reporting.

- The wider context around public services and the influence of changes in LA funding, devolution, and other funding streams. The wider context will be explored as part of the case study research and other longitudinal interviews.

Research questions

Objective 1: Understand what RAA models are being implemented

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

k) What factors are affecting changes in matching rates (including specific characteristics of the RAA, such as e.g. website, joint front door, focus on

SGOs, involvement of elected members and when they became involved; level of buy-in) as well as external factors?

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

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

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

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

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

- Does the information on the characteristics of children waiting to be matched drive recruitment? How?

- How is information between recruitment/matching teams shared?

- How well does this compare with before?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

l) What are the adopter recruitment strategies?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

e) What factors are affecting changes in adopter support?

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

g) How is support commissioned within the RAA?

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

i) How do adopters access support?

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

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

l) Do adopters get timely support?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

f) What factors are affecting changes in costs?

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

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

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

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

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

- **What are the internal impacts (e.g. development of expertise, leadership, commissioning and decision-making capabilities)?**

- **What are the optimum working relationships and processes necessary to achieve the optimum outcomes?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Learning and dissemination

As part of the RAA interviews, we asked interviewees what they thought about the idea of thematic learning papers and found an appetite for real-time, accessible feedback. There is a lot of interest in learning from the evaluation and the experiences from other RAAs, particularly as some felt they implemented theirs in a bit of a 'learning vacuum'.

Interviewees set out many possible ideas, which can be organised around governance and practical guidance, and developing the evidence base. Their ideas are recorded here for reference and we would be interested to explore the options further with the Department and via future cohort meetings.

Governance and management

- Learning from other RAAs, especially those working with similar models and in similar contexts.

- What is the experience of those developing a separate legal entity?

- Where do other statutory adoption services sit in the RAAs? For example, working with birth families, life stories, and tracings?

- What are the operational arrangements that would best lead to early permanence?

- How are RAAs working with the Unions?

Practical 'how to' and 'what works' guides

- How are RAAs establishing Boards and what does good practice governance entail?

- How is culture change supported and the management the transition of the service for staff?

- What are RAAs top tips for implementing "quick wins" (e.g. how to share information and TUPE staff)?

- How are RAAs developing adoption support offers with VAAs?

- How are RAAs managing adoption support assessments?

- How are RAAs managing the inter-agency fee?

- How will RAAs work with Ofsted?

- Are there innovative and new ways to improve matching?

- If and how are RAAs developing market statements? What works for the voluntary sector and what works for RAAs in terms of market statements?

Evidence of impact

- Feedback from the Adopter Voice.

- How are the RAAs influencing practice, e.g. the judiciary?

- How are RAAs working with schools and health partners?

- What is the impact of RAAs on wider children's services?

- What is the potential for RAAs to deliver other types of permanence services?

Annex II: RAA Management information

Plans for collection and analysis

The majority of RAAs that we spoke were at least at a stage where a management information framework was being developed. Several RAAs had systems in place and were already producing management information reports.

Regarding the data that are being collected, this at least reflects that which is required/submitted to the Adoption Leadership Board and the data that are used to develop the adoption scorecards. A number of RAAs reported plans to collect data to feed into their own specific key performance metrics, for example, staff satisfaction.

Longer running RAAs have been able to produce detailed analysis and reports. An example shared with the evaluation team clearly reported progress against headline figures/targets and trend analysis – this has been designed with practice improvement in mind and there are plans to develop this to help with early planning (i.e. ensuring appropriate adopters are recruited to meet demand).

Potential challenges

A few RAAs have experienced issues around data sharing between LAs in the RAA. This is to be somewhat expected for LAs that have not worked together closely in the past and use different software- there are information sharing procedures to be followed and systems infrastructure that need to be in place in order for data to be collected centrally.

Historically, some LAs have had issues with time lags and/or inconsistencies with adoption data. For example, records being left open leading to inaccurate dates/durations.

This might present a challenge for the evaluation in future if data collection is delayed.

Opportunities and implications for the evaluation

In terms of RAA level management information being able to inform the evaluation, we identified the following potential opportunities:

- RAA reports and/or raw data could be used to sense check the national data we will be using.

- RAA reports and/or raw data could potentially be used to access more up to date (i.e. "live") data. This would support detecting early impacts of the RAA programme.

- Where RAAs are collecting data that are additional to that collected nationally, provide further insight to the impact of RAAs, for example, staff satisfaction.

This will be dependent on RAAs having systems in place for data collection and a willingness to share their reports/data with the evaluation team. With this in mind, it might be the case that we are unable to provide analysis or comment on all RAA management information, particularly at early stages when RAAs are still developing their systems.

Ecorys will seek to encourage the sharing of management information by offering support to RAAs around data collection and analyses. This could include:

- Analysis of raw data and individual RAA reports.

- Supporting RAAs that are using (or planning to use) management information for practice improvement and early planning. Identifying and sharing best practice around this with other RAAs to encourage them to implement similar approaches.

- Review of management information reports against what the RAA wants to know in order to make suggestions about how analysis/reporting could be improved – i.e. ensuring RAAs get the maximum value out of the data they are collecting.

Annex III: Division of Roles and Responsibilities in RAAs

During the baseline visits RAAs were asked to complete a sheet outlining which organisations were responsible for different activities. 12 RAAs provided the information. The charts below presents their responses, broken down by the RAA typology. RAAs could select more than one organisation for each responsibility.

Figure 5: Involvement in care planning/reviews
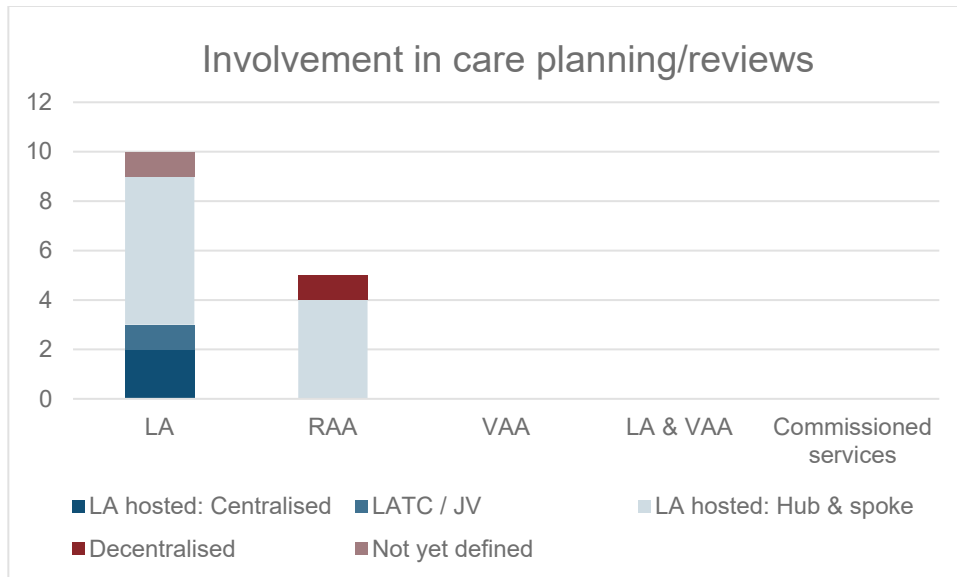
Figure 6: Child preparation for adoption including story work
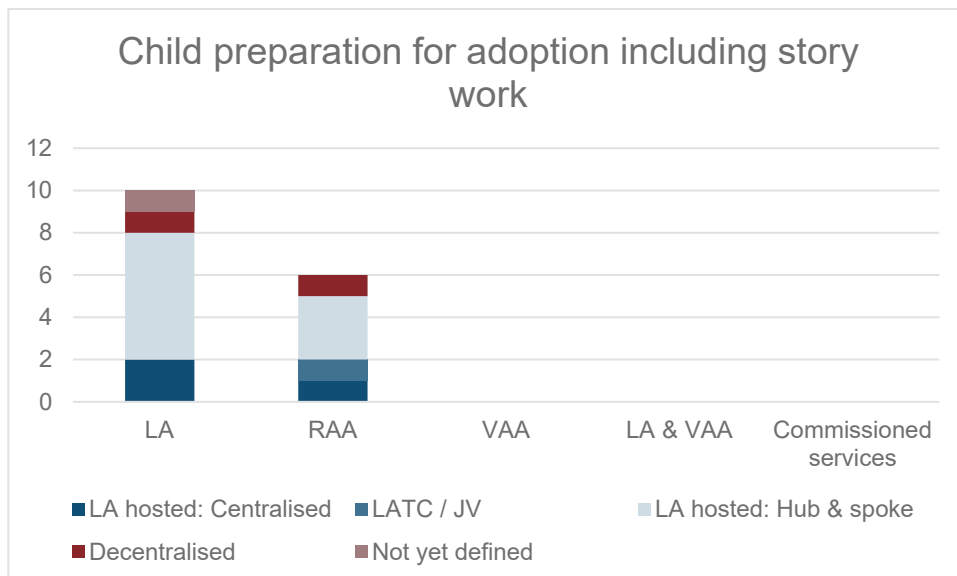
Figure 7: Writing the child permanence reports

Writing the child permanence reports
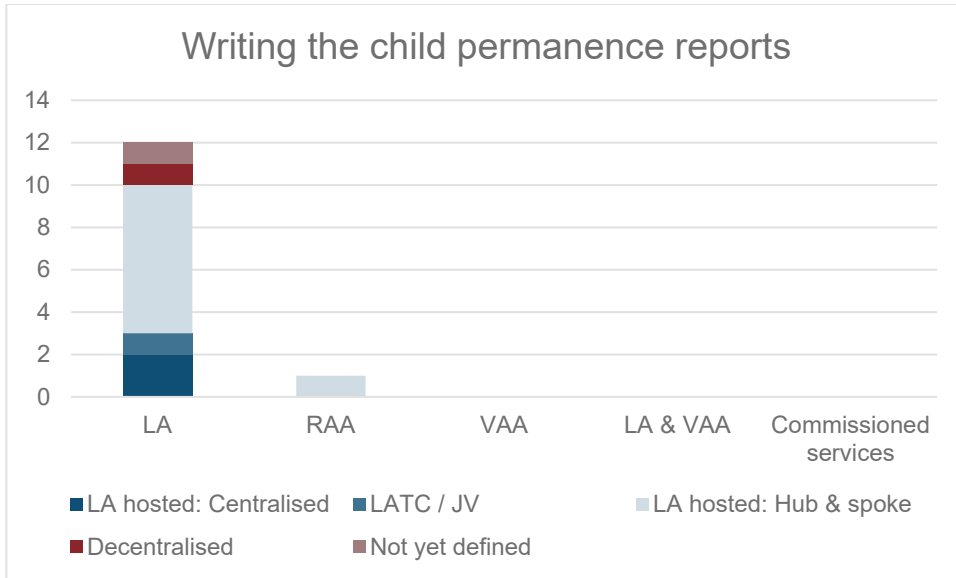
Figure 8: Delivering specific early permanence services such as concurrent planning

Delivering specific early permanence services such as concurrent planning
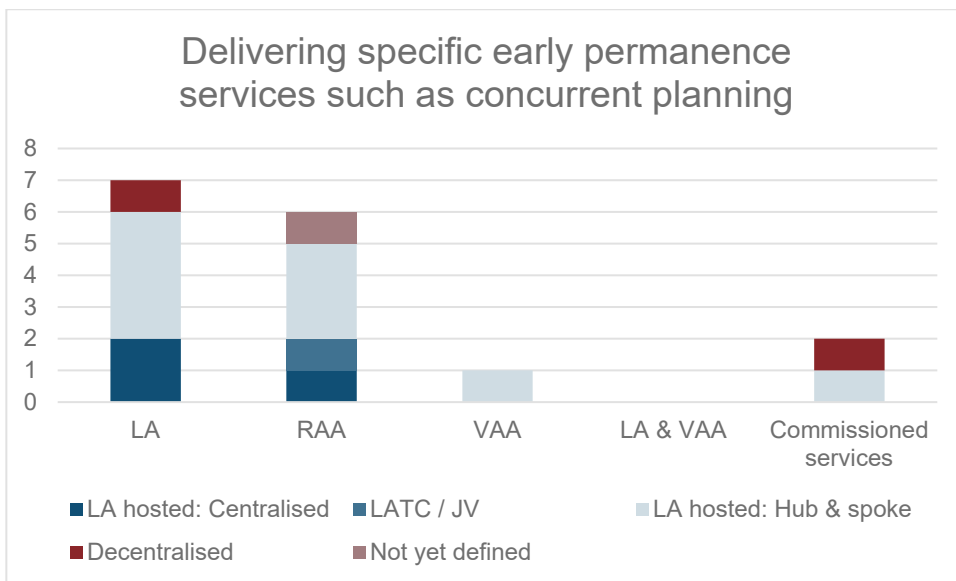
Figure 9: Family finding: Generic

Family finding: Generic
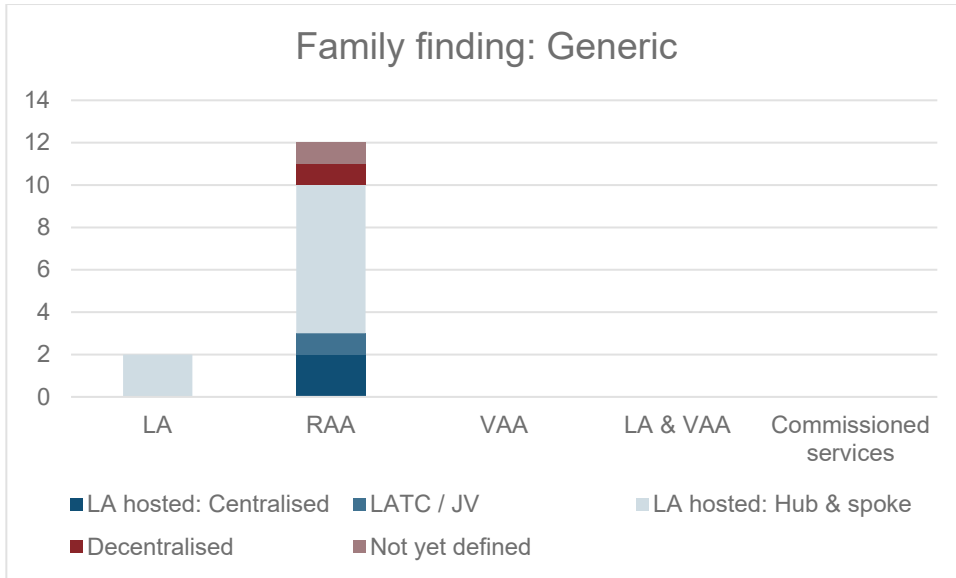
Figure 10: Child specific e.g. Activity days, exchange days

Child specific e.g. Activity days, exchange days
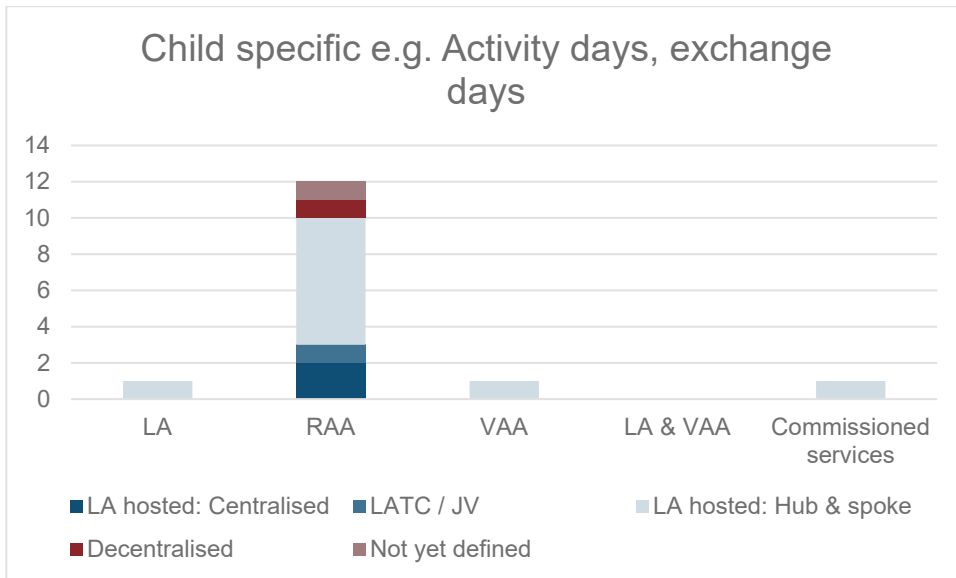
Figure 11: Recruitment activities

Recruitment activities
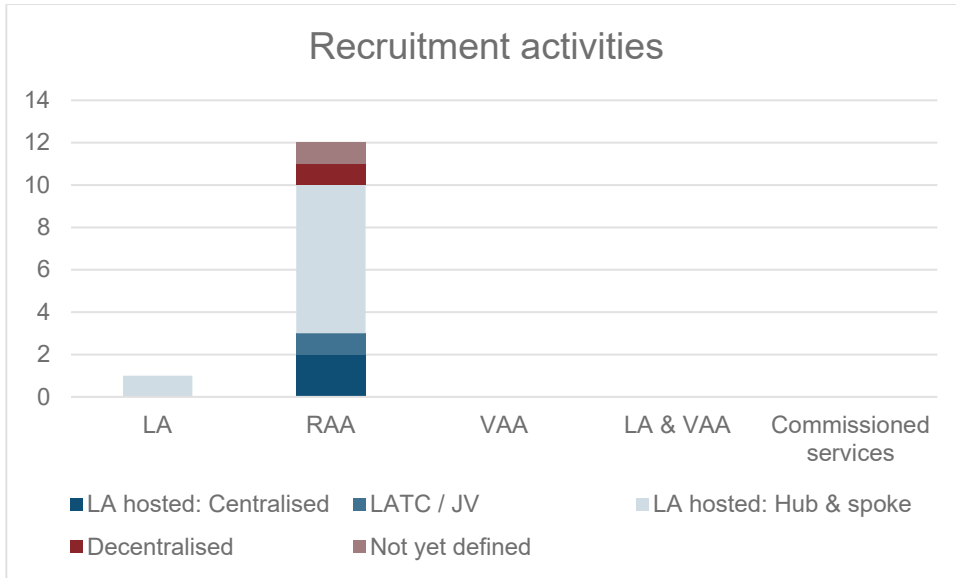
Figure 12: Stage 2 assessments and preparation groups

Stage 2 assessments and preparation groups
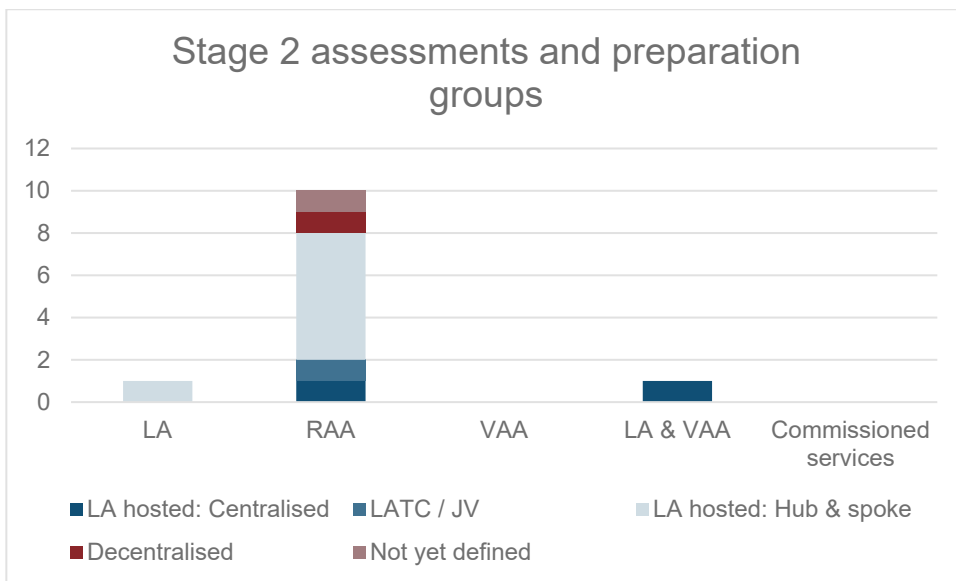
Figure 13: Linking and Matching advice to adopters

Linking and Matching advice to adopters
e.g. Exchange days, National Adoption Register and use of Linkmaker
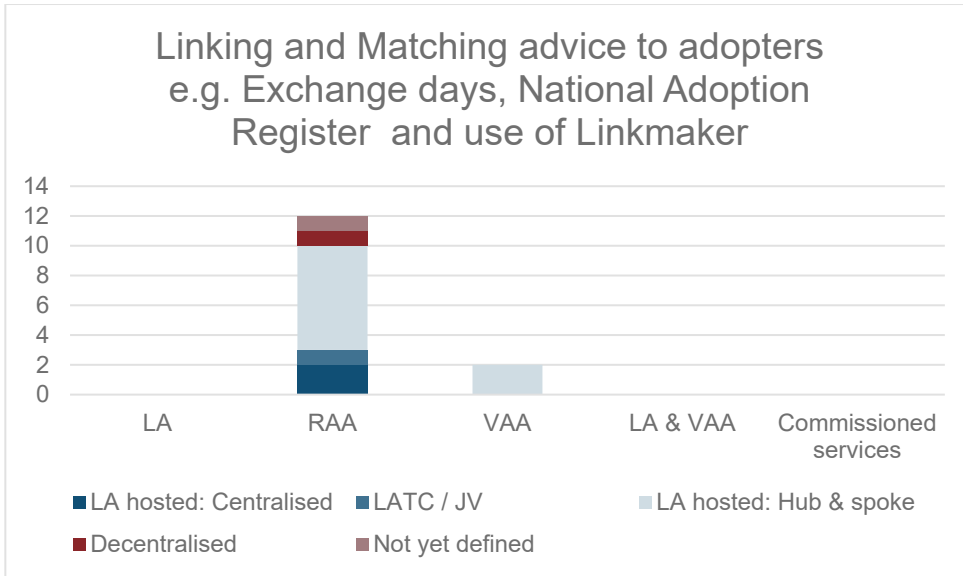
Linkmaker was previously known as Adoption Link.

Figure 14: Writing matching reports

Writing matching reports
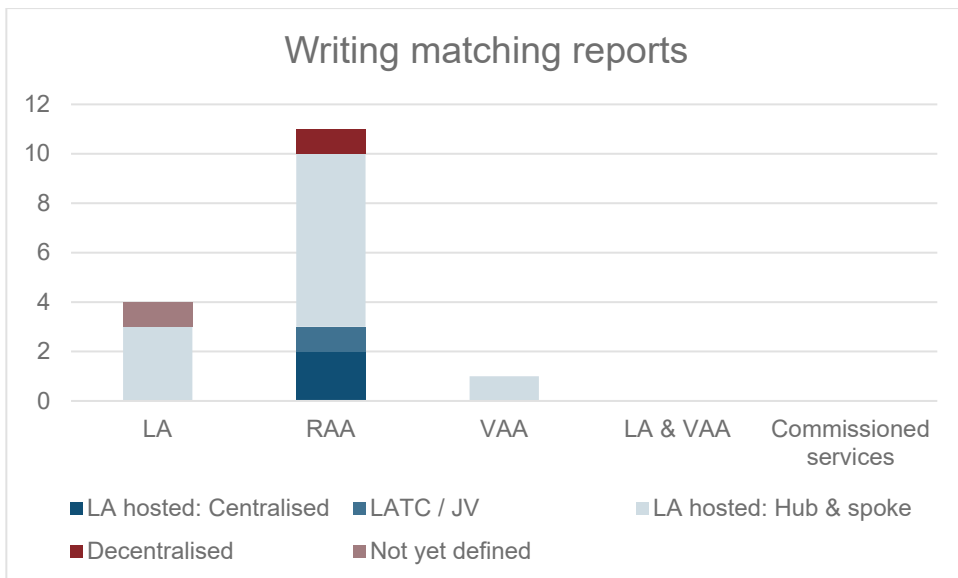
Figure 15: Children's adoption medicals

Children's adoption medicals
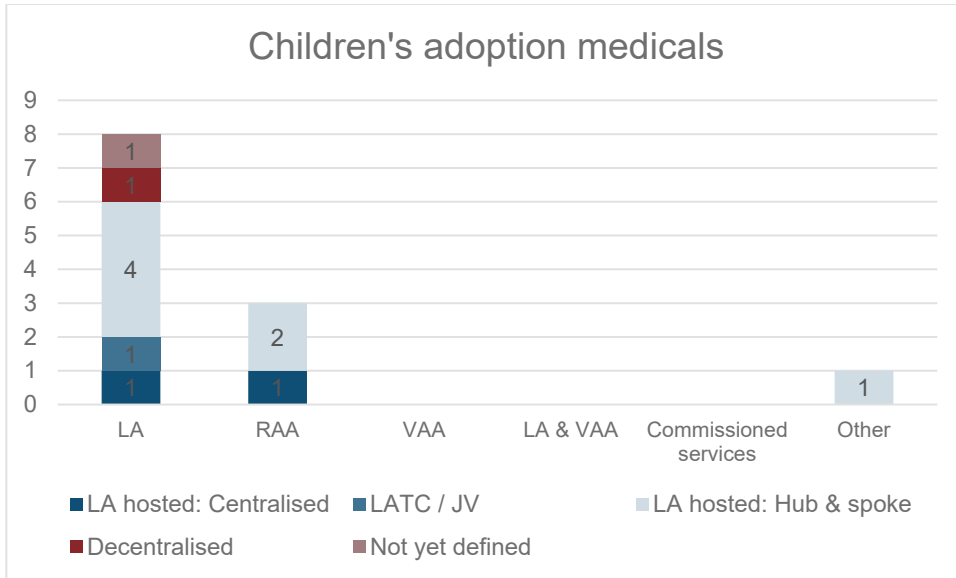
Figure 16: Panels (matching and adopter approvals)

Panels (matching and adopter approvals)
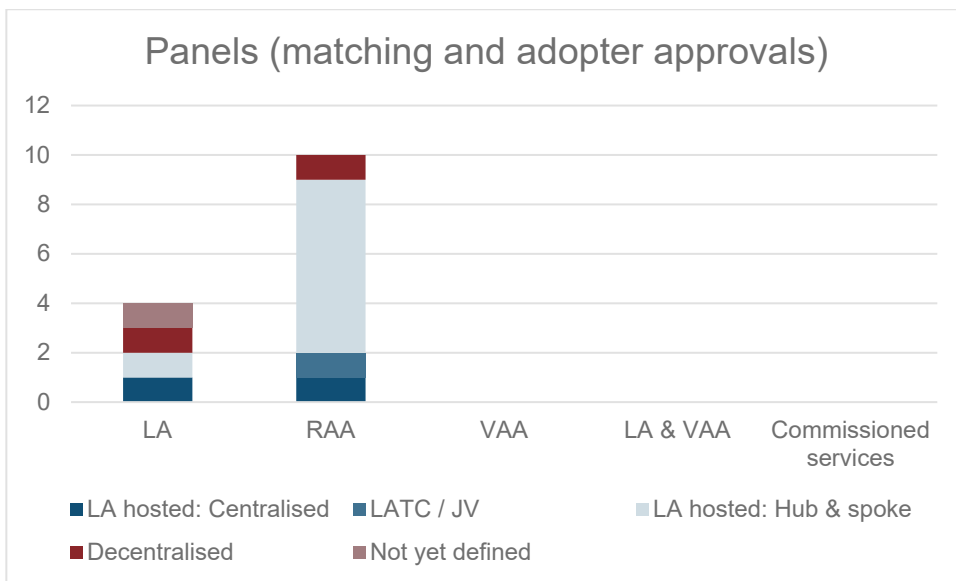
Figure 17: Letterbox services for contact

Letterbox services for contact

Legend: LA hosted: Centralised, LATC / JV, LA hosted: Hub & spoke, Decentralised, Not yet defined

Categories: LA, RAA, VAA, LA & VAA, Commissioned services
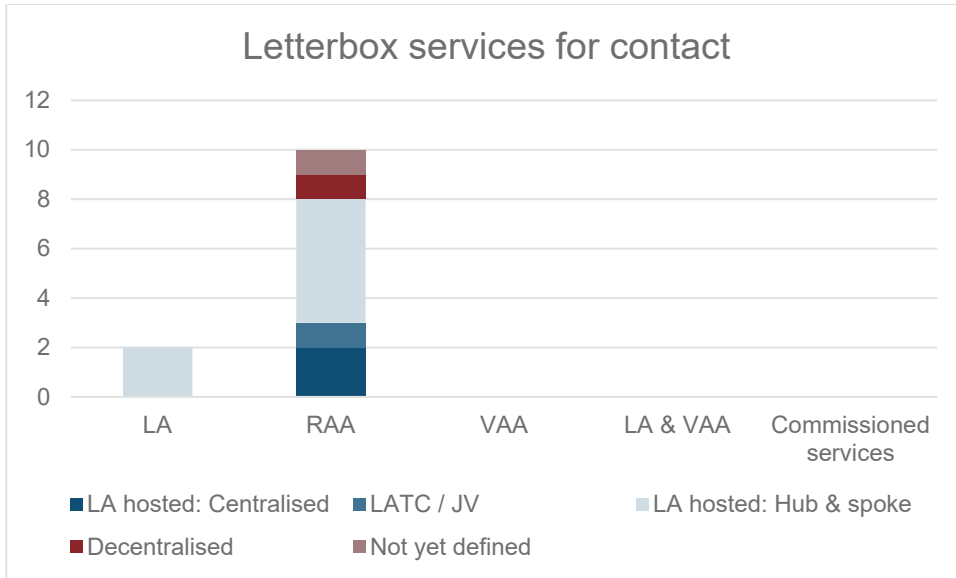
Figure 18: Provision of assessments of adoption support needs

Provision of assessments of adoption support needs

Legend: LA hosted: Centralised, LATC / JV, LA hosted: Hub & spoke, Decentralised, Not yet defined

Categories: LA, RAA, VAA, LA & VAA, Commissioned services
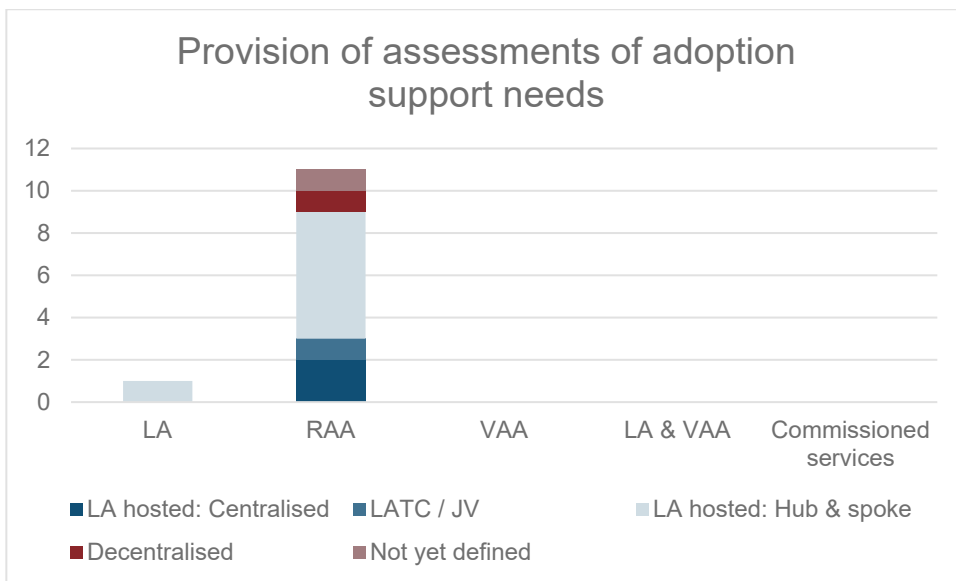
Figure 19: Applications to ASF

Applications to ASF
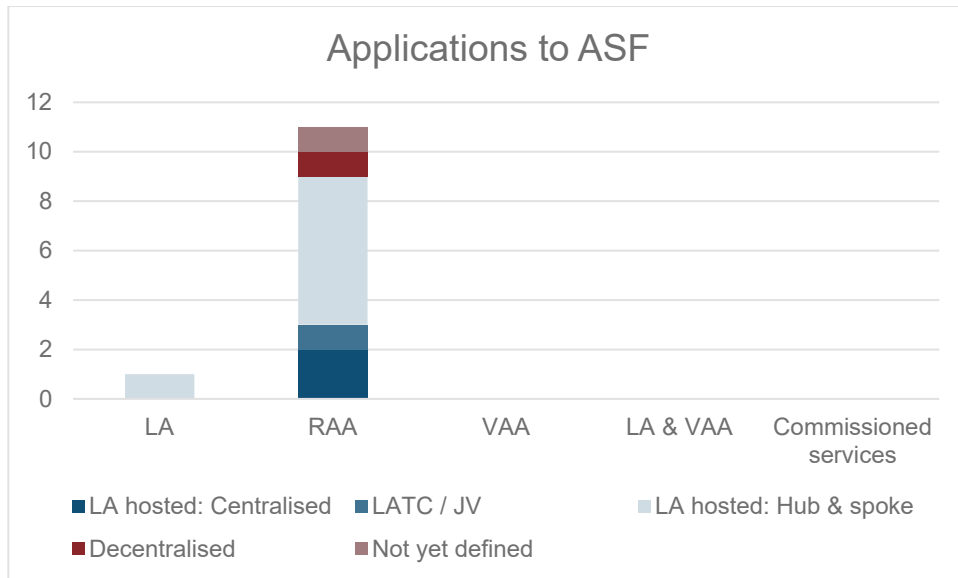
Figure 20: General support E.g. support groups, newsletters

General support E.g. support groups, newsletters
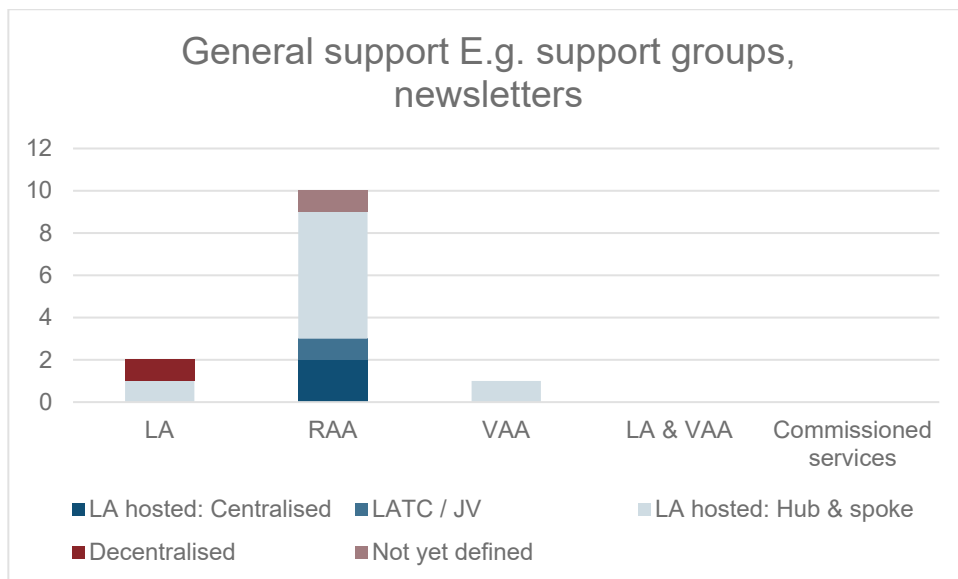
Figure 21: Contact support (face to face, supervised contact)

Contact support (face to face, supervised contact)

Categories (x-axis): LA, RAA, VAA, LA & VAA, Commissioned services

Legend: LA hosted: Centralised, LATC / JV, LA hosted: Hub & spoke, Decentralised, Not yet defined
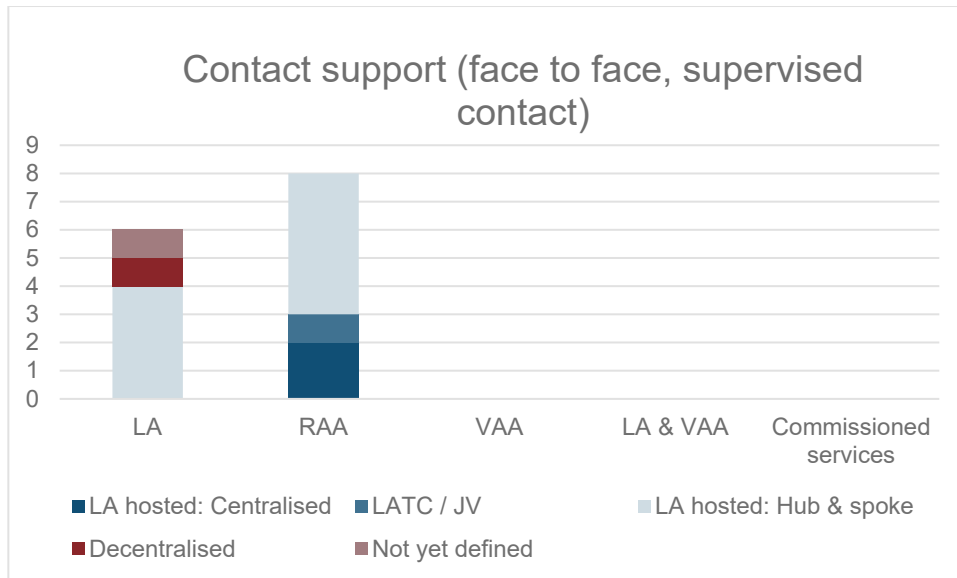
Figure 22: Therapeutic support E.g. DDP, family therapy, NVR

Therapeutic support E.g. DDP, family therapy, NVR

Categories (x-axis): LA, RAA, VAA, LA & VAA, Commissioned services

Legend: LA hosted: Centralised, LATC / JV, LA hosted: Hub & spoke, Decentralised, Not yet defined
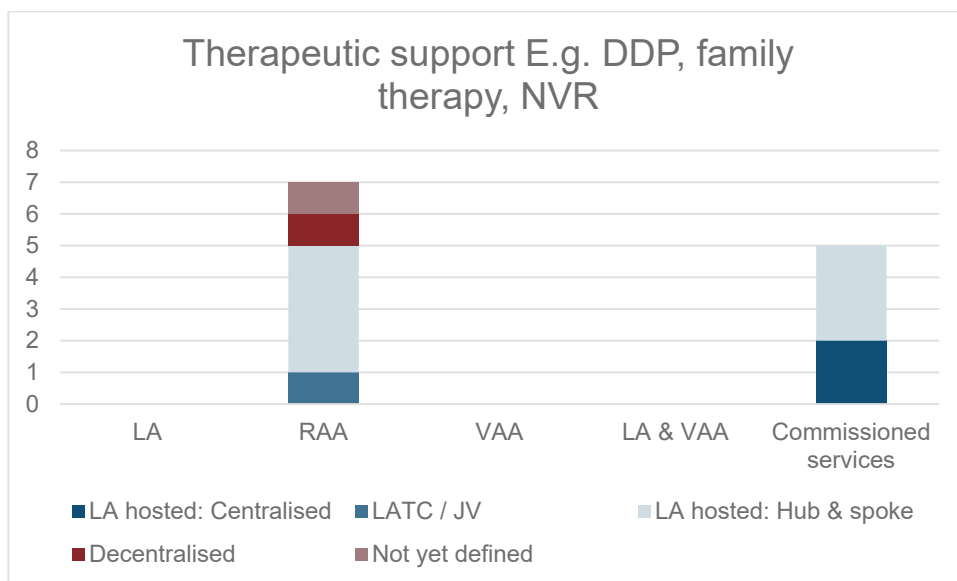
Figure 23: Support in school/education (VSH)

Support in school/education (VSH)
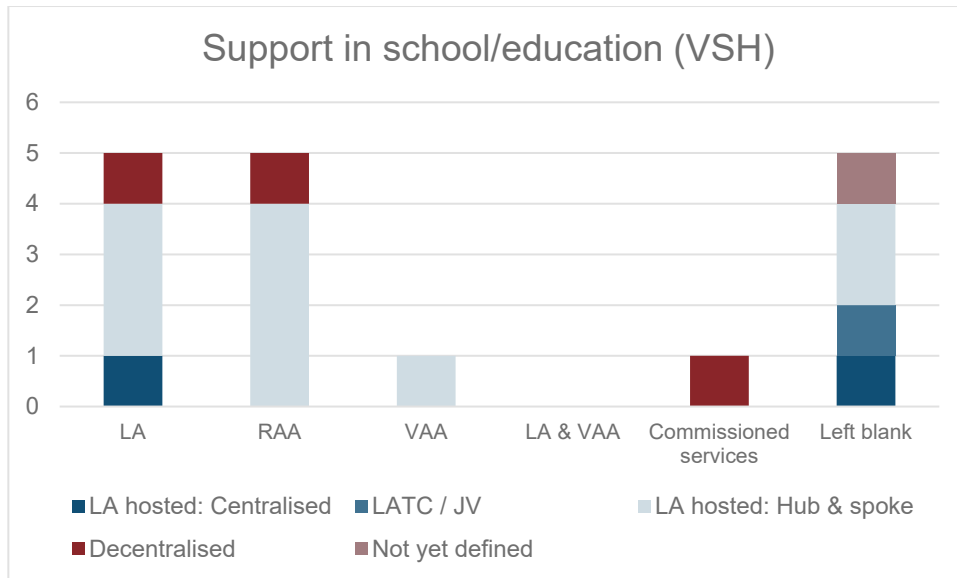
Figure 24: Searching and tracing

Searching and tracing
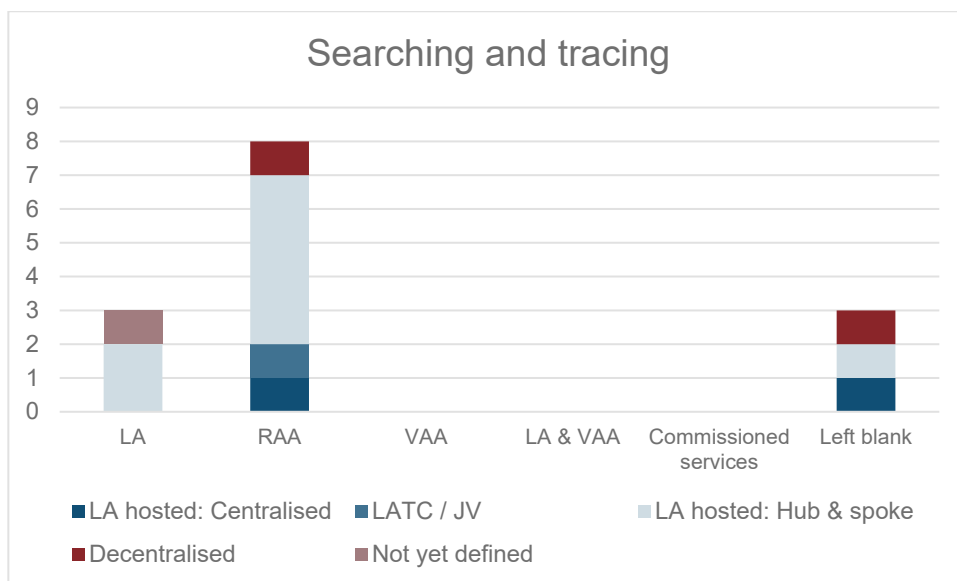
Figure 25: Intermediary services
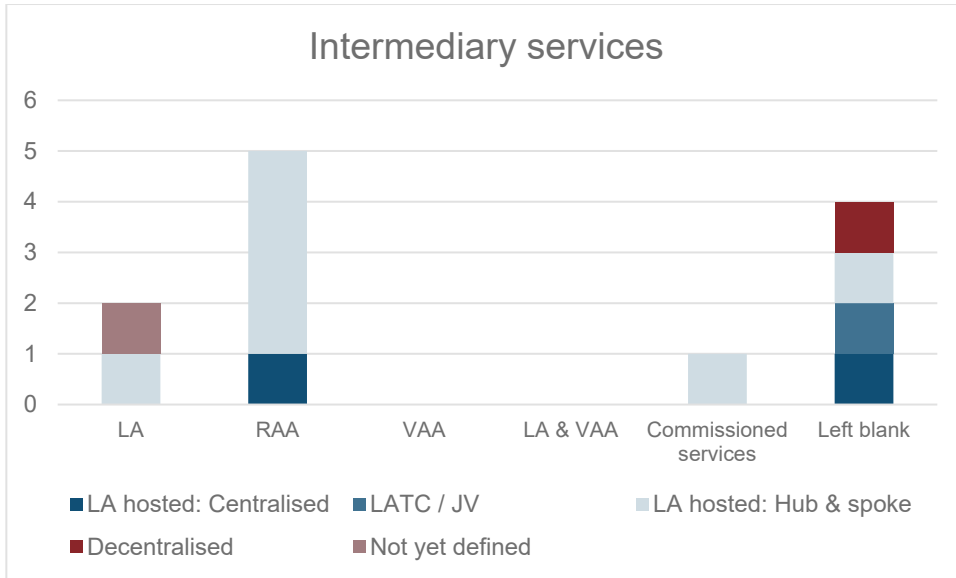
Figure 26: Step parent adoption assessments
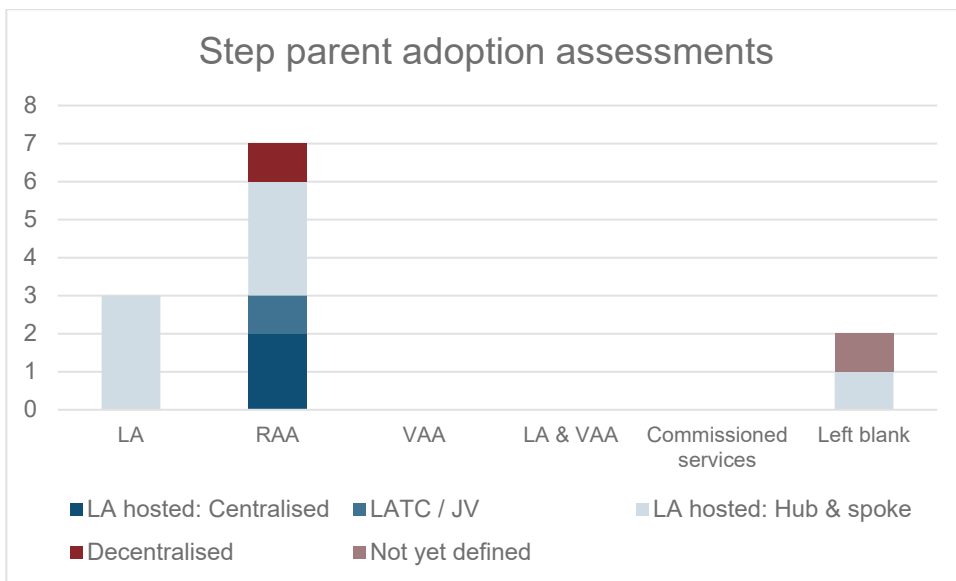
Figure 27: Intercountry adoption assessments

Intercountry adoption assessments
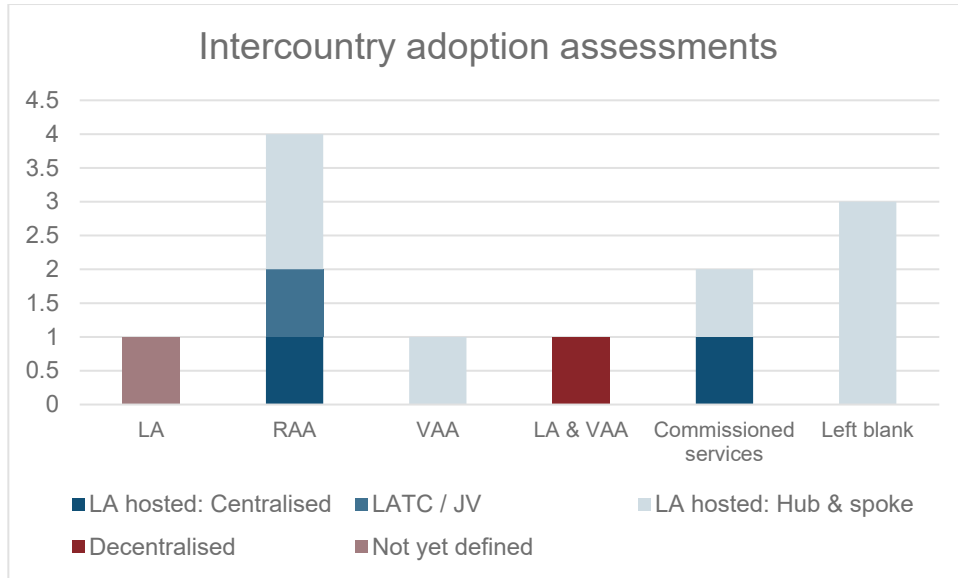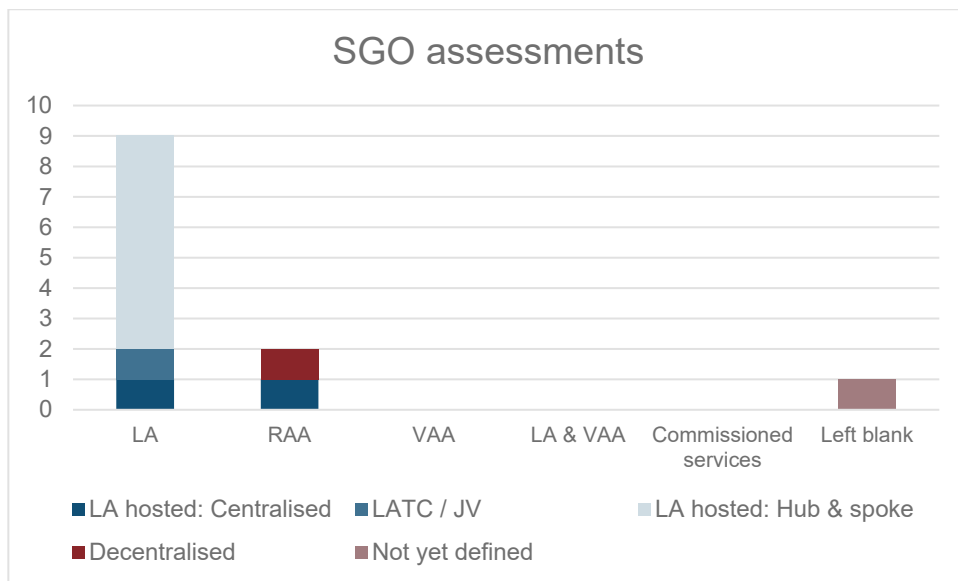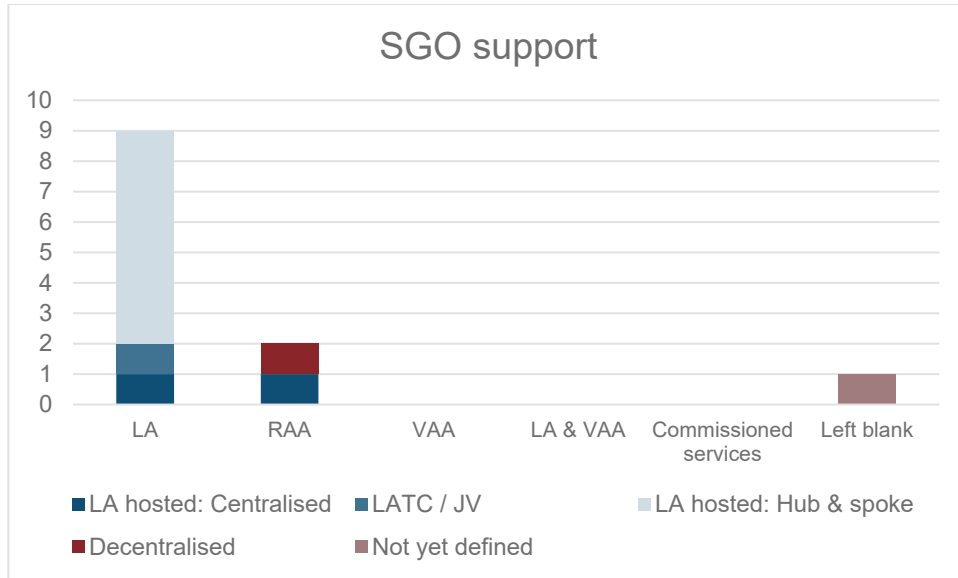
Figure 28: SGO assessments

SGO assessments

Figure 29: SGO support

SGO support