



Adoption  
England

regional adoption agencies working together

Annual Report  
2022/23





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## Foreword

This is the second annual report for Regional Adoption Agencies.

Just to recap there are 32 Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) across England. The National Adoption Strategy Team works with RAA leaders to support them in delivering high quality adoption services for children and families. This collaboration has been recently rebranded to **Adoption England, regional adoption agencies working together.**

Each local authority provides services for looked after children and works with children where adoption may be an appropriate plan. Regional Adoption Agencies provide a range of services including the recruitment of adopters, matching, placing children for adoption and adoption support services. Nationally, the Adoption England Strategic Team strive to work with RAAs and others across the sector to achieve consistency and efficient coordination of adoption services.

The team are working to ensure that children, young people, and those with lived experience of adoption form and shape the development and delivery of services across the country.

During the last year we have been looking at the data and identifying better ways to measure how we are doing across the country. There are some differences up and down the country and this helps us look at how we can work to improve performance all over England. Work is progressing to pilot an adoption support dataset to help us identify and respond better to the needs of children and families affected by adoption through to adulthood.

We continue to listen to adopters, adopted people and birth families and what they say influences how we change adoption services. I am forever grateful. We have more work to do with hearing from children and young people and this will be progressed over the next year.

We set ourselves a few priorities this year and we have made some good progress on these. There are still several challenges ahead, particularly to improve adoption support services but we are mid-way through several projects that we think will improve things for the future.

**Sarah Johal MBE**

National Adoption Strategic Lead



# Adoption England Programme Overview

## Key Achievements

This is led by Sarah Johal (National Adoption Strategic Lead) and supported by Eva Booth (Programme Manager).



Agreement reached for information and awareness raising EP with judges agreed with the judicial college.



12

matching projects have set up to improve matching practice – including work on improving the collection and use of data; RAAs delivering matching activity days together for specific groups of children. It is good to see that there has been a 13% decrease in children with harder to place characteristics waiting more than 18 months.



31

new panel members from black and minority ethnic communities over 17 RAAs resulting in an increase in the diversity of adoption panel membership.



Improving adoption services for adults project commenced to identify and urgently address barriers to tracing and support services for adults affected by adoption.



National practice standards launched for Early Permanence (EP).



A national adoption support transfer protocol agreed ensuring that when children and families move to a new area, support arrangements are transferred more seamlessly.



19

EP projects are in progress across the country raising awareness about the benefits for children and increasing the availability of carers and improving support for all involved.



Mystery shopping exercises have improved the service provided for prospective adopters.



Training has been delivered for local authority agency decision makers to discuss legislative and regulatory context with relevant case law to improve consistency of practice across the country with regard to decision making for children regarding adoption.



14%

increase in children benefitting from early permanence and therefore having one less move whilst in foster care.



248

increase in the number of black and ethnic minority approved adopters from 450 in 2020 to 698 in 2023.



# Working with Adopted People

*“For me it’s about having a say in shaping adoption in the future. Recognising previous and current shortfalls and coming up with relevant solutions.”*

- Adult adoptee and reference group member.

The adopted persons reference group, led by Denise Smalley (Advanced Practitioner) regularly consult and engage with regional adoption agency leaders and the national team to inform the work being delivered across all the workstreams. Members of the group have played a crucial part in the public facing adopter recruitment campaigns, delivered under the You Can Adopt (YCA) campaign. Group members challenged professionals regarding the proposed direction of the 2022 A Life less Ordinary campaign and the creative direction was changed based on their feedback. Due to their input, the representation of children from priority groups became more achievable and we were able to recruit child actors to represent the priority children who made up the ‘children as experts’ panel central to the campaign. Whilst the children featured were actors, the adoptive parents responding to the expert panel were all approved adoptive parents and this led to a rich discussion on what children need from the adopters we recruit. Group members were really pleased to have been listened to, knowing their views are valued and respected.

The reference group members and other adopted people have presented at national and regional conferences and workshops, interviewing new team members of the national team and being involved in round-table discussions, as well as creating a resource for professionals in the sector offering advice for working with adopted people.

A podcast from You Can Adopt, featuring an adopted adult exploring the issues of identity, birth relatives, and relationships was developed to provide a valuable resource along the adoption journey. Listen to the podcast here: <https://www.youcanadopt.co.uk/the-importance-of-heritage-and-identity>.

In November, we appointed a dedicated Voice and Influence Lead, Hannah Jones, to work on involving children and young people to support RAAs and influence the national work being delivered. The work is still in its infancy, with a mapping exercise completed looking at the current picture across regional agencies, identifying areas of good practice and areas for development. Strategic guidance and practical advice continues to be shared to those RAAs aiming to develop their own voice and influence opportunities for young people in their area or across RAAs.

Work has started with established young people’s groups within RAAs, looking to create opportunities for those young people to communicate and collaborate more closely together, with a view to developing a national youth voice around adoption. A young person’s version of the national adoption strategy has been developed and will be used to inform and consult with adopted children and young people and in addition, a voice and influence practitioners’ network will be established to support staff across the RAAs.

## Priorities for this work across each of the workstreams are:

- Ensuring adopted young people are more involved in developing campaigns, resources, and messaging about adoption.
- Ensuring resources are co-developed with people who have lived experience, as well as professionals.
- Consult on the experience of support available for, and issues faced by, adopted children across England to help understand priorities and create relevant resources.
- Providing support and training to encourage and develop open communication within adoptive families to build and support strong relationships.

**Key achievement** – 7 RAAs who previously had no voice and influence offer for adopted people now have project plans in place, with young people’s groups due to start running soon.

**Key challenges faced** – for RAAs: staff capacity/Voice and Influence knowledge/resources. For the national team: *time to get round all the RAAs to provide support needed.*

**Key next step** – establishing the practitioners’ network to support staff.



## Working with Birth Families

*"I feel change is happening in a small way, but that has a massive difference on how people see birth families."*

- Feedback from a birth parent and reference group member

The Birth Parents reference group, led by Denise Smalley, (Advanced Practitioner) has diversified over the last year and new members are ensuring we have a broad representation of people involved. The group meet every quarter to discuss developments within the sector and consult on current work projects. Members of the group also contribute to other workstreams such as the Maintaining Significant Relationships Sub-group.

The group contribute to all national campaigns including National Adoption Week and consult on the campaign creative direction to consider how birth families are portrayed. During National Adoption Week 2022, PAC-UK were commissioned to develop two online conference style events, one was focused on birth parents experiences and views and the other was around adoptee experiences. There were other NARSG funded events during this National Adoption Week that members of the reference group were involved in during dedicated workshops for sector professionals.



Reference group members also contributed to research projects with UEA which resulted in the briefing paper Seeking Connections: How Adoption Agencies Respond to Requests from Intermediary Agencies to Support Reunions Between Adopted Adults and Their Birth Families.

Whilst there is not yet an established group of birth parents consulting alongside the Early Permanency workstream, discussions have recently started. To promote inclusion of birth mothers' perspectives and the need for compassionate support during such arrangements, we have been grateful to highlight the fantastic work of the Hope Mums and Claire Mason at Lancaster University, who together with a dedicated group of midwives have created the Hope Boxes- and Giving Hope project. Child & Family Justice Research (cfj-lancaster.org.uk). H.O.P.E in the Hope Boxes stands for Hold On Pain Eases.

To raise awareness of the project and to promote uptake we were pleased that Claire Mason and a "Hope Mum" were able to deliver a Giving Hope, Workshop at the Adoption England Early Permanency Conferences in Leeds and London.

### Insights from adopted people and birth parents from PAC-UK Big Consult

The commissioned surveys of adult adoptees and birth parents were launched by PAC-UK and give rich, important feedback which deserve to be acted upon. Reference group members were instrumental in the initial discussions about the surveys and several members have been involved in surrounding activities.

Big Consults via PAC-UK launched- <https://www.pac-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/PAC-UK-Big-Consult-of-Adopted-People-FINAL.pdf> and <https://www.pac-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/PAC-UK-Big-Consult-of-Birth-Parents-FINAL.pdf>

### Key findings from the report reveal that:

- Over 70% of adopted people state there is not enough information about why they were adopted and about their birth parents
- 85% of adopted people had attempted contact with birth parents after reaching 18 and 92% were glad that they did
- 76% of adopted people said that direct contact with birth parents should be standard practice
- 90% of adopted people feel that adoption should be more open
- 77% of adopted people accessed mental health support as an adult
- 50% of birth parents cite mental health issues as a main factor in a child's removal, 84% of birth parents have mental health issues currently
- 62% of birth parents had contact with children when they were over 18, as adults

The Adoption England reference group members also contributed to two short films exploring the perspectives of adopted adults and birth parents. The films provide valuable insight and are available for adoption agencies to use in the training of prospective of adoptive parents.

*"I never thought after losing my children four years ago I would be helping to change adoption. Especially after going through care and adoption myself."*

- Feedback from a birth parent and reference group member

## Working with Adoptive Parents

The voice of adopters has been crucial in helping to shape services over the years and improving recruitment practices. We continue to listen to adoptive parents' views and ensure that they're actively informing the scope of works and recruitment of new adoptive parents. We regularly feature the lives and views of adopters throughout mainstream campaigns and social media activity, aiming to highlight the reality of adoption and share key considerations for future adopters coming forward.

Adoption England and regional adoption agency leaders work with Adoption UK to understand the views of adopters and take that into consideration across all the workstreams. We also have conducted a national survey over the last year to have a better understanding of adopted parents' views and priorities.



## Strategic Priority 1: Adopter Recruitment

The recruitment of new adopters remains a priority as there is a consistent need to find adopters for the children who would typically wait the longest to find their permanent home. The Adoption England strategic team works with the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group (NARSG) to implement the national strategy for recruiting new adopters and run campaigns and activity throughout the year. While the current data shows that there are more adopters in the system than there are children waiting to be adopted, there is a disconnect with the matching of these two groups and there's still a significant need to find the right type of adopters who can be matched with the children waiting. Data shows that children in sibling groups, those with additional or complex needs, those children over 5 years old and those from an ethnic minority background wait the longest to be adopted and recruitment activity remains focused on trying to find adopters for children with these characteristics.

Also, in the last year we ran *A Life Less Ordinary* campaign, aimed at recruiting adopters for children who typically wait longer. We recruited a diverse set of parents who were able to talk about their experiences of adopting a child who would typically wait longer. They represented a variety of parents as well as each of the different child groups.

In the film and social content, this included Adam and Daniyal (LGBTQ+ couple who adopted a mixed heritage child), Sharon (single parent who adopted a mixed heritage child), Malcolm and Shelley (couple who adopted siblings and a child with additional physical needs) and Randhiraj (parent who adopted an older child). Each contributor provided their honest and authentic experiences of adoption, demonstrating the huge value adopting a child from one

of these groups adds to your life, while also balancing this by openly discussing some of the challenges. Other real-life stories were also recruited to be involved in additional media opportunities across broadcast and online articles.

We commissioned a national survey of 2,015 adults across England to gather statistics on the public's understanding and perception of adopting children, and in particular those children who wait longest. This helped inform recruitment practices and messaging, **which resulted in over 50 mainstream PR pieces, a 33.5% website conversion rate, and an average of 82 initial enquiries per agency during the 2-week campaign period.** We continue to follow up with agencies to track initial enquiries throughout the adoption journey.

A dedicated campaign for National Adoption Week (NAW) 2022 explored the importance of identity and relationships for adopted people, with the hope being that perspective adopters who saw the campaign will be more open to contact with birth relatives, realising the impact this has on an adopted child's identity and wellbeing.



Tiegan, who speaks with her birth father in the main film for National Adoption Week and was adopted by her two mums says:

*“I think it’s important to be told you’re adopted from the very beginning - my mums knew they weren’t just adopting me, they were adopting my whole history and family as well. There are still struggles - you’ll never get every piece of information. But there were four years of my life before I was adopted, and that’s still part of my story.”*

To elevate the campaign for NAW and provide additional content for media to write about, we sourced the latest existing data on adoption in England and facilitated a new national public survey to gain a better understanding of public attitudes around adoption and identity. We produced a range of materials, including a dedicated podcast with Ashley John Baptise on the importance of heritage and identity, for agencies to use and raise awareness in their regional areas. There was a whole series of events for adopted people, adopters, birth families and the sector running during National Adoption Week and the week after focused on identity, relationships and belonging. See information below on the events we held during National Adoption Week.

## National Adoption Week Events

Adoption UK	PAC-UK	CoramBAAF	My Adoption Family (MAF)
Building your network: <b>54</b>	The voices and stories of adopted people: Identity & relationships: <b>220+</b>	Maintaining relationships in adoption: <b>71</b>	Directly engage with all mosques in England (direct contact or email): <b>531</b>
Adopting an older child: <b>35</b>	The voices and stories of birth families: The importance of connection and relationships in adoption: <b>180+</b>	What part do relationships play in our social care services? <b>25</b>	Distribute leaflets and posters to all mosques in England: <b>52,000</b>
Adopting a child with additional needs: <b>22</b>	Adoption roundtable: Perspectives & reflections: <b>160+</b>	Early Permanence-learning from experience: <b>201</b>	Online NAW social media campaign targeting existing MAF followers: <b>71</b>
Adopting siblings: <b>55</b>	Adopted people in-person meet-up-London: <b>42</b>		Adoption Friday Sermon: <b>188</b>
Coffee and chat: <b>8</b>			
Surgeries: <b>10</b>			
<b>184</b>	<b>602+</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>NA</b>
<b>Total attendance at NAW events: 1,083+</b>			<b>Reached 100,000 people from within the Muslim community</b>

## Workforce Development

New Family Social also started a two-year programme to deliver sector-wide training, policy & strategy development, and research in LGBTQ+ matters and adoption. The aim being that the sector is more equipped to deal with enquiries from a more diverse range of people.

We also started to deliver a series of Lunch & Learn events for all practitioners to broaden understanding around adoption in multi-cultural settings, including barriers to the recruitment of black and ethnic minority families, transracial and transcultural placements, as well as introduction to Muslim adoption and identities.

Working with **My Adoption Family** we launched a ‘Social Worker Reflective Discussion Space Programme’, running until March 2023. The six 90-minute group discussion sessions were for social workers and focussed on the challenges around Muslim, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic adopters to encourage better recruitment of these adopters. The programme aimed to facilitate a better understanding of the interplay of faith, culture and religion within the adoption context. It addressed the discrimination these groups may face by exploring concepts such as The Other-Race Effect (ORE) and intersectionality. The aim of the programme was 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.

We also commissioned some training to help increase the diversity of the adoption workforce. **Black and Asian Leadership**

**Initiative (BALI)** is a safe space for aspiring managers and Global Majority\* leaders working in regional adoption agencies to learn how to:

- Explore their own leadership development
- Tackle the barriers they may face
- Seize opportunities and understand the additionality they can bring to organisations

The initiative is hoped to bring much needed diversity to the adoption sector so that we can be more inclusive and aware of the needs of the children and prospective adopters we work with.

\* Global majority includes those people who identify as Black, African, Asian, Brown, Arab, mixed heritage, are indigenous to the global south, and or have been racialised as ‘ethnic minorities.’





## The Adopter Journey

The Adopter Journey' which sits under the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group is committed to improving the adopter journey. The working group is led by Karen Barrick (Adoption Now) and is supported by Emma Holroyd (Project Manager). Here are some of the highlights of this work over the year.

## Mystery Shopper exercise

Following on from mystery shopping at the front door of adoption agencies last year, in May 2022, Mystery Shoppers Limited were commissioned to explore the experiences and feedback from prospective adopters in stage 1 of the process with a focus on the challenge of recruiting new adopters for RAAs and VAAs. The findings confirm the anxieties faced by potential adopters about the process and the confusion around the choice of agency, with a clear need for transparency and good communications. "Financial insecurity" was regarded as a truth in June 2022, this was not the case in October 2021 and is a real issue in the current cost of living crisis. "My weight will affect whether I can adopt" is perceived to be a myth this time but in 2021 was seen as a truth.

The third and final phase of the mystery shoppers exercise took place in March 2023 and this has largely been positive, with feedback provided to agencies about their strengths and areas for development. 96 of 114 shoppers reported a professional tone to greetings and 88 out of 114 rated the attitude and helpfulness of the agency as excellent or good. There were examples of great customer service, such as:

*"The agent was knowledgeable and articulate. The answers were clear and they were very prompt to come up with unexpected proposal suggestions as to how I might take the enquiry further."*

## National Practice Standards – Adopter Journey

The adopter journey working group has been working with CoramBAAF to develop and produce National Standards for the recruitment, assessment and matching of adopters. The standards will be ready for wider consultation in Autumn 2023 and will cover everything from recruitment and assessment of adopters to the point of being matched with a child.



## Stage One & Stage Two – Adopter Preparation

Working groups are in place to develop, identify, and determine best practice in adopter preparation. The groups will draw on sources of research that has been undertaken to support this work with the aim being to provide:

- National Adopter Preparation Guidance to support adopter preparation and assessment.
- Visual Timeline for Adopters from point of first enquiry to matching of a child.

## Adoption Eligibility Criteria

The adoption eligibility criteria used by agencies across England is an important element of the first contact that individuals have when thinking about adoption. The criteria agreed in 2021 was revisited by a sub-group to ensure that the messages that are given were consistent with societal changes. The amended version will be published in Autumn 2023. Prospective adopters continually tell us that there is a very inconsistent message around criteria being presented by agencies.

## Relational Based Assessment Training

The importance of building connections with adopters early in the adopter journey has been a theme across all of the work. 7 workshops were provided by Satwinder Sandhu (Changing Script) across RAAs and VAAs to support adoption practitioners to reflect on the importance of developing relationships when working with prospective adopters. This training was positively evaluated by practitioners and exceeded expectations in 95% of those received.

*"The discussions challenged some of our concepts and ideas. It struck a chord of how much we expect of adopters. It made me reflect and re-think how we approach assessments, how this hasn't changed for many years and using the suggested tools will be valuable to explore how we gather information going forward during an assessment."*

## Increasing the diversity of adoption panels

Adoption England commissioned Ade Larigo (Agency Connections) to work with RAAs to increase the diversity within the adoption panel membership. There has been a lot of key learning from this project regarding the recruitment, induction and continuing support for new panel members from diverse backgrounds. An additional 31 panel members from a range of black and minoritised ethnic communities are now in place across the RAAs. A summary of the learning will be made available for RAAs and shared in the autumn following two webinars to aid discussion about the issues during the summer.



## Strategic Priority 2: The Journey of the Child

This 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 is overseen by Nik Flavell (Adopt North East) has been broken down into the following workstreams:

- Early Permanence
- Linking and matching
- Social work practice, systems and processes

### Early Permanence

Early Permanence (EP) is a child-centred practice that offers stability at a very early stage in the child's care journey, preventing multiple moves and the associated trauma of separation from and loss of attachment figures, until a court has reached a decision about the final care plan for a child. The need for good quality care planning for children and twin tracking to prevent delay is crucial. Learning from people with lived experience and research and taking views from several sources has indicated that, whilst the terminology to describe the approach has changed over time, preparation and support for parents and carers is vital for better meeting the needs of children.

### The Early Permanence Working Group

This working group, chaired by Vicky Davidson-Boyd (Adoption Tees Valley), and supported by Helen Thomas (Project Manager) leads the work on increasing the number and quality of EP care arrangements across England.

### The key priorities are:

Increase the number and quality of EP arrangements; improve the consistency of EP data; disseminate good quality EP resources across the country; engage key-stakeholders on the benefits of EP for children (Social workers/Judiciary/CAFCASS/legal advisors); ensure EP carers are well prepared and supported; ensure the voices of those with lived experience inform EP practice.

*"Delighted to see a 14% increase in 2023 of children benefitting from early permanence."*

(Coram-i ASG headline data)

Regional adoption agency leaders have been working together with colleagues across the sector to develop National Early Permanence Practice Standards.

[https://earlypermanence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/National-Early-Permanence-Practice-Standards-\\_DIGITAL.pdf](https://earlypermanence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/National-Early-Permanence-Practice-Standards-_DIGITAL.pdf)

These were launched over two conferences with 400 practitioners and wider stakeholders in attendance. Delegates were able to attend a range of workshops dedicated around EP practice such as care planning, supporting relationships between parents and carers, the legal framework and therapeutic support for carers amongst others.

The working group has continued to oversee the projects awarded DfE funding to support developments in EP. During the year funding was given to an additional 9 EP projects from across England, bringing the total number to 19. Some of the projects are focussed on testing out innovative ideas, such as EP for school-age children, while others are embedding practice and seeking to increase access to EP carers.

Over the next year we will be working with an evaluation partner to look at the learning from the projects and the impact of the work undertaken for children and families. We have also had agreement to provide training for the Judicial College in the autumn for existing judges and for new judges in Spring 2024 about early permanence. We will be gathering some data from RAAs during the autumn, to measure the start of EP care arrangements and how they progress and gather a better understanding of its use and outcomes for children.

### The Early Permanence Practice & Development Group

The EP Practice & Service Development group, chaired by Cathy Sowden (Together for Adoption) with membership from across local authorities, RAAs and VAAs has a focus on disseminating learning and acts as a consultative forum for a range of developments and resources, such as the recently launched National Standards.

The group runs a programme of virtual workshops centred around EP practice which has gone from strength to strength over the past twelve months with attendance regularly reaching over 100 from a range of practitioners, managers, and wider agencies. Presentations from the practice workshops are shared with delegates and are forming a growing library of resources on EP. A task and finish group has been established to have oversight of this resource library which is expanding rapidly as the 19 grant funded projects progress.

Our ambition is for practitioners and wider stakeholders to have a single point of access where good practice guidance, toolkits, leaflets, checklists and so on can be downloaded and personalised to suit local arrangements. We want to support practitioners to be confident about pursuing an early permanence placement where adoption may become the final plan for the child. This will be provided on the Adoption England website, due to be launched in the autumn.



## Linking and Matching

The workstream is made up of representatives from RAAs and VAAs, led by Shelagh Mitchell (Adoption East Midlands) and supported by Helen Stevens (Project Manager) with the aim to reduce delay in placement by improving matching practice and processes. The priorities of the work stream remain the same in terms of timely matching for children and maximising opportunities for children to be matched with a family who can meet their needs.

## National Family Finding Lead

Ruby Shah (Practice and Development Manager), started in the National Team in Autumn of 2022. Ruby leads on Family Finding and Matching and works with all RAAs to promote innovative and evidence-based family finding practice across England and other key stakeholders.

Ruby is working with RAAs to support family finding for children who wait longer, promote and share good practice and works with RAAs, Link maker and others to plan, co-ordinate and support Adoption Activity Days, National Exchange and profiling events across the country.

## Practice Development Group and National Standards

This is a new practice group chaired by Ruby with family finding managers from across the country, sharing different approaches to family finding across England and has topical discussions around different practice issues around matching and family finding.

Looking forward the practice development group will be working to develop National Practice Standards for Matching and consultation is planned to take place with experts by experience to listen to their views on what is important with regards to family finding & matching to feed into the workshops.

## Activity Days and Exchange Events

Activity days and exchange events continue to be a widely used tool for matching; particularly for children who we know wait longer.

Coram-i were commissioned to deliver activity days and exchange events with 3 RAAs (One Adoption West Yorkshire, Adopt Thames Valley and Adoption Now) and commissioned to host pan-regional activity days by Adoption England, regional adoption agencies working together. Feedback from all of the events showed them to be a positive experience for children attending who had fun during the day with really positive feedback from prospective adopters, foster carers, family finders and children's social workers. Follow up from the events evidenced that over 200 expressions of interest were made as a result of the events; leading to over 40 links for individual children. Many of these were for sibling groups.

## Social work systems and processes

Decision making for children with a plan for adoption is critical and following discussions with stakeholders there was a lack of induction, training and support for this role within local authorities.

CoramBAAF were commissioned to deliver training for Agency Decision Makers (ADMs) for adoption. The training considered the latest case law, with opportunities to discuss the challenges in ensuring effective care planning and decision making for children. 9 sessions have been delivered during the year, with the remaining 6 sessions now booked to be delivered in October and December 2023. The training has been received extremely positively by decision makers and CoramBAAF are developing material and resources to support ADMs moving forward.



## Matching Grant Projects

A grant programme for matching launched in Spring 2022 to award funding for projects that delivered against the matching priorities. Twelve matching projects, across 11 agencies, were awarded funding:

Agency	Project Summary
Adoption West	Increase understanding of permanence planning for children with disabilities/complex needs and pilot a family finding approach.
Adoption East & West Midlands	Dedicated regional lead for Midlands Together Collaboration (MTC) to maximise matching within the MTC.
Coram-i (Coram Trading Ltd)	Exchange events to strengthen the identification of links and matches for children waiting the longest through several approaches.
Coram-i (Coram Trading Ltd)	Development and pilot of a Collective Matching tool
Coram Ambitious for Adoption	Implement Step Up Family Finding programme for priority children, employ an outreach ambassador to support recruitment and support Black and Minority Ethnic adopters and implement a programme of skills training.
Adopt Thames Valley	A focus on achieving permanency for children with additional needs by recruiting a dedicated team of social worker, educational and clinical psychologists. Work will include training for practitioners, supporting assessments and development of a screening.
Adoption Connects	Appoint a dedicated matching lead across two RAAs with a focus on priority children to coordinate and improve matching opportunities.
Adopt London	Appoint a dedicated matching manager and coordination post to coordinate matching activity across London.
Adoption Partnership South East	Pilot development of advanced family finding service within the family finding team with a specific focus on siblings.
One Adoption West Yorkshire and Adoption Matters	Implement and evaluate use of child focused family building service for identified children who wait longer.
Adopt Coast to Coast	Work alongside a VAA to test out how earlier sharing of children's information and assessed needs can inform child specific recruitment activity.
Adoption Now	Appoint dedicated matching lead who will coordinate a number of matching workstreams across the NW region focused on children who wait the longest. Workstreams include; developing a series of short films, attendance by medical professionals at activity events, training for social workers on range of conditions that commonly occur in children being adopted.

The projects come together every quarter to share developments, challenges and successes and the forum will be cascading the learning and resources produced from the projects out to the wider sector, looking at how they are able to evidence impact and outcomes for children.

### Data

Coram-i and the RAA leaders have been working on a simpler matching dashboard and this was launched during the year. This shows the average days to complete key phases of child's journey in the previous 12 months.

The visual tool shows the stages of the child's journey clearly and this will help identify areas for improvement. Understanding the story behind the data is critical and we are working hard to ensure that these stories can be captured to show the lived experience and outcomes for children.

The matching workstream will continue to look at ways to understand the story behind the data.

### Looking Ahead

Two pieces of work that have very recently been commissioned:

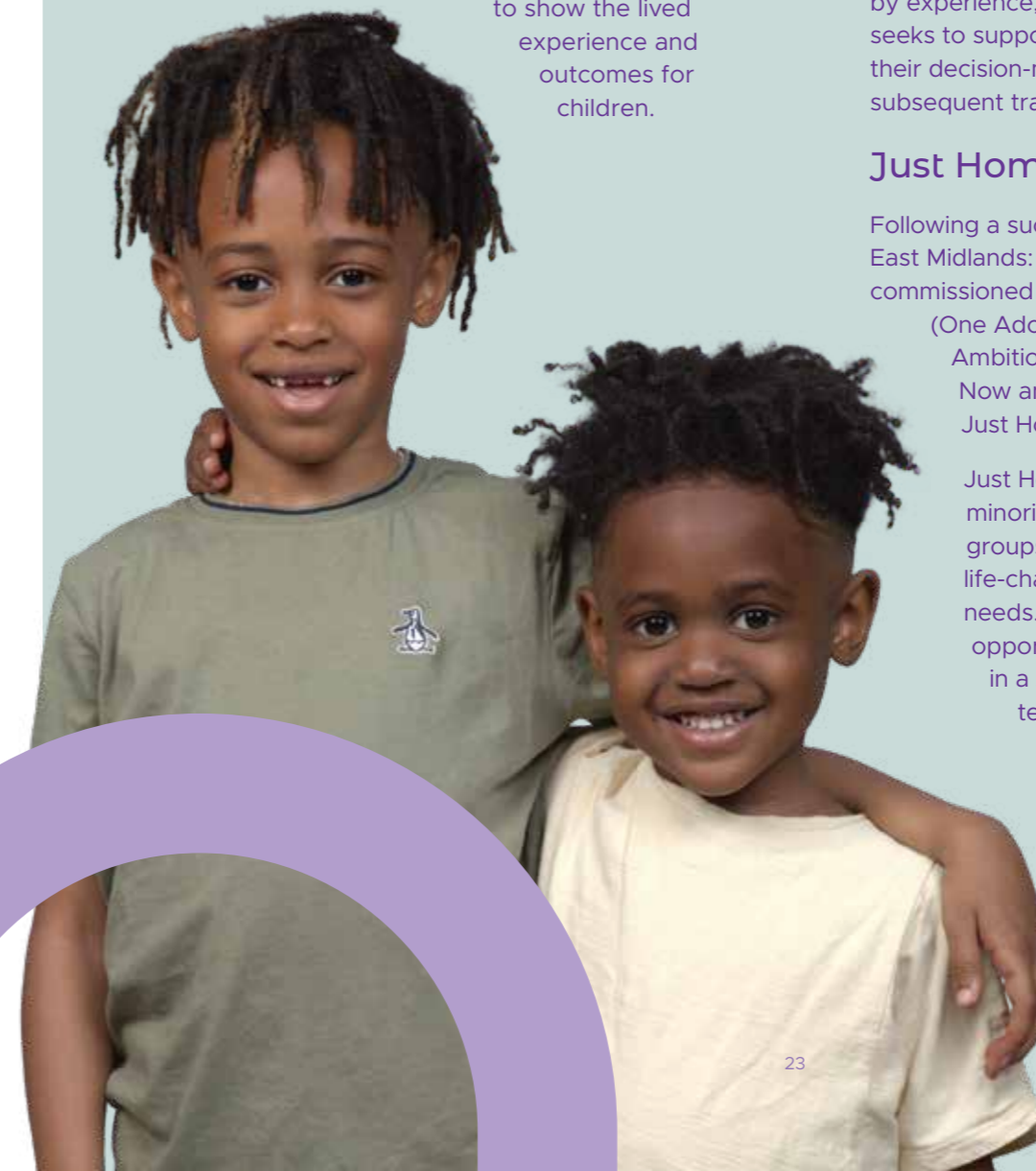
#### AfDiT:

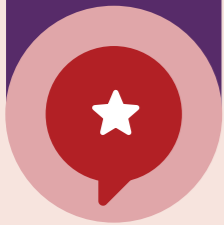
The University of Sussex, led by Dr Tam Cane, have been commissioned to develop and pilot the use of an anti-racist framework for decision-making and transitioning children from minoritised racial and ethnic groups into transracial adoptive families (AFDiT). The project will work with 5 RAAs (Adoption East Midlands, One Adoption West Yorkshire, Ambitious for Adoption, Adoption Now and Adopt Birmingham) to co-produce and develop, alongside experts by experience, practice frameworks that seeks to support social workers during their decision-making processes and the subsequent transition process.

#### Just Home:

Following a successful pilot with Adoption East Midlands: The Staff College have been commissioned to work with four agencies (One Adoption West Yorkshire, Ambitious for Adoption, Adoption Now and Adopt Birmingham) on the Just Home programme.

Just Home is about children from minoritised racial and ethnic groups in care, their lives, their life-chances, their traumas and their needs. The programme provides an opportunity to explore these issues in a safe space. Permanence teams in a region, work with fostering, adoption and care planning staff to secure longer term cultural change in this area of practice.





## Strategic Priority 3: Adoption Support

The Adoption Support (AS) workstream is made up of a cross sector group of representatives, led by Alison Lewis (Adoption West) and supported by Emma Holroyd (Project Manager).

The focus of the group is to ensure that AS is embedded into every aspect of the adoption journey and ensure that all families can access high quality consistent adoption support services no matter where they live in England.

Following on from last year's report, the groups have been focussed on gathering insights from adopters and agencies to understand the issues, the strengths and areas for development



## Adopter Voice Survey

A consultation survey among adopters who had used adoption support services in the last three years. The survey took place in April 2022 and May 2022. 347 responses were received.

Here are a few highlights:



65% of respondents said it was relatively easy to find out how to contact the appropriate agency to access the support required.



39% of respondents found it easy to find out what services were available and a third (33%) found it difficult.



After contacting the supporting agency 51% of respondents started the assessment of need without delay or within three months of the initial contact.



A third (32%) waited longer than two months for the assessment to commence, 59% of those who waited were offered no support during this period.



49% of the respondents contacted the support agency following challenging time in the family and 40% wanted to access the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) for therapeutic support.



78% stated that support provided had helped their family achieve their goals.

The survey identified that the two top services that should be offered to all families were:

- An allocated/named social worker
- Support to manage relationships at school

93% of parents stated that they needed more support when their child was a teenager.

## Adoption Support brief service reviews

RAAs were offered the opportunity for a brief service review of their adoption support services.

14 reviews were completed, using the Adoption Support Blueprint Audit Tool which sets out 17 requirements of a high-quality adoption support system.

The summary of the review is due in Autumn 2023 and the findings, along with the adopter survey, will be used across our Adoption Support working groups to continue to develop best practice.

## Adoption Support Data

There is currently no national collation of adoption support data. Gail Spray (Adoption Counts) has been leading a task and finish group, with support from Coram-i, to develop a national dataset to inform and improve adoption support services.

The purpose of the data collection is to provide child level and aggregated data that will inform us about the population, the volume, timescales and information about workflow across England.

The pilot for the collection of the dataset will be started over the coming year. With a view for the first set of data will be ready for publishing in June 2024.

## Adoption Support Transfer Protocol

When families move house out of their current area it is critical that any transfer of support to new agencies or providers is as smooth as possible for the whole family. It is clear that the transfer of responsibility has been problematic for some families and this protocol has been agreed by RAAs to help families continue to be supported without disruption.

The purpose for the protocol is to:

- Ensure that the children's needs and the support plan are understood by the receiving agency.
- Ensure children, young people and families are clear about who will support them in the future and what services are available for them.

The protocol was launched in January 2023, an evaluation will take place in Summer 2023 to review the impact of the protocol and amend if required to ensure that we are working effectively to support families when moving areas.

## Task and Finish Groups – Adoption Support

### Assessment and Planning

The working group is led by Sarah Johnson (Adopt London East) to improve the assessment and planning of adoption support when a child moves in with an adoptive family.

The group have focussed their effort on updating the adoption support plan, initially used at the matching stage. They have been revising the template and will work with CoramBAAF to undertake consultation about the changes, with a view to piloting the form over the winter and a general roll out in Spring 2024.

## Core offer

The working group is led by Michael Wilson and Nickie Philips, (Adopt South East and Adoption Connects) to develop an adoption support core offer for children and families within the first twelve to eighteen months of a child moving in with their adopters.

The working group are aiming to have a proposal for consultation during the autumn with a view to having an agreed offer in late Spring 2024.

Both these groups are referring to the Adopter Voice survey and the adoption support brief reviews to ensure that a framework is designed taking into account the findings in these reviews and surveys. Further consultation will be undertaken as this work progresses.

## Learning and sharing from practice across adoption support teams

CoramBAAF hosted webinars for adoption support practitioners across England who complete assessments of need as part of their role. In June 2022 three webinars were provided for social workers and one for managers, which focused on reframing adoption support assessment in a context of relational work.

On 21 September 2022 an in-person event was held for adoption support practitioners - strengthening the value of social work in adoption support by sharing good practice and learning from each other.



## Strategic Priority 4: Maintaining Relationships

This priority is focused on modernising contact for adopted people so they can maintain relationships with the people important to them before they were adopted. This group is led by Sarah Johal (National Adoption Strategic Lead) and support by Vicky Swift (Project Manager) and consists of sector representatives and individuals with lived experience.

As part of this work Adoption England commissioned Professor Beth Neil (University of East Anglia (UEA)) to develop a theory of change around maintaining significant relationships in adoption. This drew on existing research, rapid consultation with relevant groups (adopted young people and adults, birth parents, adoptive parents, adoption professionals), and a survey completed by adopted adults.

The theory of change identified the need for significant changes in approaches to letterbox contact and face-to-face contact necessitating changes in how contact is considered, planned, and supported.

The identified problems, barriers and potential solutions operate at several different levels:

- Individual level - the characteristics and needs of adoptive parents, adopted people and birth parents
- Relational level - particularly the collaboration between birth and adoptive families
- System level - the attitudes, values and resources of professionals across the sector from children social workers, adoption social workers in LAs, VAAs and RAAs, birth family support workers, Cafcass, IROs, legal professionals and the judiciary

*“The people with direct experience of family contact and its success to their development of identity and assistance with mental health were very compelling.”*

### Priorities for the working group include:

- Improving the preparation and training of adoptive parents regarding the ongoing identity needs of children
- Development of practice resources and practice guidance - and making these accessible online building relationships between birth and adoptive families through meetings
- Changing perceptions of birth families strategies to involve children more fully in contact
- Looking at promotional materials around contact
- Addressing the cultural issues in the system, particularly around the values and beliefs about ongoing contact
- Understanding the needs of adopted adults



During the first year of this work the Adoption England Strategic Team held a Social Work England online conference on the Importance of Maintaining Relationships. This was well attended by over 150 professionals across the sector.

Delivering the conference included people with lived experience, birth parents and adopted adults. It included academics from the UEA and professionals who are already practicing family time within their RAAs and LAs.

*“It was great to be able to share their knowledge and I am certainly going to use all I have gained from the session to make positive changes in my practice.”*

## Letter Swap

Letter Swap is a prototype created by Link maker and the digital system is being used to exchange letters via digital communication that would traditionally be handwritten and posted. The project commenced in August 2022 and runs until October 2023. The main aims of Letter Swap are:

- To find out how Letter Swap is working in practice: does it help adoptive and birth families stay connected, and is anything about Letter Swap that needs to change to make it better?
- The University of East Anglia (UEA) are gaining feedback from users and practitioners and feeding this into the pilot via cycles of action research.
- To inform the future use of a digital system and to develop guidance to help agencies decide when to use a digital approach and it will also help adoptive parents and birth family members decide if they want to use a digital system to support staying in touch.

The project consists of 6 RAAs. The Adoption England Team are working with the UEA to evaluate the prototype and PAC-UK are offering support to birth families using the prototype.

There have been several positive outcomes for families using the system enabling contact to evolve in line with children's needs.

There are equally barriers encountered in using a digital system and the need to have additional support, particularly for birth parents when completing initial exchanges.

So far 135 families across the 5 RAAs are connected to enable two-way communication.

The system will be released to all RAAs in England in the autumn.

*‘I love getting to know my daughter through these more informal messages [with adopters]. I think it’s important for my daughter as well going forward to see that both sets of parents do have that trust and communication and it might make it less awkward and confusing for her when she gets older if she wanted to get to know me.’*

- Feedback from a birth parent involved in the project

*‘We took off all the safety settings just for Christmas. So [Birth Mum] could actually see photos of [daughter] open her presents. It sort of frees us up it and gives me a bit more control in a way... and we’ll find a way of communicating’*

- Feedback from an adoptive parent involved in the project

## Improving Adoption Services for Adults (IASA): a time for change

We're delighted to announce the start of the IASA project, in partnerships with UEA and PAC-UK. The project will run until July 2024 to address the needs of adults affected by adoption.

There are issues with lack of support for adopted people, such as accessing birth records, intermediary and therapeutic services.



Likewise, services are needed to support birth parents and birth relatives who are affected by adoption.

The team will collaborate with experts who have professional experience, alongside adults with lived experience of the impact of an adoption order on their family. The Project Team will work under the auspices of UEA Consulting and include Professor Beth Neil (Academic Lead), Dr Julia Feast OBE (Project Manager) and Dr Mary Beek (Research Consultant). Its first priority is updating the guidance 'Adoption: Access to Information and Intermediary Services Practice Guidance' (last published 2008) and produce a new 'good practice guide' to support work in this area. The project will also produce a briefing paper outlining the deficits in current legislation, regulations, and guidance, and proposed solutions to these.

## Lifelong Links

As part of the maintaining relationship working group, Adoption England Strategic Team has commissioned the Family Rights Group (FRG) to develop and adapt the lifelong links approach for children and young people who have been adopted. A trained coordinator works with a young person in care or care leaver to find the people that matter to them.



These can be people they have become separated from, or people they have never even met including grandparents, brothers, sisters, and extended family as well as others such as teachers, social workers, football coaches etc. The coordinator searches for these people and brings them together to make a lasting support plan with and for the young person.

The child or young person is at the centre of the approach. The work only happens with their agreement, and it goes at their pace. This would include exploring:

- What legal issues need consideration? (This would include access to records, consent, GDPR)
- What adaptations or additional tools and resources are required?
- What support is needed from the outset, and then throughout for the child, their adoptive family, and their birth family?
- How would a lifelong links plan be implemented? Where does responsibility lie for continued support? Which organisation(s) should host lifelong links services for adopted children?
- Sustainability of the approach.

## Birth Family Mapping

For the first time, support services – including advice, peer-to-peer support, and therapeutic services are available for birth families in England whose children have been or are at risk of being adopted. At present, there is no nationwide map showing the services available to birth families including before, during, and after adoption proceedings have occurred. This will help understand the picture and how families are assisted in navigating the adoption process.

## 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.

### Annual Budget from DfE Funding

DFE GRANT	AMOUNT AWARDED
National Team 2022/23	£500,000
Early Permanence 2022/23	£1,000,000
Adoption Recruitment 2022/23	£500,000
Matching 2022/23	£1,000,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>£3,000,000</b>

### Forward Planning for 2023/24 Budget

DFE GRANT	AMOUNT AWARDED
National Team 2023/24	£500,000
Early Permanence 2023/24	£1,000,000
Adoption Recruitment 2023/24	£500,000
Matching 2023/24	£2,000,000
Centres of Excellence 2023/24	£2,000,000
National Commissioning 2023/24	£1,500,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>£7,500,000</b>

### Projects allocated for next year's budget:

- 13 matching projects
- 19 Early Permanence projects
- You Can Adopt recruitment campaign activity
- 7 Centres of Excellence projects
- Activity days and pan regional play days
- National commissioning projects
- Training, resources and development of national practice standards
- 'Openness in Adoption' conference
- Research and evaluation





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