

Annual report 2021/22
and forward look



Working together to deliver
high quality adoption services
for children and families

2022





Contents

Foreword	5
Background	6
Working with adopted people	8
Working with birth families	10
Working with adopters	13
Working with the NARSG	14
Working with My Adoption Family	20
Strategic priority 1: Adopter recruitment	22
Strategic priority 2: The Journey of the child	25
Strategic priority 3: Adoption support	30
Budget and forward planning	31

Foreword

I'm proud to share with you the very first annual report for Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). This last year has been a busy one as we work together to strengthen adoption practice to provide high quality services for children and families.

I am truly honoured to have been appointed as the National Adoption Strategic Lead and remain committed to putting those with lived experience of adoption at the heart of all the work we do. Over the last year I've had the privilege to work with a passionate and committed group of RAA leaders from across the country and a small, dedicated national adoption team.

There has been an enormous amount of work undertaken so far, with various working groups led by RAA leaders, producing great insights and resources to improve services for all. We're working collaboratively across the sector with colleagues in voluntary agencies and local authorities to deliver the very best outcomes for children.

We have also worked closely with an amazing group of adopted people, birth parents and adopters to help shape and develop the key priorities. I can honestly say that I have been humbled to hear about their experiences and their ability to help us think about how we can improve practice and services to better meet their needs.

We are very early on in our journey as Regional Adoption Agency leaders and I am really pleased with the progress we have made so far. This report records the achievements and learnings over the last two years, there's still lots to do and we're only just at the start.

Sarah Johal

National Adoption Strategic Lead



Background

A Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) brings together adoption professionals from councils across a region, providing expertise and support at every stage of the adoption journey.

In 2015, the Government announced plans to regionalise adoption services to improve recruitment and support, reduce costs, and speed up matching to deliver the best outcome for children in care. Previously, the adoption system was highly fragmented with around 154 individual Local Authorities (LAs) separately recruiting and matching adopters for the children with a plan for adoption.

Much has changed since then and many LAs have come together to combine resources and form RAAs. There are currently **32 RAAs with just 2 LAs left working towards being part of an RAA.** Within the last year, RAAs have started to work more collaboratively with each other and RAA leaders now meet every month to discuss sector challenges and working practices, share ideas, monitor workstreams and commit to national practice improvements. There has also been several practice events and sector-wide training sessions for leaders and practitioners.

The work detailed in this annual report is reflective of a time when the Covid-19 pandemic rapidly changed the way in which the sector operated and recruited adopters. There were many delays across the sector which impacted the number of adoption orders being granted and the timeliness of children being matched and placed with an adoptive family.

RAA Leaders are continuing to improve adoption services and are building on some of the work undertaken by the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group (NARSG), working collaboratively with the group for ongoing improvements. Our work is built upon a commitment from all those involved in the adoption system across England to ensure that every child with adoption as their plan finds the right adoptive family to meet their needs in a timely way. RAA Leaders are committed to achieving improvement in adopter recruitment, matching, preparation, policy, practice, and support for all those whose lives are impacted by adoption.



The RAA Leaders strategic priorities are:



Recruitment (NARSG)

- Reduce the time from entry into care to children moving in with their adopters
- Increase the number and diversity of adopters to better meet the specific and emerging identity needs of all children and to enable early placements
- Ensuring everyone is treated with respect and receives an open, honest, and caring response throughout
- Raise the profile of adoption, by recognising and valuing the achievements of adopted people and their families.

Child's Journey

- Improve permanence planning through better quality decision making and use of the evidence base
- Increase the number and improve the quality and consistency of early permanence practice
- Enable development of the highest quality care planning processes, systems, and structures for children across RAAs and LAs
- Reduce delay in placement by improving matching practice and processes
- Improve the quality of information provided to adopters and children about the child's history
- Improve the planning and management of fostering placements which become adoptive placements (which are not early placements).

Adoption support

- Ensure that each child has an individual adoption support plan at the point of placement, which identifies their current and future needs. It is regularly reviewed with the children and adoptive parents to ensure it meets the changing needs of the children and family
- Children and adoptive families across the country have equal access to timely and pertinent adoption support core services
- Ensure that adoption support services are evidence based with measurable aims.



Working with adopted people

*“I feel that adopted young people and adults are increasingly being listened to, centred and involved in conversations that concern them. There is still a way to go, but **involving adopted people is the best way of helping adoption meet the needs of adopted children and adults.**”*

Feedback from an Adopted Persons Reference Group member

Over the last year, the national team have developed an Adopted Persons Reference Group supported by Advanced Practitioner Denise Smalley. The adopted people regularly meet with various working groups and RAA Leaders to ensure that those with lived experience are informing working practices and consulting on sector changes. They have advised professionals in many areas, including on the importance of more nuanced messaging about adoption and acknowledging that adoption emerges from loss and trauma to help build a more trauma informed and responsive workforce.

Individuals from the group have helped to shape and contribute to national recruitment campaigns, by taking part in You Can Adopt podcasts and working with PAC-UK to design and produce content for online conferences held in National Adoption Week (NAW) 2021. They also provide feedback on national recruitment campaign ideas to ensure adopted people are represented appropriately. Several reference group members have also individually been invited to speak at RAA events and conferences, from which many delegates fed back the added value that hearing from adopted young people and adults brings to adopter preparation and workforce development.

Reference group members have been involved in recruitment panels and invited to join the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board. Members of the Adopted Persons Reference Group also contribute to Adoption Support and Racial Disparity working groups to ensure adopted people’s voices are represented throughout the sector.

Discussions in 2021/2022 evidence that RAA leaders recognise the importance of consulting more widely with adopted people and, as a result, PAC-UK are working with us to widen consultation and to deliver some specific resources over the next year. The ongoing work with adopted people ensures they are at the heart of everything we do and represented in all areas, from public facing campaigns to sector training and preparation for adopters. We recognise that there’s still improvements to be made to make sure adopter voices are represented accurately and fairly.

Priorities for this group across each of the RAA Leaders strategic aims



Recruitment

- To see a more diverse representation of adopted people across adoption recruitment campaigns, helping adoptive parents to think about relationships and support needs across the whole lifespan
- Ensuring that health and education professionals understand and provide support for adopted people and family members
- Ensuring adopted young people and adults are more involved in developing campaigns, resources, and messaging about adoption.

Child's Journey

- To provide high quality resources, information, and support to promote and assist adoptive parents and families learning. Detailing the challenges throughout childhood and teenage years, as well as beyond into adulthood
- Ensuring all adopted people have support and know how to access it
- Ensuring resources are co-developed with people who have lived experience, as well as professionals
- To co-develop resources which support and prepare adopted children and their adoptive family for questions and attitudes they might encounter about being adopted. There is a particular importance around LGBTQ+ and transracial families to ensure their experiences are understood
- Involving adopted adults from diverse backgrounds in adopter recruitment and preparation stages and within workforce training to help widen the range of people considering adoption and deepen the understanding and knowledge of the adoption workforce.



Adoption Support

- Consult on the experience of support available to adoptive parents and adopted children across England to help understand priorities and create relevant resources
- Regularly provide information for updating resources to match emerging research and data to support the child and the adoptive family, at various stages of their life
- Adoptive parents are supported to understand the importance of maintaining sibling relationships
- Providing support and training to encourage and develop open communication within adoptive families to build and support strong relationships.



Working with birth families

“As birth parents, we are often the forgotten side of adoption meaning that our valuable input is sadly missed. Being able to share our lived experience knowing that the information we share is being used to improve things for birth parents, adopters, and adopted people is extremely empowering and a very positive development.”

Feedback from a Birth Parent Reference Group member

The Birth Parent Reference Group meet regularly to ensure that the voices of birth families are being heard and considered in the development of adoption services nationally. They impact each of the ambition groups and are also supported by Advanced Practitioner, Denise Smalley. Over the course of the year the group have been widely involved in various work across the sector and have helped to inform campaigns and strengthen understanding around the experiences of birth families. The voice of a birth mother was represented in the National Adoption Week (NAW) 2021 campaign video and materials. Birth parents from the group also produced content for online training sessions during the week.

Research evidence shows that children having ongoing relationships with their birth family helps them to better understand their identity and improve their emotional wellbeing as they move through their lives.

We're committed to ensuring that adopters and potential adopters, along with practitioners, understand the experiences and difficulties that birth families face so that relationships can be maintained and strengthened throughout their lives.

Members of the group have spoken to RAA professionals about their experiences at various events and conferences throughout the year. From their lived experiences being heard and a national emphasis on modern adoption, the group hopes this will help in developing the general public's understanding and dispel myths and assumptions around adoption. This should result in more informed and prepared prospective adoptive parents coming forward who are open to maintaining birth family relationships.

Priorities for this group across each of the strategic aims



Recruitment

- Increase public understanding of birth parents' experiences, moving away from the shame and stigma often attached. Emphasising that birth parents should be more visible throughout the recruitment of prospective adoptive parents.
- Campaigning for the importance of birth families being involved in national and regional discussions to help improve adoption recruitment, the support of adopted children, sibling relationships and the wider adoption system.
- Ensuring that birth parents and family members are involved in updating information and resources

Child's Journey

- Emphasising to sector professionals that during and following the adoption process, checks need to be carried out with birth families to ensure key information has been provided, is factual and recorded accurately.
- Emphasising to sector professionals that opportunities should be available for birth family members to contribute further to a child's history and identity. Including if additional information becomes available or if the information was unavailable at the time of the adoption.
- Ensuring that adoptive parents are helped to understand some of the benefits in maintaining a link between themselves and the birth family. That adoptive and birth families have advice and support in maintaining links and this help becomes widely available.
- Emphasising the need for better preparation and support for those adopting brothers and sisters to help maintain sibling relationships.



Adoption Support

- Ensuring that reviews of post adoption contact arrangements are more widely available, recognising that people's situations change over time.
- Encouraging more opportunities for parents and adoptive parents to meet, aiming for at least one meeting being the standard practice.
- Ensuring that adoption agencies review and update the information currently provided to birth parents to better explain the child protection stage and adoption processes.
- Help to inform practice so that future birth parents have clear advice about the different stages of the adoption process and what support is available. Ensuring that there is clear signposting to organisations that can offer support and help; this information needs to be readily available in different formats for the diverse range of birth parent's needs, including, video, British Sign Language, variety of languages and for parents with learning disabilities.



“Bringing a group of birth parents together in a really well supported manner so that we can discuss our own experiences has been a wonderful opportunity. I don’t often get to talk to other birth parents, especially those who were also victims of Domestic Abuse. It has been therapeutic and very rewarding, the support available to all of us is second to none and I have felt supported and guided throughout.”

Feedback from a Birth Parent Reference Group member

“Over the course of my involvement with the Birth Parent Reference Group I have been incredibly impressed by the level of engagement from the professionals we have met. The Ambition Leads have given shared helpful information around the processes and reasons behind various aspects of adoption, and they have actively listened and learned from us.”

Feedback from a Birth Parent Reference Group member

“There have been opportunities to be involved in training and in creating training materials for prospective adopters; this will hopefully make adoptive families less likely to experience difficulties in the long-term.”

Feedback from an Adopted Persons Reference Group member

“I have been impressed with how the messages from the adopted people within the group have been listened to by professionals working within the field, and also with how the voices of adopted people have been sought more widely beyond the Reference Group.”

Feedback from an Adopted Persons Reference Group member



Working with adopters

Engaging with adopters and potential adopters is central to all workstreams and developments, as detailed throughout this report. The adopter voice has been crucial in helping to shape services over the years and improving recruitment practices.

We regularly work with adoptive parents for recruitment campaigns, sharing real adopters’ experiences and unique journeys.

Representation is extremely important, and we aim to represent a diverse mix of adopters across all our work, showing that there is no typical adopter. We have worked hard to change perceptions of who can adopt and encourage people that previously may not have thought they could adopt to apply. This has been particularly successful in engaging with single adopters, those from an ethnic minority background and those from the LGBTQ+ community.

RAA Leaders also work with Adoption UK to help understand adopters and potential adopters current perspectives and experiences. Feedback from surveys, mystery shopping and the Adoption Barometer is used to identify areas for improvement across all services.

Working with the NARSG

RAA Leaders have been working closely with The National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group (NARSG) to deliver their commitment to improving adopter recruitment and sector practice.

The NARSG's ambitions are:



Ambition 1: Reducing delay



Ambition 2: Diversity



Ambition 3: Adopter journey



Ambition 4: Raising the profile of adoption



Ambition group 1: Reducing delay

This group has now merged into the matching workstream detailed later in the report to operate as efficiently as possible. The aim of the group was to reduce the time of children entering care to being matched with their permanent adoptive family.

The group, led by Theresa Rogers from Adopt Thames Valley, pioneered several national projects, including national profiling events, in addition to:

Deep Dive

A Deep Dive to look at the top 100 children currently waiting the longest for adoption and the top 100 adopters waiting the longest was completed. With support from Coram-i, the main outcome of the research was to obtain a greater understanding of the reasons for children and adopters waiting longest and to share any actions to help progress plans with the RAA leaders.

Activity days

Several Activity Days were held throughout the country over the course of the year provided by Coram-i. In The North West, RAAs and VAAs worked together to deliver the days and showcase the children waiting to be adopted.

Foster carers who adopt

A task and finish group, led by Shelagh Mitchell from Adoption East Midlands, reviewed a range of RAA policies and procedures used when foster carers apply to adopt a child in their care. This resulted in a written paper providing some general guidance and principles.

Ambition 2: Diversity

The aim of this group, led by Sue Lowndes from Coram Ambitious for Adoption, is to improve the diversity of adopters to better meet needs of all children. Several projects have taken place over the last year, including:



- Reflecting on the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are associated with becoming culturally self-aware and valuing diversity
- RAAs were able to demonstrate how they are planning to change in response to the experiences learned throughout the training

The participants responses, facilitators observations and feedback demonstrated that all outcomes were met. The working group therefore commissioned further training modules to panel chairs and advisors, which will be delivered between September 2022 and February 2023.

Supporting LGBTQ+ adopters with New Family Social

During the first year, the working group recognised that more needed to be done to raise awareness of the LGBTQ+ community in adoption and support their experiences accordingly. A clear plan for 2022/23 was drafted, and New Family Social was commissioned to deliver a two-year programme that includes training, policy/strategy development & research in LGBTQ+ matters from April 2022 onwards.

Panel diversity project

The group is committed to increasing the diversity of adoption panel members to best assess the needs of children and ensure fair representation for all. Ade Larigo from Agency Connection was commissioned to lead on this work and has been working closely with agencies to explore the composition of current panels, understand their panel requirements, find ways of support, and engage with services to recruit panel members that represent the communities they work in.

The work will remain ongoing into the new financial year and retain panel members, however, many RAAs have now begun to recruit one or two new panel members. Some of the new recruits are experienced panel members whilst others are new to panel role but have experience of adoption or fostering. New recruits are being provided with mentorship from Agency Connections, as part of the contract provided to RAAs.

Training and development

The working group started to plan for a series of virtual Lunch and Learn events, giving participants the opportunity to have open conversations and explore different topics which may impact diversity in their regions. The programme will run throughout 2022, with topics such

as 'Adoption Reconstruction' which will focus on listening, learning, and changing perceptions through conversations about intersectionality, Identity, racism, trauma, and adoption.

The working group also commissioned a comprehensive programme of Cultural Humility training, in partnership with Amber Greene. Each agency was offered a place for 3 practitioners and there was also a separate training session for sector leaders and managers.

The objective of the training was to support adoption service professionals in providing better support for families across England to adopt, using the lens of cultural humility. The training was positively received by the sector, some agencies also chose to commission further training for staff in their regions.

The outcomes of the program were:

- Raising awareness of the concept of cultural humility
- Enabling a discourse on the concepts of cultural competence and cultural humility
- Highlighting the role of cultural humility and its wider relevance in the context of adoption and social work practice, particularly in relation to diversity and the dynamics of difference and unconscious cultural stereotypes



Ambition 3: The adopter journey

This working group, led by Karen Barrick from Adoption Now, is committed to improving the adopter journey, ensuring that all potential adopters are welcomed and treated with respect throughout their journey.



International literature review

Coram-Baaf were requested by the working group to complete an international literature review of the content available for adopter preparation. The outcome of the review reassured the working group that the current content of the preparation in England is in line with the practice internationally.

Review of current preparation practices

This was completed by the working group in April and May 2022. The exercise provided information about the current adopter preparation and training practices. Responses were received from 27 RAAs and 11 VAAs.

Consultations with adopted people and birth family

As detailed in the first two sections of the report, we have been working extensively with adopted people and birth families' groups to share their lived experience. The National Team has commissioned PAC-UK to further support the team in the facilitation of the groups. In addition, PAC-UK will create training material with the groups that can be used nationally in adopter and staff training.

The work completed during the past year has provided the ambition group with valuable baseline information, which will enable it to start planning for the second-year activities.

Throughout the year, the main aim of the working group was to focus on creating a standard of good practice around adopter journey and adopter charter, as well as looking at front door messaging and workforce development.

After consultation with RAAs, they identified minimum standards that existed for adopter preparation and began to explore what best practice looks like in adopter journey. The steps to gain insight into this area were defined to be:

Mystery Shopper exercise

Following a procurement process, the group commissioned Mystery Shoppers Limited to conduct objective and impartial reviews to highlight what the adopters' experience of contacting adoption agencies is. Between 1st of October 2021 and March 2022 the company completed two rounds of mystery shopper exercises. Each agency was provided with a detailed report, highlighting areas for improvement going forward.

Overall, the enquiry handling section scored very well with an average score across all agencies of 81.52% with positives noted around the helpfulness and attitude of the staff member.

Adopter Voice

Adopter Consultations were commissioned to gauge adopters' experiences of adopter preparation and training. The consultations were conducted via an online survey and several adopter forums.



Ambition 4: Raising the profile of adoption

Ambition group 4 is focused on raising the profile of adoption, challenging misconceptions, and improving adopter recruitment.

The work is delivered through the You Can Adopt campaign. This work will be detailed later in the report in the RAA's strategic priority one Adopter Recruitment section.

Working with My Adoption Family

My Adoption Family (MAF) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic families as they navigate through the adoption process. They work closely with the sector and have been a member of the NARSG since it's origin, they also work on ambition groups two, three and four.

MAF plays an active role by promoting the need for recruitment of a wider diversity of adopters to better meet the specific and emerging identity needs of all children. They work closely with adopters and sector professionals to ensure that adopters are prepared to understand and address the needs of the diversity of children.

Adoption and Muslims in England Toolkits

Through February 2021 to September 2021 MAF worked with a wide range of sector professionals and experts to develop targeted toolkits for the adoption sector to better inform practice. The three toolkits produced were:

1. **Toolkit 1** – For recruitment and marketing professionals and social workers within the adoption sector. This Toolkit had a specific focus on addressing recruitment barriers and gives advice on improving the experience of BAME and Muslim adopters.
2. **Toolkit 2** - For the general Muslim community and wider population, addressing issues around the process of adoption and Islamic perspectives. It gives practical guidance on adoption from a faith-based perspective.
3. **Toolkit 3** - For Imams, leaders, and influencers in the Muslim community, detailing how they can promote adoption and raise awareness amongst their communities.

Tapping into the extensive knowledge base of the challenges faced by Muslim communities around adoption to develop the toolkits, MAF engaged with:

- Over 60 leading figures from across the Muslim community, including experts by experience, researchers, adopters, faith leaders, influencers, care professionals and politicians
- Sought the input of over 30 care professionals and social workers from beyond the Muslim community
- Included the views of Muslim adopters and care experienced young people

MAF continue to engage with various scholars from the Muslim community to feedback the insight to RAAs, giving access to views and fatawa (ruling points on Islamic law) on topics related to adoption. They have also produced other documents, such as detailed questions and answer sheets, from regular monthly Q&A sessions with Muslim adopters, social workers and faith advisors that help to inform practice.

Advisory Group for Muslim heritage children in care

As part of their work on Ambition Group 3, MAF launched an advisory group of experts by experience, researchers, academics, Imams, social workers and care experienced Muslims to oversee the work being done in the adoption sector around:

1. The support available for adopters of Muslim heritage children
2. The support available for Muslim adopters
3. The support available for Muslim adopted people

The group offers recommendations to sector professionals on how they can improve services, as well offering their insight on future developments.

The MAF Adopter Buddy Scheme

Throughout the year, MAF have been providing an informal buddying service through its active support network for prospective Muslim adopters. The buddying service has proved successful in offering extensive support, it involves pairing new and prospective adopters with more experienced ones to share their experiences and offer advice.

The scheme has now been formalised into a service known as the Adopter Buddy Scheme. A pilot project will run from July to December 2022, with an aim to roll out a national buddy scheme service from 2023 for all adopters at stage 1.

Social Worker Reflective Space Programme

Building on the success of their work this year, MAF launched a Social Worker Reflective Space programme. The programme aims to provide a safe space for social workers to discuss issues and challenges around Muslim, Black and Asian and Minority Ethnic adopters.

It will help to facilitate a better understanding of the interplay of faith, culture, and religion within the adoption context, addressing the discrimination these groups may face by exploring concepts such as The Other-Race Effect (ORE) and intersectionality. The main goal of the programme is to help participants overcome barriers and achieve better outcomes, while learning about different approaches to working with Muslim adopters or those from an ethnic minority background.



Strategic Priority 1: Adopter Recruitment

RAA Leaders work with the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group (NARSG) to deliver data-driven, targeted recruitment campaigns designed to increase the number of adopters coming forward and change public perceptions around adoption. This work is delivered by a cross-sector group with Karen Barrick from Adoption Now taking a lead role on behalf of RAA leaders.

This work is delivered under the '#YouCanAdopt' campaign name and brings together all major stakeholders in the delivery of adoption services across England for national adoption campaigns.

The group recognises its responsibilities to adopted people, birth families and adoptive families in ensuring that public facing campaigns give a fair and balanced picture of adoption. Adoption is a complex and emotional process which has lifelong impact. All national campaigns strive to ensure that public opinion is informed by the experiences and voices of those whose lives have been changed through adoption. We do this by regularly consulting with adopted people, birth families and adopters and involving them at various stages of the campaign planning process.

The original campaign launched in 2020 with an aim to raise the profile and understanding of adoption in England, bust myths around who is eligible to adopt and encourage a wider diversity of adopters to come forward. It ran for 12 weeks, and we worked with 6 test agencies to scale up the evaluation which resulted in:



10,000+
enquiries
(attendance at an information event, expression of interest or informal visit)



2,240
registrations of interest



1,344
total approvals
(after 12 months)

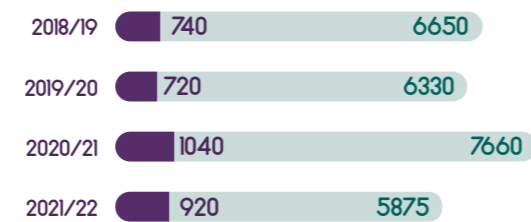


Ethnicity of Adopters

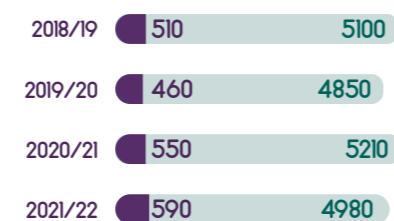
Key:

● Ethnic Minority Adopters* ● White Adopters

Registrations



Approved



Source: ASGLB Quarterly Data Collection 2018/19-2021/22
* Excludes white minorities



This work has resulted in an overall increase in the number of potential adopters coming forward. Over the last four years there has been an increase in Ethnic Minority (excludes White minorities) adopter registrations and approvals too, indicating a more diverse adopter population.

At the end of 21/22 Ethnic Minority (excludes White minorities) adopters accounted for:



13% (920n)
of all individual adopter registrations, an increase of 3 percentage points when compared to 2018/19



11% (590n)
of all individual adopter approvals, an increase of 2 percentage points when compared to 2018/19

Responding to ASGLB data, the campaigns that followed over the last year have addressed the shortage of adopters willing to adopt family groups and target adopters from the Black African and Black Caribbean communities.

In April 2021 we launch the national brother's and sister's campaign which aimed to raise awareness of why it's important to adopt siblings and encourage adopters to consider adopting family groups together. To motivate potential adopters and open their minds to adopting family groups, we focused on the advantages of adopting brothers and sisters together and the unique benefits of the family bond. We created a short film that brought these advantages to life with our three case study families' experiences at the core.

To tell their stories, we used a combination of a fun question and answer game and more probing interviews. The film set out to:

- Focus on successful placements that feature relatable family scenarios
- Celebrate the joys, and openly talk about the challenges that come with family groups
- Highlight the benefits of adopting a ready-made family

The impactful main film was used across earned, paid and social media, with separate more in-depth themed films created for the You Can Adopt website. A toolkit of campaign messaging, assets and statistics was developed to support all RAAs, VAAs and LAs with regional roll-out. They received a suite of targeted collateral that they're able to use to promote adopting siblings locally.

The campaign landing page received over 14,000 visits, with



1,320

people going through to an agency website to start their adoption journey.

Black Adopters Campaign

We also launched a Black Adopters campaign, aiming to recruit more adopters from Black African and Black Caribbean communities. There were two aspects of the campaign, one which focused on bespoke content creation, online targeting of digital media and national PR coverage. The other had a unique community outreach approach which involved street ambassadors in key areas engaging with communities and encouraging them to consider adoption. The total reach of media coverage was over 6m, with a social reach of 1.7m aiming to raise awareness. On the direct enquiry campaign materials,



over 3,600

people clicked through to find an adoption agency after visiting the Black adopters page on the You Can Adopt website which resulted in a



37%

increase in ROI's from same adopters.

National Adoption Week 2021

From consulting with adopted people and birth families, as well as sector leaders, it was decided that National Adoption Week in 2021 would move away from being recruitment focused. The week was instead used to educate and inform the public on modern adoption. This was done through an honest exploration of the many voices of those whose lives have been impacted by adoption; adopted children, adopted adults, adoptive parents, birth families, social workers and family members who watched loved ones go through the adoption process. Our film which showcased the different voices has been viewed over 21,000 times. Despite not being a recruitment campaign, it resulted in over 7,000 visits to the You Can Adopt website, almost 500 of which went on to enquire with an adoption agency. We also facilitated several events for adopters, potential adopters, adopted people, birth parents and professionals during and after National Adoption Week.




We gather life stories for our campaigns from across England, establishing and creating a range of messages and resources that no individual agency or organisation could achieve alone. Each campaign has a detailed evaluation report that is shared with the whole sector to inform their local recruitment strategies. We have also commissioned training session for RAA recruitment leads, focusing on helping them recruit Black and Muslim adopters.



Strategic Priority 2: The Journey of the Child

Improving the journey of the child as they progress through the adoption process remains a key priority for sector leaders. The group is led by Nik Flavell from Adopt North East and Scott Crawford from Together for Adoption.

The programme aims to develop the highest quality care planning processes, systems, and structures for children across RAAs and LAs, increase the quantity and quality of Early Permanence placements and reduce delay in placement by improving matching practice and processes. The programme has been broken down into the following workstreams:

-  Early Permanence (EP)
-  Matching & Link Maker
-  Social Work Practice, Systems and Processes

Early Permanence Workstream

RAA Leader, Vicky Davidson-Boyd from Adopt Tees Valley leads on this work which aims to improve the number and the quality of EP placements nationally. While also identifying areas for potential innovation and ensuring that EP carers receive appropriate support.

A survey of practice across all RAAs and VAAs was conducted and showed that interpretations of the terms relating to EP varies among agencies, this remains a significant challenge for the workstream.

The group aims to reach a collective understanding on a national level and promote the following principles:

Early Permanence should be used as the universal term for placements, including with foster carers who are also approved as adopters.

Fostering for Adoption and Concurrent Planning should be seen as two routes to achieving early permanence for children. Attention should be paid to identifying the right children and carers for each approach with the aim of:

- maximising the number of children who can benefit from EPs
- maximising the number of carers who feel able to take on these routes to adoption.

The development of concurrent planning services to be supported across a wide geographical area as possible.

All EP carers should be prepared for the possibility that any child in such a placement may return to their birth family.

EP carers to transport children to contact with birth families and develop an ongoing relationship with them, where possible.

RAAs should abandon and discourage any language which suggests that the prospect of a child returning to birth family is a 'risk' and adopt more positive language.

Three subgroups have been set up with the purpose of delivering the aims of the programme:

1. The Data and Research Subgroup

This group seeks to establish and analyse baseline performance data on EP placements, addressing the need for more research into early permanence.

Lancaster University, with support from Coram-i, conducted a data analysis programme into current EP practice and available data which showed that **nationally, approximately 12% of all adoption placements are early permanence**. However, this varies among regions with 33% in one RAA to less than 2% in the lowest performing. It is suspected that LAs report this data in different ways and we now have a methodology in place for analysing data in the future.

Lancaster University has also made a proposal for a future research programme which will involve further data analysis and feedback from EP adopters, birth parents and staff to better understand what constitutes 'best practice'. This will feed into the development of national standards for early permanence and involve further work to agree common definitions of EP related terms, together with more robust data collection.

2. The Practice and Service Development Subgroup

This working group is made up of EP managers and practitioners, it seeks to analyse current best practice to improve standards. The group acts as a consultative forum for other developments, such as the national standards and research priorities.

Development workshops take place bi-monthly, with up to 50 practitioners from RAAs and VAAs attending virtually. Practitioners share their experience of:

- Developing the wider workforce
- Recruitment and support of EP carers (including peer-to-peer support)
- Supporting and supervising contact

This group will contribute to the development of National Standards for Early Permanence and consult on the various other projects taking place. An Early Permanence Conference is planned for Winter 2022/23.



Commissioned projects

AGENCY	TITLE
Adopt Thames Valley	EP specific Buddy Scheme EP Book project for children A multi-perspective film about early permanence
Adoption West/South West	To refresh and strengthen the Early Permanence culture across the RAA within LAs and with the courts and cafcass
North East/Cumbria	To strengthen the Early Permanence offer for children across North East and Cumbria
Yorks and Humber	EP practice improvement across the five LAs/ VAAs, RAAs and courts development of specific peer mentoring scheme
London	Revive and develop EP in London
North West	Scoping project to develop Fostering for Adoption for children aged 4-8 years
Midlands Together Collaboration (MTC)	Review of regional practice
Adopt East and Adoption Connects	To strengthen the Early Permanence offer for children across the RAAs and LAs

3. The Commissioning Subgroup

This working group oversees the distribution of funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to support developments in EP. In the last financial year 8 projects were commissioned following a successful bidding process.

A further 15 RAAs have been funded to undertake the **Early Permanence Quality Mark** process, with applications for more RAAs to take part continuing throughout the year.

The DfE has made available a further £1 million of funding per year over the next three years for the development of EP services. A second round of commissioning is now taking place focused on the following priorities:

- Funding underdeveloped EP services
- Increase the coverage of concurrent planning services on a pan-regional basis, particularly where no service is currently accessible
- Funding of further data collection and analysis
- Funding for best practice research to support the development and roll out of national standards
- Establishing an innovation fund to support EP carers and placements, as well as developing contact services and birth family engagement



Matching Workstream

This workstream is led by Shelagh Mitchell from Adoption East Midlands, with the aim to reduce delay in placement by improving matching practice and processes. The priorities are:

For children:

Improved and speedier permanency opportunities through early, consistent, and accurate assessment of matching and placement needs.

Greater placement stability through earlier placement and better understanding of children's support needs.

Earlier attachments, reducing impacts of trauma and loss and improving life outcomes.

Providing the **best possible permanency opportunity** for all children in the system by ensuring those likely to wait longer are identified earlier and family finding plans put in place.

Reducing delay for children by diversifying the regional pool of adopters.

For Adoptive families:

Increased opportunity in finding the right match through coordinated national family finding.

Confidence to come forward to adopt due to greater transparency within the system.

More timely matching and placement, leading to earlier attachments.

Adopters will be **more aware of the needs of children** waiting and better prepared to meet them.

Greater **placement stability from tailored, informed adoption support packages** secured at the point of placement.

Matching data

This subgroup has been developed to address various issues relating to the available matching data across RAAs. It is not clear that RAAs use data from Link Maker at all, and the data is not currently linked in any way to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board's (ASGLB) data. Contextual understanding of data sets is also not currently understood or reported at either RAA or national level, and there are discrepancies between RAA data and that of the ASGLB.

Throughout the last year, preparations have been taking place to improve matching data nationally, with various projects taking place throughout 2022/23. Future plans include creating a matching data dashboard to help RAAs assess their own performance against relevant benchmarks. Further consultation will also take place with stakeholders on the benefits of linking ASGLB data with Link Maker data.

Review of Link Maker and its usage

Consultation with RAAs has taken place to gain an understanding of their usage of Link Maker. The findings show that there is not a consistent understanding nationally, with usage varying across different regions. Adopter feedback also highlighted their challenges of using the service, following which Link Maker have created an advice and guidance document to address concerns.

This work has prepared a baseline to improve agencies use of Link Maker going forward, with RAA Leaders agreeing to develop a more strategic approach to commissioning and communicating with Link Maker. A post has been created on the national team structure to support this, with an extensive amount of work due to take place over the coming years.

Additionally, we have identified a small group of practitioners to form a 'Link Maker User group', the priorities will include:

- Being a regular point of contact between RAA Practitioners and Link Maker
- Identifying and resolving Link Maker system issues for improvement
- Identifying potential practice developments using Link Maker
- Identifying issues for resolution through the commissioning group

As of the end of March 22, the number of children with a placement order (PO) waiting to be matched for longer than 18 months decreased by:



26%

showing a significant improvement in the timeliness of matching services.

Commissioning of Matching Development Projects

The DfE has made significant funds, amounting to £5 million over three years, available for matching development and improvement. A commissioning strategy has been agreed with the following priorities to be completed in the next financial year and beyond:

Short Term/Quick wins (0-9 months)

The funding is likely to be used for one-off initiatives which will improve matching practice, systems, and processes. These could involve:

- Early identification of priority children (e.g. Using the Flag Tool)
- Recruitment campaigns for Individual children with specific needs
- Support to individual or small groups of children and sibling groups for whom traditional approaches, systems and resources have not worked or are not likely to work
- Campaigns targeted on categories of adopters such as those who work in the caring professions or adopters from ethnic minorities
- Training for staff
- Proposals which meet the support needs of children and carers
- Proposals which reduce local barriers to speedier matching

Medium to long Term (6-36 months)

The team has sought proposals for innovative service developments which will be delivered over a two to three-year period and which will:

- Significantly improve matching for children who wait the longest
- Be scalable (if evaluations prove positive) and sustainable into the future.



Social Work Practice, Systems and Processes

This work focuses on improving the relationship between RAAs, LAs and VAAs to enable all to provide the best outcomes for children with a plan for adoption.

The development of RAAs has presented the sector with opportunities for strategic development in matching and family finding practice. However, the regionalisation has left LAs without adoption expertise which is exclusively and readily available to their decision-making processes. For example, RAAs are not automatically included in care planning decisions and processes.

It was considered necessary in all areas of the country to develop a stream of work to address these issues and to ensure that adoption expertise is consulted in important decisions such as 'Should be Placed for Adoption' decisions (SHOBPA) or decisions to change a child's care plan away from adoption. The workstream identified three short-to-medium term priorities:

- Agency Decision Making
- Early Identification of children who may require an adoption placement or who may take longer to place.
- Maintaining birth family relationships – ensuring that this issue is properly considered in the care planning process.

Working alongside RAA Leaders, CoramBAAF has been commissioned to develop a workshop for Agency Decision Makers, which proved particularly timely in the wake of the Somerset judgement and Care Review.

This workstream was only just forming throughout this financial year and will be ongoing over the next few years, with many developments due to take place.

Strategic Priority 3: Adoption Support

The Adoption Support (AS) priority group is made up of representatives from RAAs and VAAs, led by Alison Lewis from Adoption West. The main aim of the group is to ensure that all families across the country can access high quality adoption support services.



The group have been working towards creating national guidance principles in adoption support practice to establish a best practice view of support that all agencies can adhere to. The first-year projects aimed to create a good understanding of the current services as a baseline and identify what improvements are needed. The work is being delivered in two phases; the first consists of adoption support service reviews, consultations, data analysis work and best practice events that helped to define the core offer for early help and shape the core adoption support offer.

Adoption support brief service reviews

The AS working group have commissioned brief service reviews of the current adoption support practices using the AS Blueprint Audit Tool.

The reviews provided each RAA with detailed information about their services to identify areas for potential improvement. Three RAAs were initially selected to pilot the work and were supported by an independent consultant to complete the reviews. Feedback from all participants was positive and have helped to inform the next stages.

Following the pilots, the review tool was amended and the decision was made to offer the review to other agencies. Twelve agencies signed up for reviews and three consultants were commissioned to support the work. When aggregated on a national level, it's possible to build a national picture of adoption support improvement needs.

The working group also commissioned Adopter Voice to conduct a survey among adopters who have used support services within the past three years to gain a better understanding of what services are offered to adopters.

The survey also formed an understanding of where support services are best regionally and what adopters' experiences of using those services are. The survey was shared widely within the Adopter Voice membership, throughout RAAs, VAAs and specialist agencies. The results have been shared with all agencies to inform ongoing improvement. In addition, adopters were invited to take part in virtual adopter consultation forums to further develop a deeper understanding of access to support services. Report of the consultations will be shared with the working group.

Lack of national adoption support data makes it difficult to measure the delivery and effectiveness of adoption support services. It is not currently possible to make meaningful comparisons between agencies or to identify good practice and areas that require improvement. The Adoption Data Team, chaired by Gail Spray from Adoption Counts, was set up to build a national adoption support data set. The team has made good progress throughout the last year in defining the Core AS Data. The work has included agreeing data points and clear definitions for those points, with an objective to consult with key stakeholders with a view to going live from April 2023.

Staff Development is another key part of the AS development work. The group commissioned Coram-Baaf to deliver three half-day webinars for practitioners and one webinar for managers with an aim to "Reframe adoption support assessment in a context of relational work".

Looking forward, the group will invite adoption support practitioners to an in-person practitioner event in London in late 2022 to network and share good practice across the agencies. Julie Selwyn has agreed to be the keynote speaker and seven workshops delivered by AS staff across the agencies will showcase examples of innovative practice in adoption support. A small working group is also creating a practice guidance for adoption support case transfer between agencies aiming to create a form and practice guide by the end of December 2022.

Budget and Forward Planning

The work detailed in this report is funded and supported by the Department for Education. Please see a breakdown of annual funds below:

Key Projects Supported:

- 8 pan regional Early Permanence adoption projects

Annual budget from DfE funding:

DfE GRANT	AMOUNT AWARDED
Early Permanence	£500,000.00
National Team	£419,000.00
Recruitment	£1,000,000.00
Total	£1,919,000.00

Forward planning for 2022/23 budget:

DfE GRANT	AMOUNT AWARDED
National Team 2022/23	£500,000.00
Early Permanence 2022/23	£1,000,000.00
Adoption Recruitment 2022/23	£500,000.00
Matching 2022/23	£1,000,000.00
Total	£3,000,000.00

As detailed throughout the report, RAAs are applying to the national team for funding specific projects. The funding is also intended to be used for:

- VAA/RAA/LA training and events
- Adoption Support Practice Event
- YouCanAdopt recruitment campaigns
- National Adoption Week 2022
- Pan regional early permanence projects
- National activity and play days
- Providing webinar/training places
- Commissioning further research and data analysis





Working together to deliver
high quality adoption services
for children and families

